



Maintaining perceived control with unemployment facilitates future adjustment



Frank J. Infurna^{a,*}, Denis Gerstorf^{b,c,d}, Nilam Ram^{c,d,e}, Jürgen Schupp^{c,f},
Gert G. Wagner^{c,e,g}, Jutta Heckhausen^h

^a Arizona State University, Tempe, USA

^b Humboldt University Berlin, Germany

^c German Institute for Economic Research (DIW Berlin), Germany

^d Pennsylvania State University, University Park, USA

^e Max Planck Institute for Human Development, Berlin, Germany

^f Free University, Berlin, Germany

^g Berlin University of Technology, Berlin, Germany

^h University of California, Irvine, USA

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ABSTRACT

Unemployment is a major challenge to individuals' development. An important personal resource to ameliorate the negative impact of unemployment may be perceived control, a general-purpose belief system. Little is known, however, about how perceived control itself changes with the experience of unemployment and what the antecedents, correlates, and consequences of such change in perceived control are in different ages. We use data from the German Socio-Economic Panel Study ($N = 413$ who experienced unemployment and $N = 413$ case-matched controls; time period of data collection: 1994–1996) to examine whether perceived control changes with unemployment, explore the role of socio-demographic, psychosocial and health factors in moderating such change, and investigate whether levels of perceived control prior to unemployment and unemployment-related change in perceived control predict unemployment-related outcomes up to five years following. Results indicated that, on average, perceived control remained relatively stable with unemployment, and that younger and older workers did not differ in this regard. However, there were sizeable individual differences in change in perceived control, with women and those with fewer years of education experiencing greater unemployment-related declines in perceived control. Lower levels of perceived control prior to unemployment and steeper unemployment-related decrements in perceived control were each associated with a higher risk of remaining unemployed in the 12 months immediately following unemployment. Steeper unemployment-related declines in perceived control also predicted lower life satisfaction up to five years following. We discuss possible pathways by which perceived control may facilitate adjustment to unemployment, consider the role of perceived control for better understanding the dynamics of unemployment, and suggest routes for further more process-oriented inquiry.

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Major life events such as job loss or severe illness are among those experiences that challenge people's psychological functioning and have consequences for later developmental outcomes (Baltes & Nesselroade, 1979; Birren & Cunningham, 1985; Diener, Lucas, & Schollon, 2006; Gerstorf & Ram, 2012; Hultsch & Plemons, 1979; Infurna & Luthar, in press). For example, unemployment typically

* Corresponding author at: Arizona State University, Department of Psychology, 950 S. McAllister Ave., Tempe, AZ 85281, USA.
E-mail address: Frank.Infurna@asu.edu (F.J. Infurna).

results in loss of earnings and long-term difficulties of finding work as well as declines and sustained lower levels of life satisfaction and physical functioning (Dooley, Fielding, & Levi, 1996; Lucas, Clark, Georgellis, & Diener, 2004; McArdle, Waters, Briscoe, & Hall, 2007; McKee-Ryan, Song, Wanberg, & Kinicki, 2005; Paul & Moser, 2009). Our objective is to examine how a key psychological resource, perceived control, changes in relation to unemployment and whether greater perceived control facilitates adjustment in the years following unemployment. Examining perceived control in the context of unemployment will help us better understand possible antecedents of stability and change in perceived control and how perceived control helps individuals to seek out opportunities that facilitate adjustment to and overcoming of unemployment. We use prospective longitudinal data from the widely used German Socio-Economic Panel Study (SOEP) to (a) examine whether perceived control changes as an outcome of unemployment, (b) explore the role of socio-demographic, psychosocial, and health factors in moderating changes in perceived control, and (c) investigate whether levels of perceived control prior to unemployment and changes in perceived control are predictive of future re-employment and well-being.

1. Perceived control (change) as an outcome of unemployment

Perceived control, as a psychological construct, has a long history (for discussion, see Skinner, 1995) and refers to an individual's belief about his or her capability to exert influence over and shape his or her life circumstances (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978; Skinner, 1995). It is a widely used construct across behavioral and social science disciplines, including psychology, sociology, and economics. Higher levels of perceived control and more positive rates of change over time have been linked to better cognitive, mental, and physical health across the lifespan (Gale, Batty, & Deary, 2008; Infurna & Okun, 2015; Infurna, Ram & Gerstorf, 2013; Lachman, 2006; Moffitt et al., 2011). In the economics literature, perceived control has similarly been linked to economic outcomes of better job performance and increased wages (Almlund, Duckworth, Heckman, & Kautz, 2011; Heckman, Stixrud, & Urzua, 2006; Judge, 2009; Stajkovic & Luthans, 1998). However, much of the research on perceived control has focused on its effects on aging-related outcomes and in the context of career choice and career decision making (Gianakos, 1999; Taylor & Popma, 1990). Although studies examining change in perceived control over the adult lifespan (i.e., chronological age) provide insights on the long-term pattern of change (e.g., increases in young adulthood, stability in midlife, and declines in older ages; Cobb-Clark & Schurer, 2011; Gerstorf, Ram, Lindenberger, & Smith, 2013; Heckhausen & Baltes, 1991; Lachman, Rosnick, & Röcke, 2009; Specht, Egloff, & Schmukle, 2013), there are typically large between-person differences. What is largely lacking from the literature is a focus on outcomes of perceived control or put differently, what contributes to (short-term) changes in perceptions of control, with an emphasis on the role of life events.

The Motivational Theory of Lifespan Development proposes that changes in biological and societal/social opportunities and constraints across the lifespan shape the overall trajectory of control capacity (e.g., inverted U-shape; Heckhausen, Wrosch, & Schulz, 2010). These time-organized opportunity structures present significant regulatory challenges to the individual who must respond in a time- or age-sensitive way (see also Brandtstädter & Greve, 1994). For example, the data we use was collected during a special historical time in Germany (i.e., 1990s), where there were major historical issues and changes relating to work. During this time period, there were historical issues and major changes relating to employment trends, financial issues, and changes in government as a result of German reunification. German reunification led to sweeping economic changes, such as average wage growth increased in East Germany, but the payoff to education decreased slightly (Krueger & Pischke, 1992). There were higher unemployment rates in East Germany and trouble finding jobs (see Diewald, Goedicke, & Mayer, 2006; Solga & Diewald, 2001).

Age-related changes in societal opportunities and biological constraints may be pertinent antecedents of between-person differences in changes in perceived control. We argue that such changes could be the result of life events that occur across the adult lifespan, such as our focus, unemployment. Studies on unemployment have helped us better understand how unemployment relates to various individual difference characteristics, including personality (Hoye & Lootens, 2013), mental health (Paul & Moser, 2009), gender (Leana & Feldman, 1991), and family support (Huffman, Culbertson, Wayment, & Irving, 2015). Unemployment is a life event that has the potential for having different objective and subjective consequences in young adulthood and midlife. Objective consequences of unemployment involve the loss of financial security and an urgent struggle to find re-employment, whereas subjective consequences include declines in well-being and challenges to psychosocial development, in particular, perceptions of control. We view job loss as a major life event that can be a setback with potential long-term implications for the development and maintenance of perceptions of control during the course of people's lives.

Employment is one of the central pillars of adult life in modern society, providing essential materials resources to other domains of life (e.g., family, health), and has been conceptualized as an important source of perceived control (Bandura, 1997; Lachman & Weaver, 1998; Marmot, 2006). Work transitions, such as unemployment can result in changes to one's time structure, social contact, collective purpose, status, and activity (see Jahoda, 1981; Jahoda, 1982) that can potentially have consequences for psychological well-being and in our interest, be one potential source of between-person differences in changes in perceived control. The work context in young adulthood may provide opportunities to aspire for, plan, and attempt actions that lead to desired outcomes, thereby reinforcing and leading to increases in perceptions of control (Mirowsky & Ross, 2007; Schieman, 2001). Entering the workforce in young adulthood comes with increases in effective control of one's own life and financial autonomy and often relates to changes in psychological and personality characteristics (Roberts, Wood, & Smith, 2005; Robins & Trzesniewski, 2005). Therefore, unemployment in young adulthood may be more likely to have subjective consequences for development due to the developmental importance of the transition to the workforce. For example, experiencing unemployment in young adulthood can be especially detrimental to perceptions of control because people may have not yet developed the interpretive resilience of using self-protective strategies to maintain perceived control (Heckhausen et al., 2010). The loss of social relationships associated with co-workers and possible other relational sources, such as

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