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Maintaining Well-Being During Unemployment: The Role of the Latent Benefits of Employment

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Abstract

A survey of 371 unemployed people in South East Queensland explored whether deprivation of the latent benefits of employment was able to predict psychological distress after controlling for other key correlates. A standard multiple regression found that the latent benefits (time structure, social contact, collective purpose, enforced activity, and status) accounted for a significant 13% of the variance in psychological distress, with time structure being the most important unique predictor. However, after controlling for self-esteem, positive affect (PA), negative affect (NA), satisfaction with employment status, employment commitment, and financial strain, the latent benefits did not significantly add to the prediction of distress. The results are discussed in terms of their practical implications for career development.

Maintaining Well-Being During Unemployment: The Role of the Latent Benefits of Employment

Even though the current unemployment rate of 5.1% is reportedly at an all time low, there are still approximately 542,000 Australians out of work (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2005). The ABS defines a person as being *employed* if they are 15 years or older and working at least one hour per week. Thus, the official unemployment rate does not include people who are only marginally attached to the work force. These people are the *underemployed*, who are doing casual, part-time, or temporary work, but who could be working full-time. According to the Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS, 2003), the official figure would most likely be double if those people were also considered. Furthermore, there is a growing trend for organisations to employ staff on a more casual or temporary basis (Campbell & Burgess, 2001), which means that many of today's jobs are insecure. Because of these insecure employment conditions, there is a greater likelihood for people to experience unemployment at some stage in their working life. Therefore, it is important for career development professionals to understand the unemployment experience and to incorporate strategies that will assist people to maintain their well-being during periods of unemployment.

The detrimental effects of unemployment on the psychological well-being of the unemployed have been firmly established in the literature (see Feather, 1990; Murphy & Athanasou, 1999; Winefield, 1995 for reviews). Several approaches have been taken to explain why this is so. One of these approaches is the latent deprivation theory proposed by Jahoda (1982). The central notion in Jahoda's theory is that unemployed people experience psychological distress because they are deprived of certain consequences of employment that sustain well-being. Jahoda argued that whilst employment provides *manifest benefits* or deliberately planned consequences, such as a regular income, there are five other more important consequences. She referred to these as the *latent benefits*, which are not deliberately planned, but fulfill certain psychosocial needs that are important to well-being. They include social contact

(employment provides opportunities to meet people outside of the family), time structure (employment imposes a structure to the day), status/identity (the work we do forms part of our identity or sense of status within the community), collective purpose (employment provides opportunities to work with others towards collective goals that would not be achieved by an individual alone) and enforced activity (employment typically enforces some sort of activity upon us). Jahoda maintained that time structure was the most important of the latent benefits.

However, recent studies that have assessed the relative contribution of each of the five benefits suggest that loss of status may be the most detrimental to well-being (Creed & Machin, 2002; Creed & Macintyre, 2001). This is not to say that all jobs are good and provide the right amount of access to these benefits. Indeed, there are jobs where at least some of these consequences are extreme and stressful (e.g., organisations may impose rigid time schedules or there may be too much contact with others), but Jahoda argued that any job is better than the alternative of being unemployed.

There is a lack of consistency in the instruments used to measure access to the latent benefits, which makes comparative studies difficult. Further, those that have been used more frequently, for example, the Access to Categories of Experience (ACE) scale (Evans, 1986, as cited in Creed & Machin, 2003), have been criticised for their questionable psychometric properties (Creed & Machin, 2003; Muller, Creed, Waters, & Machin, 2005). Answering the call for a more integrated theory and a more valid measurement instrument, Muller et al. (2005) developed the Latent and Manifest Benefits (LAMB) scale, which measures financial strain, collective purpose, social contact, status, time structure, and enforced activity.

A criticism of deprivation models is that they fail to take into account individual differences, such as temperament, values, or experiences (Creed & Evans, 2002). In their recent meta-analytic study, McKee-Ryan, Song, Wanberg, and Kinicki (2005) identified work-role centrality (also referred to as employment commitment) and personal and social coping resources

as some of the key correlates of well-being in the unemployed. Employment commitment is the value a person places on being in paid employment. Research has shown that placing a high value on being employed promotes job seeking and job acquisition (e.g., Mean Patterson, 1997; Rantakeisu & Jonsson, 2003; Wiener, Oei, & Creed, 1999), but it also has a moderating effect on well-being. Unemployed people with high levels of employment commitment experience greater distress than those who are more ambivalent about employment (Feather, 1990; Jackson, Stafford, Banks, & Warr, 1983; Mean Patterson, 1997).

Some of the other important variables associated with well-being include self-perceptions of worth (e.g., self-esteem), various affective dispositions, social support, financial resources, and time structure (McKee-Ryan et al., 2005). Whilst self-esteem has typically been measured as an outcome variable in unemployment studies, Feather (1990) suggested that it is a potential moderator of the impact of unemployment, in that high self-esteem may buffer some of the negative effects. This study explores self-esteem in that context, along with affective dispositions, as measured by negative affect (NA), positive affect (PA), and satisfaction with employment status. A consistent finding in the literature is that NA and PA are strong predictors of distress (e.g., Creed, Machin, & Hicks, 1999; Pulkkinen, Kokkonen, & Makiäho, 1998). At a more situation-specific level, having a positive view of one's employment status (whether employed or unemployed) is also likely to influence levels of distress. Hesketh, Shouksmith, and Kang (1987) found that people who were happy being unemployed were engaged in purposeful activities and had good social contacts (thus accessing two of the latent benefits) and high self-esteem, whereas those who were unhappily unemployed reported low self-esteem, financial strain, few social contacts, and high employment commitment.

Using the recently developed LAMB scale, this study examines the relationship between the latent benefits and mental health and assesses the relative importance of each of those benefits. The main focus, however, is on determining how well those variables stand up when

included with other key correlates of well-being, including employment commitment, self-esteem, financial strain, and affectivity (PA, NA, and domain-specific satisfaction). Earlier results from this study, based on a sample size of 213 unemployed persons, were published in the Proceedings of the 39th Australian Psychological Society's Annual Conference.

Method

Participants

Participants for this study were a sample of 371 ($M = 214$; $F = 157$) unemployed clients recruited from various employment agencies in South East Queensland. Ages ranged from 16 to 65 years ($M = 33.84$, $SD = 13.22$). Most participants ($N = 259$) were not currently doing any paid work, 38 were doing volunteer/unpaid work, 65 were working casually or part-time, 8 selected the "other" category (5 were students and 3 were starting their own businesses), and 1 participant did not respond to this item. Most participants (346) had previously done some paid work in the past, with 296 of those having been employed on a full-time basis at some point in their lives. For 158 of those participants, it had been at least a year since their last full-time job, whilst 136 had ceased their last full-time job less than 12 months before completing the survey. The majority of participants (350) were receiving some form of government income support payment, with participants' mean net fortnightly income being \$382.02 ($SD = \176.19, Range \$0 - \$1100).

Materials

This study is part of a longitudinal study of unemployment that involved using cross-sectional surveys to gather data at Time 1 and again 6 months later at Time 2. For brevity, only the measures relevant to this component of the research project are reported. The survey included demographic questions and the following measures.

The *Latent and Manifest Benefits Scale* (LAMB) was developed by Muller et al. (2005) and consists of 6 subscales each with 6 bipolar items measured on a 7-point scale: Financial strain (e.g., *My income usually allows me to socialise as often as I like/My income rarely allows me to*

socialise as often as I like); Social contact (e.g., *I often/seldom meet new people*); Collective purpose (e.g., *I contribute greatly/minimally to my community*); Status (e.g., *I am often/rarely valued by the people around me*); Time structure (e.g., *I often/rarely have nothing to do*), and Enforced activity (e.g., *I usually/rarely do all the things I have to do*). A high score on each of the five latent benefits indicates greater access to that benefit, whilst a high score on financial strain indicates greater financial strain. The scale authors reported internal reliability coefficients ranging from .74 (time structure) to .93 (financial strain) and demonstrated the construct, criterion, and divergent validity of the scales (see Muller et al., 2005 for details). Scale reliabilities for this study ranged from .84 (enforced activity) to .92 (financial strain and social contact), with re-test reliability after 6 months ranging from .43 (time structure and financial strain) to .62 (social contact).

Satisfaction with employment status was measured by one item, which asked participants to rate how satisfied they were with their current employment status on a 5-point scale from 1 (*extremely unsatisfied*) to 5 (*extremely satisfied*).

Psychological Distress was measured using the 12-item version of the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12, Goldberg, 1972; Goldberg & Williams, 1988). Responses to the 12 items (e.g., *Have you recently been able to enjoy your normal day-to-day activities?*) were scored on a 4-point scale ranging from 0 (*more so than usual/same as usual*) to 3 (*much less than usual*), with higher scores indicating greater psychological distress. The GHQ-12 is a popular measure of psychological distress with scale reliabilities typically above .85 (e.g., Creed Muller, & Machin, 2001; Hannan, O Riain, & Whelan, 1997; Kokko & Pulkkinen, 1998). Coefficient alpha for this study was .91.

Employment Commitment. The Employment Commitment Scale (ECS) was originally developed by Warr, Cook, and Wall (1979), who called it the Work Involvement Scale. It was then adapted by Rowley and Feather (1987) to suit the Australian context and the items are

clearly presented in Feather (1990). The ECS is an 8-item measure that assesses the degree to which a person wants to be engaged in paid employment (e.g., *Even if I won a great deal of money in the lottery, I would want to continue working somewhere*). Respondents rate each item on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*). Warr and Jackson (1984) reported an alpha coefficient of .82 for the original 6-item scale. The reliability of the ECS for this study was .80.

The *Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale* (Rosenberg, 1965) is a widely used measure of self-esteem which consists of 10 items (e.g., *I feel I have a number of good qualities*) with response options ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*). Higher scores indicate higher self-esteem. Reliabilities are typically at an acceptable level at around .80 (e.g., Judge, Erez, Bono, & Thoresen, 2003). The alpha reliability for this scale in the present study was .86.

The *Positive and Negative Affect Schedule* (PANAS, Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988) consists of 20 items, 10 measuring PA (e.g., *interested, excited, proud*) and 10 measuring NA (e.g., *distressed, upset, nervous*). Participants were asked to indicate how often they had experienced each emotion over the past 30 days on a scale from 1 (*very slightly or not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*). High scores indicate high levels of PA or NA. For this study, Cronbach's alpha coefficients were .86 for PA and .89 for NA, which are similar to the reliabilities reported by Watson et al. (i.e., .87 for both NA and PA).

Procedure

Staff at participating employment agencies distributed survey packages to their clients who expressed a willingness to take part in the study. Apart from the survey instrument, the packages contained information about the study, details about the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses, a consent form, and a reply-paid envelope to enable participants to return their completed survey directly to the researchers. Participants provided their informed consent and

chose to either complete a survey on site at the employment agency or to take the survey home to complete.

Results

Six of the study variables violated the assumption of normality. Using a z-score of 3.29 as the cut-off criterion, psychological distress, satisfaction with employment status, and collective purpose were significantly positively skewed (z -skew = 4.87, 8.26, and 4.32, respectively), whilst employment commitment, financial strain, and status were negatively skewed (z -skew = -6.54, -10.57, and -6.51, respectively). These variables were transformed and the statistical analyses were carried out using both the transformed and untransformed variables. Where the outcomes differed, results are reported for the transformed variables. Several multivariate outliers were also detected in the data set using mahalanobis distance scores. Again, the analyses were run with and without the offending cases. No differences were found, so results using the full data set are reported. Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, alpha reliability coefficients, and correlations among the main study variables.

Insert Table 1 about here

All of the variables were significantly correlated with psychological distress in the expected direction. Participants with higher NA, employment commitment, and financial strain were more distressed, and those with higher PA, self-esteem, and satisfaction were experiencing less distress. Less access to the five latent benefits was related to higher levels of distress.

A standard multiple regression analysis was carried out to determine how well the five latent benefits were able to predict psychological distress. The results are presented in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 about here

Table 2 shows that the five latent benefits together accounted for 13% (adj. R^2) of the variance in GHQ scores, $F(5, 365) = 11.67, p < .01$. Time structure was the best individual predictor, accounting for approximately 5% of the total variance explained.

A hierarchical multiple regression analysis was then used to test whether deprivation of the latent benefits was still able to predict well-being after controlling for financial strain, self-esteem, employment commitment, PA, NA, and satisfaction with employment status. Given that the results differed for the transformed and untransformed financial strain variable, but not for any of the other non-normal variables, the transformed (cubed) values for financial strain are reported. Results for the hierarchical regression are presented in Table 3.

Insert Table 3 about here

All of the 11 variables together accounted for a significant 58% (adj. R^2) of the variance in psychological well-being. At Step 1, PA, NA, satisfaction with employment status, self-esteem, employment commitment, and financial strain (cubed) significantly predicted distress, $F(6, 364) = 85.11, p < .01$, accounting for 58% of the variance. With the exception of self-esteem, all made significant individual contributions, with NA being the strongest contributor (15% of the variance). The addition of the latent benefits at Step 2 did not add significantly to the prediction of distress, $\Delta F(5, 359) = 1.21, p > .05$, which suggests that they are relatively less important when personality factors and financial strain are considered.

Discussion

The significant correlations between the latent benefits and psychological distress demonstrate support for Jahoda's (1982) contention that deprivation of the latent benefits of employment is related to psychological distress. The first regression analysis highlighted time structure as the most important predictor, but social contact and collective purpose also play a role. These results suggest that unemployed people who are able to structure their day, mix with others, and make a meaningful contribution to their community have better mental health. Therefore, finding alternate ways of accessing those benefits may provide some protection against the negative psychological consequences of unemployment. This finding supports the Government's *Australians Working Together* initiative (Commonwealth of Australia, 2001), with

one of its aims being to encourage unemployed people to increase their social participation by engaging in volunteer work or Work for the Dole activities.

When the latent benefits are considered with other key correlates of distress, however, they have a minimal impact. The results show that the disposition to experience negative emotions and to view things in a negative light has a significant influence on the mental health of unemployed people. Feeling financially strapped and having high employment commitment is also detrimental to well-being. On the other hand, people with high self-esteem, who have a positive outlook on life and a positive view of their current employment situation, suffer less distress. These results suggest that strategies based on cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT), such as modifying negative thoughts and behavioural activation, may be useful for improving the mental health of the unemployed. There is research evidence to indicate that CBT-based approaches are effective in improving levels of well-being in the unemployed (e.g., Creed, Machin, & Hicks, 1999; Proudfoot, Guest, Carson, Dunn, & Gray, 1997). The behavioural activation component of CBT has been shown to be effective in alleviating negative affect and corresponding maladaptive cognitions (Jacobson et al., 1996; Jacobson & Gortner, 2000). As such, practitioners may find the Brief Behavioural Activation Treatment for Depression (BATD), outlined in Lejuez, Hopko, and Hopko (2001), a useful and cost-effective approach for assisting the unemployed. The BATD incorporates behaviour monitoring, activity scheduling in several life areas (e.g., social relationships, recreation, volunteer work, career/employment), and positive reinforcement.

Given the trend for more casual or temporary forms of employment, it is important for career development practitioners to encourage individuals to plan ways to sustain their well-being during times when they may find themselves jobless. The results of this study have provided some guidance in terms of areas to be considered when making such contingency plans. The cross-sectional nature of this study, however, limits the ability to draw any causal inferences. Furthermore, although the latent benefits were not successful in adding to the prediction of

well-being when included with other key correlates, their effect may be mediated by other variables (e.g., employment commitment, financial strain). Therefore, future research could examine alternate models of possible indirect, moderating, or mediating effects to provide a clearer understanding of the role of the latent benefits.

Table 1

Means, Standard Deviation, Alpha Coefficients, and Correlations for Main Variables (N = 371)

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	α	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. GHQ-12	14.89	6.99	.91	-	-.40**	.68**	-.49**	-.24**	.37**	.21**	-.26**	-.25**	-.23**	-.20**	-.15**
2. Positive affect	34.15	5.94	.86		1	-.26**	.42**	.12*	-0.06	-.08	.23**	.29**	.31**	.35**	.33**
3. Negative affect	26.27	7.77	.89			1	-.54**	-.08	.28**	.16**	-.24**	-.24**	-.18**	-.17**	-.22**
4. Self-esteem	29.99	5.13	.86				1	.04	-.22**	-.01	.24**	.24**	.21**	.36**	.33**
5. Satisfaction	1.95	0.93	-					1	-.26**	-.29**	.20**	.21**	.12*	.04	.03
6. Commitment	36.90	8.00	.80						1	.08	-.32**	-.07	-.04	-.02	.02
7. Financial strain	33.83	8.55	.92							1	-.09	-.48**	-.46**	-.08	-.13*
8. Time structure	22.89	9.54	.91								1	.17**	.08	.08	.07
9. Collective purpose	29.03	8.68	.88									1	.51**	.28**	.27**
10. Social contact	25.92	9.63	.92										1	.43**	.18**
11. Status	16.37	7.36	.89											1	.43**
12. Enforced activity	19.55	7.25	.84												1

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$; Satisfaction = Satisfaction with employment status; Commitment = Employment commitment.

Table 2

Multiple Regression of Latent Benefits on Psychological Distress (N = 371)

Variable	<i>B</i>	95% CI for <i>B</i>	SE <i>B</i>	β	<i>sr</i> ²
Time structure	-.16	-.24 to -.09	.04	.23**	.05
Collective purpose	-.10	-.19 to .00	.05	.12*	.01
Social contact	-.08	-.17 to .00	.04	.12*	.01
Status	-.07	-.18 to .04	.06	.07	.00
Enforced activity	-.05	-.15 to .06	.05	.05	.00

Note. R^2 (adj.) = .13**; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

Table 3

Hierarchical Multiple Regression of Variables Predicting Psychological Distress (N = 371)

Variable	<i>B</i>	95% CI for <i>B</i>	SE <i>B</i>	β	<i>sr</i> ²
Step 1					
Positive affect	-.23	-.32 to -.14	.04	-.20**	.03
Negative affect	.47	.40 to .54	.04	.52**	.18
Satisfaction	-.76	-1.32 to -.21	.28	-.10*	.01
Self-esteem	-.11	-.23 to .00	.06	-.08*	.00
Commitment	.14	.07 to .20	.03	.16**	.02
Financial strain	.00	.00 to .00	.00	.10*	.01
Step 2					
Time structure	.01	-.05 to .06	.03	.01	.00
Collective purpose	.02	-.04 to .09	.03	.03	.00
Social contact	-.01	-.07 to .06	.03	-.01	.00
Status	-.02	-.10 to .06	.04	-.02	.00
Enforced activity	.08	.01 to .16	.04	.09	.01

Note. Step 1 R^2 (adj.) = .58**; Step 2 ΔR^2 = .01; * p < .05; ** p < .01;

Satisfaction = Satisfaction with employment status; Commitment = Employment commitment; Financial strain = Financial strain cubed; Coefficients presented are from when the variable was entered into the model.

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Brief Biographical Notes

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