



The relationship between core self-evaluations, employment commitment and well-being in the unemployed

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ABSTRACT

We surveyed 173 unemployed adults and assessed their levels of core self-evaluations (self-efficacy, self-esteem, neuroticism, control), employment commitment, and psychological well-being. Three hypotheses were tested: (a) that higher self-esteem and self-efficacy, lower neuroticism and greater perceptions of control would be positively related to well-being; (b) that employment commitment would account for additional variance over and above that accounted for by the core self-evaluation variables; and (c) length of unemployment would moderate the relationship between employment commitment and well-being. Self-esteem, neuroticism, and control were related to well-being in the expected direction. In support of incongruence theory, employment commitment contributed unique variance. Further, the relationship between employment commitment and well-being was contingent on length of unemployment, with those unemployed longer being disproportionately disadvantaged when employment commitment was high. The study demonstrated the value of considering dispositional characteristics when examining the well-being of unemployed people; and demonstrated direct support for the incongruence model by showing that employment commitment was unrelated to core self-evaluations and was differentially related to well-being in unemployed people, depending on their period of unemployment.

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1. Introduction

Unemployment remains a serious economic and social problem in most countries (Wrightson, 2005). At the time of this study, the national unemployment rate for Australia was 4.6% (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2007), with ~468,000 individuals unemployed. When the hidden unemployed (e.g., older workers who have withdrawn from the workforce because they do not believe they will get a job) and the underemployed (e.g., those employed but wishing to work longer hours) are taken into consideration, the estimated actual rate is double the level of the official measure (Barrett, Nukic, & Treuren, 2005), and predicted to get worse over the next 2 years (OECD, 2008).

Efforts to understand the psychological issues associated with unemployment have led to a significant body of research typically focused on job search attitudes, determinants of reemployment and the relationship between unemployment and psychological well-being (McKee-Ryan, Song, Wanberg, & Kinicki, 2005). The current study adds to the understanding of the negative well-being effects associated with unemployment by: (a) testing the relationship between core self-evaluations (Judge, Erez, Bono, & Thoresen, 2002) and well-being in an unemployed sample, (b) test-

ing whether employment commitment explains additional variance in well-being over and above the core self-evaluations, and (c) testing whether the relationship between employment commitment and well-being varies depending on the length of time people have been unemployed.

Since the 1930s, many studies have shown that unemployment is associated with a decline in well-being (McKee-Ryan et al., 2005), and several models have been proposed to account for this deterioration. Jahoda (1982) argued that the decline was related largely to the loss of latent benefits associated with employment (e.g., the loss of structure to one's day, the loss of regular social contact), whereas Fryer (1995) argued that it was the loss of income and subsequent impoverishment that led to the decline in well-being, as this restricts personal control and reduces the capacity to make plans and organize a meaningful and satisfying life. However, these models have been criticized for their failure to consider the dispositional characteristics that may influence well-being during unemployment (Creed & Evans, 2002). With this limitation in mind, and the knowledge that there is considerable variability in the unemployment experience, researchers have broadened their studies to include various personality traits that have been assumed to either aid in the process of coping with job loss, or directly affect well-being. In a recent meta-analysis that examined the correlates of well-being during unemployment, McKee-Ryan and Kinicki (2002) identified several dispositional characteristics they

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considered to be important precursors to the coping process. The most important of these were those related to the individual's self perception of worth or perceived control over life events, and included self-esteem, self-efficacy, locus of control and neuroticism, which together comprise the recently conceptualized core self-evaluation construct (Judge et al., 2002).

Self-esteem reflects an overall evaluation of self worth. It is related to well-being in numerous ways. For example, it functions as a gauge of how well we perceive we will be accepted by others, and also operates to promote interpersonal relationships, which are associated with better well-being (Leary, 1999). Self-efficacy is an individual's appraisal of what they are capable of accomplishing in a given setting, and according to Bandura (2001), is the key ingredient in human achievement and well-being. Locus of control refers to an individual's belief about how much control they have over situations in their life. People with an internal locus of control see themselves as primarily in control of their behaviour and its consequences, and typically experience less anxiety and greater well-being than those who do not feel in control (Reich, 1997). Finally, neuroticism refers to the ease and frequency with which a person becomes upset and distressed. Neuroticism both exposes people to more perceived stressful events and increases their reactivity to those events (Bolger & Schilling, 1991).

Research into the capacity of the core self-evaluation variables to predict psychological well-being has proceeded along two fronts. The first concerns the construct in its entirety. Judge et al. (2002) argued that the four core self-evaluation variables should not be considered in isolation as they were so strongly correlated they could be explained by a higher order factor. The empirical evidence from this perspective suggests that the composite construct is a good dispositional predictor of job (Judge & Bono, 2001) and life satisfaction (Judge, Locke, Durham, & Kluger, 1998). A recent, large longitudinal study, for example, found that the core self-evaluation construct explained 84% of the variance in job satisfaction in a sample of German employees (Dormann, Fay, Zapf, & Frese, 2006). Second, research, including studies with the unemployed, has examined the four traits separately. The unemployment studies have generally concluded that the self-evaluation variables moderate the experience of unemployment and its effects on well-being. Evidence supports the notion that having a positive self-view is a protective resource when faced with unemployment (McKee-Ryan & Kinicki, 2002), and correlations have been found between well-being and self-esteem (Leana & Feldman, 1995), locus of control, self-efficacy (Vinokur, Price, & Schul, 1995), and optimism, which overlaps with neuroticism (Lai & Wong, 1998). McKee-Ryan et al. (2005), in their meta-analysis of unemployment and well-being, called for future research to directly test the relationship between psychological well-being during unemployment and the core self-evaluations. The current study tested the relationship between these variables and psychological distress in a sample of unemployed people.

1.1. Incongruence theory

Employment commitment (also known as work-role centrality) is concerned with the desire to be in paid employment. It is regarded by many, but not all, to be a stable dispositional trait that results from a lifelong socialization process (Kanungo, 1982; Paul & Moser, 2006). Employment commitment is the central concept in the incongruence explanation for psychological decline in unemployed people (Paul & Moser, 2006). This hypothesis states: (a) that unemployed people are in a state of incongruence, as they desire to be in paid employment but are in a state of unemployment, and (b) that, while people are generally motivated to reduce discrepancies between goals and achievements, discrepancies are associated with negative outcomes, such as psychological distress.

In a recent meta-analysis, Paul and Moser (2006) concluded that both employed and unemployed people have high mean levels of employment commitment, with the level for unemployed people only marginally below that of the employed, and that a major cause of psychological distress in unemployed people was the incongruence between high levels of employment commitment and the experience of unemployment. These authors also showed that employment commitment remained stable over time, and subsequently argued that unemployed people did not exhibit an adaptation process over time to reduce their distress by lowering their employment commitment.

1.2. Study aims and hypotheses

The current study will, first, test whether employment commitment explains additional variance in psychological well-being in unemployed people over and above that explained by the core self-evaluations. This will test whether additional dispositional variables should be included when assessing specific populations. Second, the study will test whether the relationship between employment commitment and psychological distress is a simple one as suggested by Paul and Moser (2006) or whether the relationship between employment commitment and psychological distress is different during different phases of the unemployment cycle; that is, the study will test if length of unemployment moderates the relationship between employment commitment and distress.

Specific hypotheses were:

1. Higher self-esteem and self-efficacy, lower neuroticism and a more internal locus of control will be positively related to well-being;
2. Employment commitment will contribute additional variance to predicting psychological distress after the core self-evaluation variables have been accounted for – specifically, the higher the level of employment commitment the more psychological distress; and
3. Length of unemployment would moderate the relationship between employment commitment and well-being – we did not specify direction on moderation as this hypothesis is exploratory.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were 173 unemployed people: 66 males (38%) and 107 females (62%); mean age of 34 years ($SD = 14.03$). Sixty-four (37%) reported some post-secondary schooling, 28 (16%) had completed 12 years of high school, and 81 (47%) had completed 10 years or less. Eighty-three (48%) reported being unemployed for <6 months, 34 (20%) for between 6 and 12 months, and 56 (32%) for 12 months or longer (average length of unemployment was 7 months). When this sample was compared to the population of people seeking employment in the area sampled, this sample had a slightly higher proportion of females (52% was the area average), matched the mean age (of 34 years) and had been unemployed for a shorter duration (19 months was the average area duration; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2007).

2.2. Materials

2.2.1. Psychological distress

This was measured using the widely used 12-item General Health Questionnaire (Goldberg, 1972), which taps both positive

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