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# Motivational Interviewing to prevent dropout from an education and employment program for young adults: A randomized controlled trial



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## ABSTRACT

This study tested the efficacy of Motivational Interviewing for improving retention at a “second chance” program in the United States for unemployed young adults who had not graduated high school (ages 18–24; 60% male). We investigated how Motivational Interviewing effects might be mediated by change talk (i.e., arguments for change) and moderated by preference for consistency (PFC). Participants ( $N = 100$ ) were randomly assigned to (1) Motivational Interviewing designed to elicit change talk, (2) placebo counseling designed not to elicit change talk, or (3) no additional treatment. Motivational Interviewing sessions increased change talk, but did not increase program retention or diploma earning. PFC was a significant moderator of Motivational Interviewing’s impact on program retention; Motivational Interviewing was most effective at increasing 8 week retention for high PFC participants, and least effective for low PFC participants. These results suggest that Motivational Interviewing could be a useful tool for improving retention in education and employment programs, but clinicians should be attentive to how participant characteristics might enhance or diminish Motivational Interviewing effects.

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High school dropout puts young adults at risk for unemployment (Sum, Khatiwada, McLaughlin, & Palma, 2011), criminal involvement (Bernburg & Krohn, 2003), and substance use (Fothergill et al., 2008). “Second chance” programs, which provide education and employment opportunities, may be able to address skill gaps, increase employability, and reduce antisocial behavior and substance use (Bloom, 2010; Edelman, Holzer, & Offner, 2006). The Los Angeles Conservation Corps (LACC), one such “second chance” program, is a community-based education and employment organization modeled on President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s Civilian Conservation Corps. Between 1933 and 1942, the Civilian Conservation Corps provided 2.5 million unemployed young men with work completing outdoor projects intended to benefit the country (e.g., constructing hiking trails, planting trees, building dams) (Hendrickson, 2003). Today’s Conservation Corps programs, including

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LACC, often emphasize education and community service in addition to paid work experience. In a randomized trial, corps members were less likely to be unemployed or arrested compared to non-corps members (Jastrab, Masker, Blomquist, & Orr, 1996).

However, second change programs like LACC often have relatively low retention rates (Jastrab et al., 1996). A large number of Civilian Conservation Corps members “deserted” the corps (Hendrickson, 2003); only about 75% of participants are retained in education and employment programs over the first three months (Cave, Bos, Doolittle, & Toussaint, 1993; Schochet, Burghardt, & McConnell, 2008); and only about two-thirds of participants complete these programs (Jastrab et al., 1996; Millenky, Bloom, MillerRavett, & Broadus, 2011). Unfortunately, there is no published research on increasing retention in educational and employment programs for young adults.

Motivational Interviewing is an intervention designed to impact targeted behaviors by eliciting and strengthening intrinsic motivation (Miller & Rollnick, 2012). A meta-analysis showed that Motivational Interviewing had positive effects on client engagement in other interventions (Lundahl, Kunz, Brownell, Tollefson, & Burke, 2010). Motivational Interviewing has never been studied as a program retention strategy in the context of “second chance” programs, but its successful implementation in other domains suggests it may help retain participants in a Conservation Corps program.

Change talk (CT), or client verbalizations about change, has been identified as a potential mechanism underlying Motivational Interviewing effects (Miller & Rose, 2009). The link between Motivational Interviewing adherence and CT is well supported by research (e.g., Gaume, Bertholet, Faouzi, Gmel, & Daepfen, 2010), as is the link between CT and positive outcomes (e.g., Baer et al., 2008). The Motivational Interviewing literature has not yet conclusively answered the question of whether CT is a change mechanism. Three within-group studies have shown CT to mediate the relationship between Motivational Interviewing adherence and client change (Barnett et al., 2013; Moyers, Martin, Houck, Christopher, & Tonigan, 2009; Pirlott, Kisbu-Sakarya, DeFrancesco, Elliot, & MacKinnon, 2012), although a fourth study did not (Vader, Walters, Prabhu, Houck, & Field, 2010). These studies were limited by the lack of experimental manipulation of CT. Only one study has simultaneously brought CT under experimental control *and* tested whether it mediated Motivational Interviewing's effects. Morgenstern et al. (2012) randomly assigned participants to Motivational Interviewing, relational counseling, or a self-change condition. They found that Motivational Interviewing produced more CT than the other conditions, and CT mediated the effects of Motivational Interviewing on drinking outcomes, but only during the first week of treatment. More studies bringing CT under experimental control are needed to understand CT's potential role as an Motivational Interviewing mechanism of change.

Cognitive Dissonance Theory offers an explanation for how CT might function as a change mechanism. Traditional dissonance studies suggest that participants change their attitudes to be consistent with a position they have advocated (e.g., Festinger & Carlsmith, 1959). CT is essentially advocacy for a certain course of action, and therefore, may promote subsequent behaviors consistent with that advocacy (Draycott & Dabbs, 1998). Eliciting CT during Motivational Interviewing may induce dissonance by highlighting the discrepancy between an advocated position and inconsistent behaviors (e.g., a statement in favor of punctuality vs. actual frequent tardiness). Individuals may then be motivated to reduce dissonance through behavior change (e.g., arriving on time in the future).

However, not all individuals are strongly motivated to behave consistently with what they have advocated (Guadagno & Cialdini, 2010). For these individuals, Motivational Interviewing might have little impact on their later behaviors. Preference for consistency (PFC), defined as the motivation to be and appear consistent, can moderate dissonance effects (Cialdini, Trost, & Newsom, 1995). For example, in a study of adults with high levels of prejudice, individuals with greater PFC reported less prejudice after advocating a non-prejudicial attitude, compared to low-PFC individuals who performed the same advocacy (Heitland & Bohner, 2010). This could mean that interventions like Motivational Interviewing, which aim to elicit clients' arguments in favor of change, could be especially effective for individuals who care a great deal about consistency, but might be less helpful for those who do not value consistency very highly.

## 1. Current study

The primary goal of this study was to examine whether Motivational Interviewing would improve program retention for young adults in a “second chance” program. Additional aims included mediation and moderation tests to help explain how and for whom Motivational Interviewing works. Specifically, we tested CT as a mediator and PFC as a moderator of Motivational Interviewing effects. Therefore, a randomized controlled trial of Motivational Interviewing was undertaken at the Los Angeles Conservation Corps program (LACC), designed with a focus on understanding the role of CT and PFC.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants and setting

At LACC, corps members participate in a variety of activities, with a focus on earning credits toward a high school diploma and developing job skills on paid work crews. Program recruits begin by participating in an 8-week orientation phase which includes educational activities and work training. After successfully completing the orientation, they are promoted to corps member status, at which time they can begin earning a paycheck. Corps members are asked to commit to participating for at least 22 weeks (including the 8 weeks of orientation). After 22 weeks, some corps members continue in the program, while

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