



They Don't Know What They Don't Know: Using Retrospective Pretest to Adjust for Response Bias

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Abstract

The Essential Life Skills for Military Families (ELSMF) Program strengthens marriages and couple relationships among Military Reserve and National Guard families via an 8 hour workshop series held during military drill weekends. The ELSMF Program prepares single service members and married/unmarried couples for deployment by focusing on skills that help them effectively manage the relationship, financial, and legal matters in their lives. The program is a collaborative between academic programs at three North Carolina Universities, local guard and reserve centers, and NC Cooperative Extension.

The evaluation of ELSMF, however, found that participants in the program often believe they know more than they do about the fundamental skills of maintaining a relationship. By combining a retrospective pretest approach with a traditional pre-post survey, we are able to estimate the amount of response bias due to respondent's overestimation of their skills and abilities. Retrospective pretests offer a correction for response bias resulting in a more accurate assessment of outcomes.

Introduction

There are currently about 1.1 million Reserve Component (RC) families (SLS, 2009). The frequent and prolonged separations due to deployment are a significant source of stress in these military families (Wheeler & Stone, 2010). RC families experience heightened levels of relationship problems and divorce, financial difficulties, and legal ramifications due to these separations (Huebner et al., 2009). Vogt, Samper, King, King, & Martin (2008) found that RC families are often less prepared to deal with the conflicts among military service, family life, and civilian employment. In addition, RC personnel exhibit higher levels of PTSC and relationship conflicts after deployments, due to more limited access to many services and programs that active duty military members and their families utilize (Miliken, Auchterlonie & Hoge, 2007).

The Essential Life Skills for Military Families (ELSMF) program is the first program in the nation designed specifically for Reserve Component families and individuals to help them strengthen their interpersonal relationships, financial preparedness, and legal protection. This program has been shown to contribute to positive intimate relationships among military service members.

This multi-method evaluation uses data from 142 couples and 1089 individuals who completed one of 53 workshops held in diverse communities of North Carolina. The evaluation uses a complex dyadic longitudinal design for couples, which includes a baseline Pre-Test, a retrospective Pre- and Post-Test, and a 2-3 month follow-up survey (when possible). Our evaluation also includes brief surveys after each course module that gauges participant learning via quantitative and qualitative items.

Results

The 1363 survey participants were:

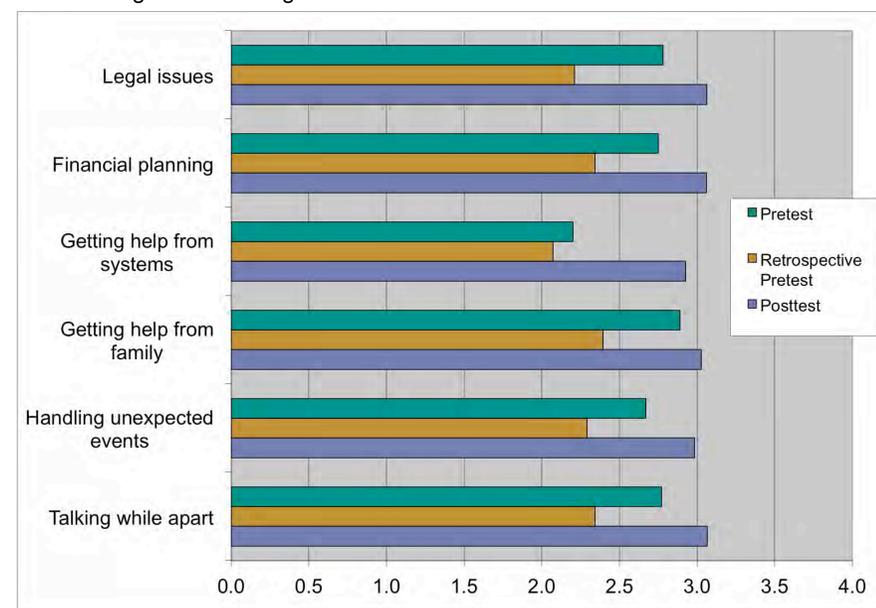
- 89% Military Reserve Services and National Guard
- 91% enlisted
- 59% male, 57% 30 or younger
- 30% deployed during the last 3 years (9 months deployed on average)

Approximately 90% of participants reported that the ELSMF workshop series was moderately or extremely helpful to them personally, to their ability to function as a military family, to their marriage or couple relationship, and to family's ability to handle deployment well. The overwhelming majority also reported each session to be a good use of their time, and that they learned skills that they plan to use in the next month.

Program completers reported statistically significant improvements in being able to handle unexpected life events, talking about deployment issues, getting help when needed from community-based agencies, maintaining a financial spending plan, and handling family legal matters.

Figure 1. Comparison of Influence of the ELSMF Program on Deployment Readiness Using Baseline Pretest, Retrospective Pretest, and Posttest Results

If a deployment occurs in the next 12 months, how well could your family manage the following



Note: All Before-Posttest improvements are statistically significant at $p > .01$. All Pretest-Posttest improvements, except "getting help from family" are statistically significant at $p > .01$. A smaller sample participated in these questions. Pretest n=417, Before/ Posttest n=348; Not all pretest respondents completed Posttest.

Participant Comments

Qualitative responses from program participants demonstrate the actual skills and learning that take place during the workshop series.

"I now understand that my spouse is also going through different emotions like I am. I'm not the only one experiencing these emotions. I need to understand that and listen more and work together as well as give each other space."

"Honestly, today I realized how much I was spending on small things that I could live without."

"There will always be stress and that it's how you handle those stressors that will make you better and your relationship stronger or weaker."

"I learned the importance of having a "strong" support base (like family, friends, church, and community)."

Conclusions

Some of the most encouraging results of this project are shown in Figure 1, where Actual Pretests are compared to Retrospective Pretest and Posttest Results. These results demonstrate that most Reserve Component service members begin the program thinking they are quite competent to deal with the various issues and skills discussed in the program, but leave the program realizing their earlier perceived competence was exaggerated and having gained much from participating in the program.

Overall the ELSMF program is highly regarded by participants, who demonstrate high levels of satisfaction with the program and who rate the value and usefulness of its content highly. Program participants also report that the program produces positive changes in their lives, by helping them feel more prepared for deployments and better equipped for success in their relationship with their partner. The ELSMF program is reported to be a fun and engaging experience that leaves its participants with new skills and knowledge for successfully dealing with the demands of military family life.

Selected References

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www.militaryfamilylifeskills.org