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journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jvbDealing with negative job search experiences: The beneficial role of self-compassion for job seekers' affective responses[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Searching for a job is associated with various obstacles and difficulties, which may elicit emotional responses among job seekers. In a cross-sectional (Study 1; $N = 99$) and a 5-wave diary study (Study 2; $N = 227$), we examined whether self-compassion helps job seekers to better cope emotionally with the difficulties they encounter (Study 1) and the lack of progress they experience (Study 2) during job search. Results of Study 1 indicated that self-compassion related positively to positive affect and negatively to negative affect. Furthermore, the negative relationship between difficulties during job search and different types of positive affect (i.e., activating and deactivating) was less negative for job seekers with more self-compassion. Results of Study 2 showed that job seekers high on self-compassion reported less negative affect and more positive affect during job search episodes in which progress was lacking than job seekers low on self-compassion. Furthermore, self-compassion was found to function as an adaptive mindset that attenuates the positive relationship of perceived lack of job search progress with different types (i.e., activating and deactivating) of negative affect. The combined Study 1 and 2 findings suggest that self-compassion can be beneficial for job seekers' well-being in difficult times during the job search process.

The mutable economy and the upswing of technology have contributed to a flexible job market in which an increasing number of people search for a job (Eurofound, 2015). Job search is relevant across various career stages, for example, new labor market entrants who just finished their degree, employees (with temporary contracts) who transit from one job to the next, and people who are laid off due to cuts or the disappearance of their job. Job search is oftentimes an emotional experience because of an abundance of difficulties such as setbacks, rejections, and other negative experiences (Song, Uy, Zhang, & Shi, 2009; Wanberg, Basbug, Van Hooft, & Samtani, 2012; Wanberg, Zhu, & Van Hooft, 2010). There are no predetermined steps to (re)employment and job seekers usually get little to no feedback other than rejections (Wanberg, Basbug, et al., 2012). It is therefore not surprising that many individuals experience job search as a black hole that swallows their efforts and energy without returning a positive outcome (Wanberg, Basbug, et al., 2012). Indeed, meta-analytic findings indicate a negative relationship between job search effort and mental health (McKee-Ryan, Song, Wanberg, & Kinicki, 2005). The detrimental effect of job search on job seekers' emotional responses is troublesome because research has shown that especially positive emotions promote job search success (Côté, Saks, & Zikic, 2006; Turban, Lee, Da Motta Veiga, Haggard, & Wu, 2013). Therefore, we need research that identifies cognitions and coping mechanisms that job seekers can use for dealing with negative job search experiences in order to reduce negative affect and sustain positive affect.

In the present paper, we present two field studies (a cross-sectional and a five-wave diary study) among job seekers in which we

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examined whether the negative affective consequences that job seekers experience can be buffered by a self-compassioned mindset. Self-compassion entails being kind and understanding towards oneself in instances of pain or failure rather than being harshly self-critical, perceiving one's experiences as part of the larger human experience rather than seeing them as isolating, and neither ignoring and avoiding nor amplifying painful thoughts and emotions (Neff, Kirkpatrick, & Rude, 2007).

Our studies aim to contribute to the extant job search literature by introducing self-compassion as a mindset that may help job seekers cope with negative experiences during job search. The literature on job search recognized the importance of positive affect for the job search process (Côté et al., 2006; Turban et al., 2013), but little research has examined how job seekers' positive affect can be fostered. Suggestions have been made to improve job seekers' resilience in order to foster positive adaptation to adverse situations (Song et al., 2009; Turban et al., 2013). We aim to contribute to this line of thought by proposing that self-compassion can function as an adaptive emotion-focused coping strategy during job search. With our research we further aim to contribute to the job search field by shedding more light on job seekers' affective responses. Affect is relatively underexposed in the job search literature and its models, as these typically focus on cognitions and behavioral processes (e.g., Boswell, Zimmerman, & Swider, 2012; Saks, 2005; Van Hooft, Wanberg, & Van Hooft, 2013; Wanberg, Hough, & Song, 2002). Because affect predicts subsequent job search behavior and outcomes (Song et al., 2009; Turban et al., 2013; Wanberg et al., 2010), it is important to increase our understanding of job seekers' affective responses.

In addition, we aim to contribute to the self-compassion literature. Research showed that self-compassion is beneficial for people who experience negative events such as receiving unfavorable feedback or academic failure (Breines & Chen, 2012; Leary, Tate, Adams, Allen, & Hancock, 2007; Neff, Hsieh, & Dejitterat, 2005). Other research showed that self-compassion can help recovery after more severe negative events like trauma (e.g., Thompson & Waltz, 2008). Job search presents a different context from what has been addressed in self-compassion research. Rather than a one-time negative event, job search entails periods of continued challenge to self-worth and mental well-being (Wanberg, 2012; Wanberg, Basbug, et al., 2012). Showing that self-compassion is beneficial during such a continued negative experience rather than one-time negative events contributes to the self-compassion literature by broadening its impact over time. In addition, our second study aims to extend previous research by examining the buffering role of self-compassion on within- rather than between-individual variability in affect.

Our study has practical implications in that a self-compassioned mindset can be induced (e.g., Adams & Leary, 2007; Breines & Chen, 2012; Zhang & Chen, 2016) and self-compassion is trainable (Leary et al., 2007; Shapira & Mongrain, 2010). Identifying self-compassion as buffering negative affective consequences of job search experiences opens up the possibility to equip job seekers with a mindset that helps them to cope with these experiences during job search. This will inform employment counselors and job seekers on how to preserve positive emotions and diminish negative emotions during job search.

1. Job search and affect

In the pursuit of obtaining (re)employment, job seekers engage in job search behavior (e.g., searching for and responding to vacancies, networking, going to job interviews). Job search behavior can be defined as a dynamic recursive self-regulatory process that is purposive, volitional, and largely self-organized (Kanfer, Wanberg, & Kantrowitz, 2001). Meta-analytic research demonstrated that the more time people spend on their job search, the higher the likelihood of finding a job (Kanfer et al., 2001). Engaging in job search can therefore be considered as a problem-focused form of coping as it attempts to resolve the “root” cause of the stressful situation (i.e., being or becoming unemployed; DeFrank & Ivancevich, 1986; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Hence, engaging in job search may positively affect people's feelings because it brings them closer to obtaining their employment goal and thus alleviates their distress about finding a job. Indeed, a diary study showed that individuals reported higher positive affect on days when they perceived progress in their job search (Wanberg et al., 2010).

Unfortunately, engaging in job search is not equal to making progress. The job search process is characterized by pursuing distal goals, lacking clear pathways, and receiving little feedback (Van Hooft et al., 2013), making it difficult for job seekers to perceive progress. In addition, taking action to attain a job is often unsuccessful (Wanberg, Basbug, et al., 2012), leaving people with limited control over whether they will find a suitable job, while the pressure to find a job is often high. Therefore, contrary to the idea that job search is a problem-focused coping strategy that relieves job seekers of some distress, it may function as an additional source of agony. Consistent with this, many studies found negative relations between job search effort and mental health (McKee-Ryan et al., 2005), which seems to be fully mediated by negative job search experiences (Song et al., 2009). Thus, the more time people spend on their job search, the more negative job search experiences they encounter, the more distress they feel.

Negative job search experiences involve different types of setbacks (e.g., being rejected for a job, not being able to find vacancies at all). Such difficulties during job search have in common that they hinder the job search process that aims to reduce the discrepancy between the current state and the desired state of attaining a job. Like in any self-regulatory process (e.g., studying for an exam, trying to meet a deadline), job seekers have a goal (e.g., job attainment), show goal-striving behavior (e.g., job search), and monitor their progress towards reaching the goal. The evaluation of progress is reflected in job seekers' affect or as Carver (2001) formulates in his self-regulatory account of affect: “positive and negative affects are posited to convey information about whether the behavior being engaged in is going well or poorly” (p.345). Anything that interferes with things going well will likely result in diminished positive affect and increased negative affect. The relation between things going well or poorly and affect is also supported by Ilies and Judge (2005) who showed that the more positive the performance feedback people receive, the more positive their affect. Based on these self-regulatory perspectives, we expect that experiencing negative feedback during job search – in the form of difficulties during job search or a lack of experienced progress – will increase negative affect and reduce positive affect.

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