



Ready or not: The influence of readiness on healthy marriage and relationship education training outcomes



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ABSTRACT

This exploratory study utilizes a sample of human service providers and administrators to examine personal, agency, and collaborative readiness as predictors of training outcomes (utility reaction, gains in knowledge, and transfer of learning). The study is informed by the child welfare training evaluation model to address the effect of participants' ($n = 58$) readiness indicators and learning impact in relation to the transfer of learning that takes place following a one-day training. Participants' personal and agency readiness predicted their utility reaction, while personal readiness predicted gains in knowledge. The association between agency readiness and transfer of learning was partially mediated by utility reaction. Implications are drawn for both human service providers and researchers.

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1. Introduction

Strengthening and building the capacity of human service providers and administrators to integrate new practices and concepts into existing safety-net services (e.g., temporary assistance for needy families, child welfare) occur through a compilation of individual readiness and support from one's own agency and leadership within that agency (e.g., Antle, Frey, Sar, Barbee, & van Zyl, 2010; Futris, Schramm, Richardson, & Lee, 2015). Garnering support from collaborative relationships, whether inter- or intra-agency, is also an effective way to accomplish desired goals (Sabol, Coulton, & Korbin, 2004). Previous studies support that readiness to change (RTC), defined as the combination of understanding the importance of an existing problem and an individual's perception of their own ability to change to resolve the problem (Barrick & Homish, 2011; DiClemente, Schlundt, & Gemmell, 2004; Prochaska, DiClemente, & Norcross, 1992), on many levels, makes a significant contribution to the outcomes of an endeavor. Additionally, trainings focused on increasing the self-efficacy of a trainee on a specific topic impact training outcomes, such that boosting one's confidence to integrate knowledge and skills gained from a training into their agency results in positive training outcomes (Sitzmann, Brown, Casper, Ely, & Zimmerman, 2008).

In order to support the goals of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), to assist human service providers in the promotion

of healthy relationships, and to encourage the formation and maintenance of two-parent families (Markman & Rhoades, 2012; Richardson, Barner, Futris, & Mallette, 2012), the Healthy Marriage Initiative (HMI) was developed by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families (ACF). However, human service agencies struggle to engage couples and families in healthy marriage and relationship education programs (Ooms & Wilson, 2004). One strategy to address this need and to achieve the HMI mission to help families gain greater access to relationship education is the promotion of integrating healthy marriage and relationship education into existing human service agencies through a national repository – the National Resource Center for Healthy Marriage and Families (Resource Center). The Resource Center provides agencies with the resources to develop the capacity to promote healthy relationship skills in a way that meets both their needs and those of the families they serve. More specifically, to equip human service providers to integrate healthy marriage and relationship education into the services, the Resource Center provides a one-day interactive training as well as targeted technical assistance following the training.

The objective of this study is to explore how varying levels of RTC impact the capacity-building endeavors of a training designed to promote healthy relationship skills within human service agencies. We examine three key readiness indicators – personal readiness, agency readiness, and collaborative readiness – and the influence they have on reactions to the training, knowledge gained as a result of the training, and actions taken by service providers and agency administrators after the one-day training. This current study is informed by the child welfare

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training evaluation model (Antle, Barbee, & van Zyl, 2008; Antle et al., 2010), a modification of Kirkpatrick's seminal taxonomy of training evaluation (1959), to explore trainees' responses to the promotion of healthy relationship education through an integrative strategy utilized by the Resource Center.

1.1. Theoretical framework

In his formative work, Don Kirkpatrick (1959) developed a model for training evaluation that pivoted around four levels of training outcomes: reactions to the training, learning (knowledge, skills, attitude, and confidence gains as a result of the training), transfer of learning (application of knowledge gains), and results (the degree targeted outcomes occur due to the training and subsequent reinforcement; Kirkpatrick, 1979). More specifically, the learning outcome (e.g., training experience) captures both the learning impact (gains in knowledge post-training) and the utility reaction (feelings of relevance to one's work) of attendees (Futris et al., 2015). However, evaluations of trainings based on these four levels left out a critical component – the predictive components that influence training outcomes, such as organizational readiness and other contextual factors such as personal characteristics and peer and supervisor support (Antle et al., 2008).

A more comprehensive training evaluation model was developed within the child welfare literature to address this limitation (Alliger, Tannenbaum, Bennett, Traver, & Shotland, 1997; Antle, Barbee, et al., 2008). The child welfare training evaluation model builds on Kirkpatrick's four levels of outcomes to incorporate factors that are known to predict training outcomes, including organizational support (Antle et al., 2008; Antle et al., 2010). This model also includes components such as individual and organizational predictors related to learning readiness, personality, and support from within an agency (Antle et al., 2010).

The model utilized in our study is informed by the child welfare training evaluation model and assesses participants' reception of healthy relationship education concepts at a training (reaction to the training and gains in knowledge) and participants' evidence of integration following the training (transfer of learning). Furthermore, we examine predictors of these training outcomes by exploring RTC.

1.2. The influence of training experiences on transfer of learning

Previous research has established that participating in trainings is related to gains in knowledge and the application of that knowledge within the workplace. For example, trainee's reactions to the facilitators, attitudes, and motivation have been found to be associated with training outcomes (Alliger et al., 1997; Brown, 2005; Sitzmann et al., 2008). Trainee's affect during a training has also been found to impact the learning processes (Estrada, Isen, & Young, 1994), and, consequently, trainees who had positive general feelings about the training were also likely to feel that the training was relevant to their work (i.e., utility reaction; Alliger et al., 1997). Additionally, trainees who feel confident in their abilities to integrate their knowledge and skills gained into their work have been found to display positive training outcomes (Sitzmann et al., 2008).

1.3. The influence of readiness on training outcomes

In addition to training experiences, RTC contributes to the success of training outcomes. RTC in the workplace has been found to be associated with high expectations of the training itself (Barrick & Homish, 2011) and has been found to impact perceptions of the change, how the learning requirements are managed, and proactive behavior toward change (Hetzner, Gartmeier, Heid, & Gruber, 2011). Furthermore, prior studies have found that personal initiative, competence, personality, and personal RTC are all factors that influence whether or not a participant of a training will exhibit transfer of learning (e.g., Colquitt, LePine, & Noe,

2000; Hetzner et al., 2011). More specifically, associated feelings of confidence in one's abilities to perform a specific task in their work environment (i.e., self-efficacy; Bandura, 1977) are related to a number of positive outcomes associated with RTC including personal initiative and change activities (Hetzner et al., 2011), and positive training outcomes (e.g., Colquitt et al., 2000; Hetzner et al., 2011; Sitzmann et al., 2008).

Organizational RTC, defined as a shared resolve among agency members to implement change (commitment) and to share beliefs in their collective capacity to enact change (efficacy; Weiner, 2009), has also been found to be associated with later success in outcomes related to change, such as cooperation, exerting greater effort and persistence, and initiating change (e.g., Cunningham et al., 2002; Weiner, 2009). Individuals' perceptions of their agency's readiness to implement change influence whether or not they will make a contribution to that change (Jones, Jimmieson, & Griffiths, 2005). However, RTC, although essential to the transfer of learning, is not the only factor needed to produce positive change-related outcomes (Barrick & Homish, 2011; Lehman, Greener, & Simpson, 2002). Agencies that are ready to implement change may also be more successful if they foster a culture of support and learning within the agency (e.g., supervisor support, peer support; Gilley, Gilley, & McMillan, 2009; Parker, Williams, & Turner, 2006), which has been found to have a significant impact on both the individual's success in the transfer of learning and the success of the training outcomes at an organizational level (Bess, Perkins, & McCown, 2011). Creating a culture of support includes engaging the members at the organizational level which combats against the "silo" effect and calls for higher collaboration to implement the change (Bess et al., 2011). In fact, those who perceive support from their peers have been found to feel more open to change (Parker et al., 2006), and supervisor support is critically necessary in the transfer of learning following training as studies have found that organizational support, including supervisor and administrator support, increases the likelihood of transfer of learning, even more so than learning impact (e.g., Grossman & Salas, 2011; Futris et al., 2015).

Similarly, taking a team approach to implementing new practices can be influential in the change processes (Moran & Brightman, 2000). While this applies to teamwork *within* an agency, it may also be relevant for partnerships *between* agencies. Partnerships between agencies have been identified as "bridges" for community change (Putnam, 2000). For example, the collaborations within a community can have a powerful role in enacting change within the community through both formal systems (e.g., social service agencies) and informal networks (e.g., family, friends, and place of worship; Mancini, Nelson, Bowen, & Martin, 2006). In examining a community-capacity approach to prevention of intimate partner violence (IPV), one study found that a strong leadership team with a sense of vision and ownership, inclusion of the community in strategic planning, and the infrastructure to support change led to a successful IPV prevention using a community-capacity approach (Mancini et al., 2006). Although interagency collaboration has been found to affect change within an agency or community, to our knowledge, no studies have examined the impact of collaborative RTC on training outcomes, specifically the transfer of learning following a training.

2. Current study

The current study examines the impact of personal, agency, and collaborative RTC on utility reaction, knowledge gains, and transfer of learning for human service providers and administrators from multiple agencies following a one-day training on integrating healthy relationship education into safety-net services. Although there is a substantial body of literature examining the impact of RTC on training outcomes, previous literature lacks the examination of the impact of personal, agency, and collaborative readiness on the integration of knowledge gained following a training. Furthermore, many studies examining the

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