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Full Length Research Paper

Therapeutic effect of Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy in fostering Self-Efficacy amongst academically-at- risk- learners in National Open University of Nigeria

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An abundance of research has shown that large transactional distance between geographically dispersed learners and supporting staff in Open and Distance learning institutions contribute to students' feelings of isolation, low self efficacy and reduced level of motivation which culminates to poor academic performance. This study, therefore, examined the impact of Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT) in fostering self-efficacy amongst academically at-risk learners in National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN). A pre-test and post-test control group quasi experimental design with 2x2x2x2 factorial matrix was adopted for the study. Stratified random and Probability Proportional to Size sampling techniques (PPS) were used to draw one hundred and thirty-five respondents (Males=68; Females=67) with age range of between 22 and 51 years ($\bar{x}$ =16.17; SD=1.01) from first-year NOUN undergraduates in South West geopolitical zone of Nigeria. The experimental group was treated with nine sessions of one and half hour using REBT, while the control group was not treated. General Self-Efficacy (GSE) scale (r=0.81) was the outcome measure. Analysis of Covariance and t-test for independent samples were used to test the four null hypotheses at 0.05 alphas. The findings revealed that REBT was effective in fostering self-efficacy in the treated group ($F_{(1,130)}$ = 54.11, P <0.05 when compared with their counterpart in the control group. Males have superior treatment gains ($\bar{x}$ =40.11) over the female participants ($\bar{x}$ =33.03). Participants educational level and age significantly influenced study outcomes (t=25.55; df=133, P=3.14, <0.05) and (t=4.64; df=133, P=1.77, <.05). The outcome of this study provided insight into the viability and potential of REBT in fostering self-efficacy in academically - at-risk learners. Based on the findings, it is recommended that Students Counsellors should continuously update their skills on the use of REBT and other psychological intervention in order to assist NOUN students become self actualized academically.

Keywords: Academically-at-risk, National Open University, Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy, self-efficacy

Background of the problem

Demanding professional commitments and family responsibilities of many adults often make studying in conventional face-to-face, full-time, institutions with fixed timetables looks unrealistic proposition. For the above

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reasons, many people choose Open and Distance Education primarily due to "the convenience, flexibility and adaptability of this mode of education to suit individual students' needs" (Holmberg, 1989, p. 24; NOUN, 2011). This assertion is in congruent with National Open University of Nigeria students (NOUN) assertion. In a recent survey conducted by Okopi (2011) using students of NOUN, result show that forty-five percent (45%) out of over one hundred and twenty thousand are adults with busy lives, family and work commitments. National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) was resuscitated on October, 2002. It was established with the mission of providing access, quality, cost-effective and flexible learning, which is anchored by social justice, equity, and national cohesion through a comprehensive reach that transcends all barriers **(**NOUN, 2003).In line with its mission and vision, NOUN as at June 2011 has established forty-nine Study Centres spread across the Federation including the Federal capital territory. These Study Centres serve as outlets for providing learners with varieties of support services. A review of literature demonstrates that while there is no significant difference in achievement levels between distant and traditional learners, there is "considerable variance in student attitudes, self efficacy and motivation levels" (Johnstone, 1991, cited in Threlkeld and Brzoska, 1994, p. 49).Engaging and retaining students in distance learning can be challenging because the students are transaction and interactional distanced from teaching, support staff and other learners despite large number of study centres created by ODL institution such as NOUN. Thus, often students report feelings of isolation, little sense of connection and belonging and difficulty maintaining interactive communication and encouragement from staff and other students for learning. Corroborating this assertion, Adeyoju (1989) opined that when individuals experience failure at a task, they often become discouraged and may want to give up. Some researchers (Simpson, 2000; Kirkup and Jones,1996) identified some aspects of OD Education that may be discouraging for some learners (a) its inability to offer dialogue in the way that conventional face-to-face education does; (b) the inflexibility of its content and study method; and (c) the isolation and individualization of the student. Despite steadily rising enrolment rates, weak academic performance and high risk of dropping out remain persistent problems among NOUN undergraduates. A recent survey by Ofole, Fawusi, and Oduneye, (2011) using 940 respondents revealed high at risk attrition rate among NOUN students due to non cognitive factors including low self. For academic institutions, high attrition rates complicate enrolment planning and place added burden on efforts to recruit new students. For students, dropping out before earning a terminal degree represents untapped human potential and a low return on their investment. Single mode ODL institutions promote student success, and subsequent retention, is by concentrating focus on academic preparation and specifically on “non-cognitive" factors. By increasing attention on non-cognitive factors of success, institutions would be able to predict academic outcomes among the students. One of the non-cognitive factors which have been identified to be highly linked to students’ retention is academic self-efficacy, (Carter, 2006). Although extensive research has been done to determine the impact of high self-efficacy on academic performance, (Tella, Tella, Ayeni and Omoba 2007; Okoiye and Falaye, 2011), few studies have attempted to enhance this vital skill for optimal academic performance among learners in ODL institutions. This study is therefore, designed to fill the identified research gap by using REBT to foster self-efficacy amongst academically at-risk learners in National Open University of Nigeria.

Purpose of study

This study is designed primarily to investigate the impact of Rational Emotive Behaviour therapy on fostering academic self-efficacy amongst academically-at-risk learners in NOUN. The moderating effect of participants’ gender, educational levels and age on the study outcome would also be examined.

Reviews of Literature

Theoretical and empirical literatures were reviewed in the following relevant areas;
Self efficacy
Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy

Self-Efficacy

Albert Bandura (1997, p. 3) defines self-efficacy as the beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments". An individual’s self-efficacy belief can vary in level, generality and strength (Bandura, 1997). In the academic context, self-efficacy has been repeatedly demonstrated to directly influence students’ affective, cognitive, and motivational processes. High levels of self-efficacy are reliable predictors of academic achievement. Self-efficacy is useful for predicting what problems and sub-problems a student will select to solve, how long a student will persist on a problem, how much overall effort they will expend, as well as motivational traits such as level of engagement (Schunk and Pajares, 2002; Witten and Frank, 2005). Indeed, high efficacy levels are robust predictors of academic achievement, positive social relationships and pro-socio behaviours (Tella, et al, 2007;

Salami, 2008). Conversely, Schwarzer and Schmitz (2005) also found that low efficacy levels frequently lead to pessimistic thoughts futility, melancholy, anxiety, irrational beliefs, and negative self statements among others. Researchers have linked many variables to increases or decreases academic self efficacy, such factors include: Age (Bandura, 1997; Koeske and Kirk, 1995); gender, (Dickerson and Taylor, 2000); marital Status *(*Pajares and Johnson, 1996; Pajares and Miller, 1994); education, (Dhooper, Royce and Wolf, 1990) and Experience, (Huang, Lui, and Shiomi, 2007; Acker, 1999).

Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy

Rational Emotive Behaviour therapy (REBT), previously called rational therapy and rational emotive therapy, is a comprehensive, active-directive, philosophically and empirically based psychotherapy developed by Albert Ellis in the mid- 1950s. REBT posits that people to a large degree consciously and unconsciously construct emotional difficulties including anxiety, anger, depression, shame, and guilt which frequently, lead to negative behavioural consequences (Dryden, DiGiuseppe and Neenan, 2003). Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy implores many humanistic qualities in its philosophy of emotion and life. These include: (a) constructivism, (b) self-actualization, (c) long-range enjoyment of life, (d) unconditional acceptance, and (e) existential choice (Ellis, 1996). As a result of REBTs humanistic stance, many techniques and tools have been developed to foster rational thoughts, explore emotions, and encourage helpful behaviours. Ellis' ABC model is a popular and useful aid used by many to address and challenge irrational beliefs.

A comprehensive body of literature spanning over 60 years gave credence to the usefulness and value of REBT for diverse purposes (David, Szentagotai, Eva, and Macavei, 2005; Haaga and Davison, 1989). REBT consists of series of active directive teaching designed to educate and create awareness of the connections between thoughts, emotions, and behaviours. Related research suggests that REBT has excellent potential in providing students with a framework from which to explore their thoughts, feelings, and behaviours in classroom settings (Trip, Vernon, and McMahon, 2007). Researchers have conducted only a few studies related to the impact of REBT on fostering self-efficacy amongst academically-at-risk- learners in open and distance learning. A study conducted by Singh and Stoloff (2008) demonstrate the irrational beliefs that many students maintain. REBT postulates that these strong, rigid beliefs lead to unhealthy negative cognitive, emotional, and behavioural consequences (Dryden, et al., 2003). These unhealthy consequences have the potential to directly interfere with distant learners' ability to study independently and effectively tackle examination questions. Additionally, learners with low self efficacy may have difficulty identifying how they feel and adapting to problem situations. Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy appears to be a viable intervention for fostering self-efficacy in academically-at-risk-learners in ODL due to its well reported efficacy in removing irrational fears and thought distortions which inter with academic achievements.

Hypotheses

Four null hypotheses were generated and tested at 0.05 level of significance

Ho_1: There is no significant effect of treatment on self efficacy scores of academically-at-risk-learners of NOUN.

Ho_2: There is no significant gender effect on self efficacy scores of academically-at-risk-learners of NOUN

Ho_3: There is no significant effect of educational status on self efficacy scores of academically-at-risk-learners of NOUN

Ho_4: There is no significant effect of age on self efficacy scores of academically-at-risk-learners of NOUN

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a pre-test and post-test control group experimental design with a 2x2x2x2 factorial matrix. The two rows consist of the treatment strategy (REBT) and the control group. While the columns consist of the moderating variables at two different levels (gender, educational status and age).The researchers adopted a factorial design because it is more encompassing and it provides the opportunity to study the interacting effect of the moderating variables on the dependent variable.

Population

The population of this study is the students of National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN). As at June, 2011, NOUN has forty-nine Study Centres spread across the six geopolitical zones in Nigeria. Each Study Centre is manned by academic and non academic staffs which provide support services to the learners. As of the time of this study, NOUN has one hundred and twenty thousand, one hundred and eight nine students undertaking courses in different programmes housed in six schools, (NOUN, 2011).

Sample and Sampling

One hundred and thirty- five respondents were stratified randomly selected from one of the Study Centres in South western, Nigeria. South West geographical zone consist of the following seven Study Centres; Ado Ekiti, Akure, Awa, Ibadan, Lagos and Oshogbo and Abeokuta. The sample consists of students whose average score in 3 compulsory undergraduate courses (GST 101, GST 105 and GST 107) were below 40 %. Those students who scored below 40 % in the above mentioned three core subjects were categorized as academically- at- risk learners due to the fact that pass mark for any subject in NOUN is 40% and above.

Participants

A total of one hundred and thirty- five (135) undergraduates' students randomly drawn from all the programmes using Probability Proportional to Size sampling technique (PPS) participated in the study. PPS was adopted in order to ensure that students from all the programmers were equally represented since some of the programmes have more students when compared with the other. Sixty-eight males (68) and sixty-seven females (67) with age range between 22 and 51 years ($\bar{x}$ =16.17; SD=1.01) participated in the study. Forty -eight percent of the study population has high educational status (HND, BEd, BSc B.A, e .t.c.); while eighty-seven percent have low educational status (O'level, OND, e.t.c). Sixty-nine percent of the participants whose age fell below 40 years were categorized as young, while sixty-six were regarded as old age for the purpose of this study because they were above forty years which was the standard set for the study.

Instrumentation

An adapted version of Morgan-Jinks Student Efficacy Scale (MJSES) was used to measure the dependent variable (self-efficacy). It is a 30-item self-report scale designed in four intervals Likert- Scale format: "Really Agree," "Kind of Agree," "Kind of Disagree," and "Really Disagree." Only three out of four MJSES subscales were adapted for the present study. The first subscale consists of statements designed to obtain information about students' perceptions of their own innate talent or ability. The second were statements designed to obtain information about students' perceptions of the role of their effort in completing a task. The third factor primarily was of socio-cultural or contextual items and appears related to Bandura's construct of outcome expectancy. Typical items in the scale include 'my friends ask me for help with their homework'', "I always get good grades when I try hard''. The items were positively worded so scoring was easy, the higher the score, the high the self-efficacy. The instrument has been widely reported to be valid and reliable by Nigerian researchers (Tella, et al. 2007; Okoiye et al, 2011). The researchers before used pilot tested the instrument and obtained Coefficient correlation r=0.81 using Cronbach's alpha after test-retest methods within one week internal.

Procedure

One hundred and thirty-five respondents who met the study inclusion criteria were randomly assigned into treatment conditions through simple ballot system. Thereafter, those who picked treatment group were exposed to nine sessions of therapy using REBT. While the control group participated in the pre and post test exercises but they were not treated. The study has three major inclusion criteria listed below;

1. Respondents who scored below average of 40% in the four compulsory GST courses (GST 101; use of English, 105 History of Science and 107 Study Guides).
2. Respondents who scored below 30 in the General self efficacy scale GSE used for screening for level of self efficacy
3. Students who gave their consent to participate by signing the consent form provided by the researchers.

The treatment package was designed along Bandura (1997) conceptualization for changing irrational beliefs and negative thoughts.

Session 1: General introduction and orientation programme for all participants. The participants were familiarized with the nature of the programme. Baseline data was also obtained using GSE.

Sessions2: Identification of the participants' irrational, unrealistic beliefs, negative self statements such as 'I must, I should, I can't" about their academic activities.

Session 3: Teaching the clients how to dispute the identified irrational thoughts and beliefs by differentiating rational from irrational beliefs about their studies, facilitation, and the school

Session 4: Demonstrating to participants how to practice Rational Emotive Imagery (REI) by imagining an event, a person or academic activities of NOUN which upset them.

Session 5: teaching the client shame-attacking exercise (Shame is an emotional reaction that keeps one from achieving mastery, gaining pleasure and satisfaction, acting assertively, sharing intimacy, and, in general, living fully).

Sessions6: Rehearsal of acquired skills by participants which involves taking "risk'' by assertively requesting for academic supports from the learner support personnel both at the Study Centre and in the

Table 1 Analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) on effectiveness of treatment on participants' self-efficacy

Source of variation	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Squares	F	P	Remark
Rows (REBT+CTG)	477.31	1	477.31	54.11	<0.05	Sig
Columns(male-female)	551.24	1	551.24	60.07	<0.05	Sig
Interactions	2.173	2	1.0865	1.01	>0.05	NS
Within	6775.11	130	321.10			

Table 2 Unadjusted X-mean and adjusted Y-mean based on treatment condition (rows) and gender (columns)

Groups		Male		Female		
Rows	NO	X-X	Y-X	NO	X-X	Y-X
Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT)	33	31.02	40.11	34	28.06	33.03
Control Group (CTG)	35	29.44	29.20	33	28.01	28.15

Table 3 Rows and columns of adjusted Y-means for comparison

Groups	Male	Female
REBT	40.11 (a) n=33	33.03 (b) n=34
CTG	29.20 (c) n=35	28.15 (d) n=33

Table 4 t-test showing the self-efficacy of participants with high and low educational level

variables	N	df	X	SD	t	P	Remark
High	48	133	53.14	2.21	25.55	3.14	Sig
Low	87		44.15	3.14			

Table 5 t-test showing the self-efficacy of old and low young participants treated

variables	N	df	X	SD	t	P	Remark
old	66	133	32.90	2.40	4.64	1.77	Sig
young	69		47.10	2.22			

Headquarters through phone contacts or face-to-face contacts as the case may be.

Session 7: Teaching the participants how to reject excuses by practicing easier assignments.

Session 8: Teaching the participants how to maintain acquired skills in natural setting

Session 9: Review of the previous sessions, post-test administration and termination of therapy

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics was used to compute for the mean, and standard deviation. While Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) and t-test statistics were adopted to test the hypothesis at 0.05 level of significant. Analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was utilized to analyze the post test scores of participants on self efficacy, using the pre-test scores as covariates to find out if post experimental differences were significant.

RESULTS

Hypothesis one

Hypothesis one which predicted no significant effect of treatment on self efficacy scores of academically-at-risk-learners was tested using ANCOVA at 0.05 alpha level. The results are presented on tables 1-3 above.

Result on Table 1 above specifically revealed that the treatment (REBT) has a statistical significant effect on participants' academic self- efficacy ($F_{(1,130)} = 54.11$; $P < 0.05$. The hypothesis that stated no significant difference in the self-efficacy scores of participants in the

experimental group and control group was therefore rejected since the calculated value was greater than the table value at 0.05 alpha level. Further computation as presented on tables 2 and 3 collaborate the trend of the findings

The results as shown on tables 2 and 3 above present the unadjusted X-means and adjusted Y-means of participants' scores on treatment (row) and sex (columns). It reveals an increase in adjusted y- means of the treated group's scores. This is evidence that the therapy improved the self efficacy scores of participants in the experimental group. On the contrary, there was no improvement in the adjusted y-means of the control group

Hypothesis two

Similarly, the second hypothesis which predicted no significant gender effect on treatment outcome was rejected. The result as contained on table 1 above show that the calculated value was greater than the table value, ($F_{(1,130)}$ = 60.07; P <0.05. The male had superior treatment gains in self-efficacy scores ($\bar{x}$ =40.11) when compared with their female counterpart ($\bar{x}$ =33.03). Therefore, the

Second hypothesis that stated no significant gender effect on self efficacy scores of academically-at-risk-learners was also rejected

Hypothesis three

Hypothesis three stated no significant difference in the self-efficacy mean scores of participants with high and low educational status. This hypothesis which was tested using t-test at 0.05 alpha level was rejected. The findings are presented on table 4 above.

The result from table 4 above shows that t=25.55; DF=133, P=3.14, <0.05 since the calculated value was greater than the table value, the null hypothesis was therefore rejected. It implies therefore, that educational level has significant influence on the participants' self efficacy scores. The participants with high educational status obtained superior mean scores ($\bar{x}$ =53.14) over their counterpart with low educational status ($\bar{x}$ =44.15)

Hypothesis four

The fourth hypothesis predicted no significant effect of age on self efficacy scores of academically-at-risk-learners. This hypothesis was tested using t-test for independent samples. The result is presented on table 5 below.

The result from table 5 above shows that t=4.64; DF=133, P=1.77, <.05. Since the calculated value was greater than the table value, the null hypothesis was therefore rejected. It implies therefore, that age of participants significantly influenced treatment outcomes. The same table also reveal that the means score of the young participants ($\bar{x}$ =47.10) was greater than their older counterparts ($\bar{x}$ =32.90).

Discussions

The outcome of this study has lent credence to the effectiveness of Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy in fostering self-efficacy amongst academically- at-risk learners in NOUN as evident in the post-test scores. The null hypothesis was therefore rejected in favour of the alternative hypothesis. The present result support findings of previous researchers (Ofole, et al. 2011; Okoiye, et al., 2011) who successfully used REBT and other variants of cognitive therapies on diverse populations. The finding is not surprising given the fact that, REBT has a well documented efficacy in managing distortions, irrational fears attributions, and anxiety which culminates to low self-efficacy. The therapy possibly have also increased the self -efficacy of participants which will make them put more efforts to complete their academic task, persist longer in those efforts without the assistance of Tutorial Facilitators unlike their untreated counterpart with low self-efficacy who will believe tasks to be harder than they actually are, typically shied away from academic interactions, and attribute failure to external factors (Smith and Betz, 2000)

The second hypothesis which predicted no significant gender effect on the self-efficacy scores was similarly rejected at 0.05 alpha level. Males had superior ($\bar{x}$ =40.11) treatment gains over their female counterpart ($\bar{x}$ =33.03) on self-efficacy scores. Researchers have mixed reports for this finding, for instance, Okoiye, et al, (2011) show that there is no significant difference in the effect of gender in the post-test examination anxiety scores of 180 academically at- risk-students exposed to cognitive therapy. On the contrary, Warren (2010) report that male students in their study had lower self efficacy when compared with their male counterpart after being treated with cognitive therapy. The possible reason for this outcome could be traceable to studies that show that men tend to have higher general and task-specific self-efficacy than women. According to the proponent of male superiority in self- efficacy, women tend to lack confidence in making decision and are less likely to take on academic challenges that they have ability to complete while men are more likely to take on any task regardless of their feelings of expertise in the particular area that pertains to the task (Dickerson and Taylor, 2000). Women are also reported to more likely to

attribute success to luck or chance rather than their own competence and level of skill (Dickerson et al., 2000).

Moreover, educational levels of the participants significantly influence their self-efficacy scores. The null hypothesis was also rejected. Participants with high educational status performed significantly better ($\bar{x}$ =53.14) than their counterpart with low educational status ($\bar{x}$ =44.15). This finding collaborates that of Bandura, (1997) who suggests that when individuals have the opportunity to observe and learn from others who have a higher level of experience, those individuals are more likely to develop a greater level of self-efficacy. Bandura (1997) also suggests that the higher an individual has attained educationally, the greater the number of obstacles the individual has generally achieved to be successful. This implies that the more education an individual has completed, the greater level of general self-efficacy that individual will possess.

The fourth hypothesis which predicted no significant gender effect on self-efficacy scores was rejected. This finding collaborate Bandura (1997) concept of enactive mastery that indicates that as we gain experience and overcome obstacles, feelings of self-efficacy are developed. Therefore, this concept when broadened means that as students mature due to age, they will gain more life experiences and therefore gain self-efficacy.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This study examined the therapeutic impact of Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy in fostering self-efficacy amongst academically-at-risk learners in National Open University of Nigeria. The findings have provided empirical evidence to suggest that REBT is a viable comprehensive intervention that has the potential to promote emotional health and foster self-efficacy among academically-at-risk learners. As a result of exposure to REBT, students would no longer re-indoctrinate themselves with faulty assumptions and irrational thought. Academically-at-risk learners would also learn to think logically and scientifically about their thoughts and emotions in turn, would be prepared to face the challenges that lie ahead of them in a rational and self-helping manner. They will believe in their ability to succeed, develop positive attitude to school and learning, reduce anxiety and improve on their academic achievement. In addition, the significant effects of gender, educational level and age on treatment outcomes have implications for counsellors to adopt appropriate intervention strategies that would take those variables into cognizance.

Moreover, efforts must be geared towards ensuring practicing counsellors to update their skills in order to effectively utilize REBT and other psychological treatments for learners in order to make them actualize their academic potentials. More importantly, student counsellors should design robust induction and orientation programmes, whereby they could discuss extensively the modalities of studying in ODL institution. Such opportunities could also be used to address frequently asked questions. This would no doubt reduce to the barest minimum some of the challenges the learners encounter.

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