

Unemployment from the Perspective of the Psychology of Working

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AUTHOR NOTE

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Abstract

Unemployment is a ubiquitous problem that is a complex of cultural, economic interpersonal, physical, and psychological dimensions. Whereas the pernicious negative outcomes of unemployment are empirically established in the literature, there is a need to better understand the psychological experiences of unemployment so as to inform interventions that ameliorate its impact. The present research is based on archival interview data and uses the psychology of working theory to understand 32 individuals' experiences of unemployment. The findings include themes that are consistent with the hypothesized predictors posited in the theory, including: marginalization, economic constraints, volition, career adaptability, proactive personality, critical consciousness, social support, and economic conditions. The research findings affirm the conceptual precepts of the theory with regards to its predictors; thus this contribution to the literature on the psychology of working and unemployment opens new perspectives on a perennial problem.

Keywords: unemployment, underemployment, decent work, workforce marginalization, age discrimination, mature-age workers.

Unemployment from the Perspective of the Psychology of Working

Unemployment is variant of trauma and a scourge of public health associated with poorer physical health (Griep et al., 2015) and mental health (Wanberg, 2012), including suicidal behavior (Milner, Page, & LaMontagne, 2013, 2014). Despite the ubiquity of unemployment, extant vocational psychology theories have been criticized for insufficiently addressing the plight of marginalized and under-represented peoples who are unemployed (Blustein, 2006, 2013). The present research is a response to Blustein's (2006) call for "experience near" (p. 238) research that conceptualizes the lived experience of unemployment. Accordingly, we report on an in-depth qualitative investigation of the experience of the unemployment from the perspective of the psychology of working theory (PWT; Duffy, Blustein, Diemer, & Autin, 2016). Furthermore, the study is set in Australia and thereby is an exploration of the PWT's international utility.

A core precept of the PWT is that decent work leads to satisfaction of needs, work fulfillment, and wellbeing. Decent work is a combination of safe working conditions, personal time and rest, respect for the needs of family, social values, provisions for compensation when income is not assured or diminished, and access to healthcare (International Labour Office, 2015). The PWT posits *predictors* (i.e., economic constraints and marginalization), *mediators* (i.e., work volition and career adaptability), and *moderators* (i.e., proactive personality, critical consciousness, social support, and economic conditions) the influence the experience of decent work. PWT is focused on decent work, its tenets may be used to understand unemployment as the absolute deprivation of decent work.

Predictors. The PWT specifically addresses *marginalization*. Financial insecurity (Rohde, Tang, Osberg, & Rao, 2016), unemployment (Hoare & Machin, 2010), and underemployment (Winefield et al., 2002) contribute to marginalization that is associated with diminished aspiration for and access to decent work. Thus, unemployed persons may

feel somehow on the outer, unaccepted, and not in the mainstream, because they experience the disparity between what is, what could be, what may never be with respect to aspirations past and present, and, moreover, a sense that they have somehow fallen short of meeting stereotypical societal expectations and perceived expectations of proximal sources (e.g., family and friends). The PWT focuses on the inherent relationship between *economic constraints* and psychological experience of social class (cf. Diemer, Mistry, Wadsworth, López, & Reimers, 2013) because these factors impose structural limits on social mobility and negative psychological effects on individuals, groups, and communities (Blustein, Kozan, Connors-Kellergren, & Rand, 2015; Diemer & Rasheed, 2009). It is axiomatic that unemployed persons will feel economic constraints acutely following loss of work and chronically if unable to rejoin the workforce.

Mediators. Holding beliefs about choices with regard to working and career-related decisions is one thing and knowing the limits of those choices is another. This delimitation of choice by awareness of context is posited as *volition* (Duffy, Diemer, Perry, Laurenzi, & Torrey, 2012). Volition comprises beliefs; it is a perception of environmental constraints juxtaposed with personal resources. It is a useful construct because it operationalizes an individual setting realistic expectations about choice in socio-economic and cultural contexts. Self-efficacy is of no material value if the socio-economic context is inert and unreactive to a person's aspirations and efforts, or worse still, opposed—to render dreams dashed and futile. The PWT predicts that higher volition will improve the likelihood of attaining decent work. Similarly, *career adaptability* (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012) is posited as a mediator between context and outcomes. It is evident that career adaptability predicts unemployed persons' job search behavior (Koen, Klehe, & Van Vianen, 2013) and the subsequent quality of employment (Koen, Klehe, Van Vianen, Zikic, & Nauta, 2010). Conversely, the PWT posits that economic conditions and experiences of marginalization may diminish career

adaptability, which is evident in the effects of job insecurity on career adaptability (Maggiori, Johnston, Krings, Massoudi, & Rossier, 2013). Future outlook—positive and negative—is intrinsic to career adaptability and, for unemployed people, outlook mediates the relationship between financial strain and psychological wellbeing (Creed & Klisch, 2005).

Moderators. *Proactive personality*, which predicts objective (e.g., salary) and subjective (e.g., satisfaction) indicators of career success (Seibert, Crant, & Kraimer, 1999), is regarded as a moderator of the effects found in the relations among variables in PWT, such that it buffers the negative effects of marginalization and economic constraints on work volition and career adaptability. Proactive personality effects job search behavior (Waters, Briscoe, Hall, & Wang, 2014; Zacher, 2013; Zacher & Bock, 2014); however, its effects on job search behavior do not directly lead to success in securing employment (Waters et al., 2014). Evincing its reformist roots, PWT posits *critical consciousness* (Diemer, Rapa, Park, & Perry, 2014; Freire, 1972) as a moderator variable which comprises: (a) awareness of distal, societal, and structural causes of social inequality; (b) beliefs in capacity to make changes to those causes; and (c) performance of actions to effect change. Research affirms the relevance of social capital as a dimension of employability for unemployed persons (McArdle, Waters, Briscoe, & Hall, 2007). Thus, *social support* is a moderator variable in the PWT. For unemployed persons, social support is a buffer for mental health (Milner, Krnjacki, Butterworth, & LaMontagne, 2016) and homelessness (Johnstone, Parsell, Jetten, Dingle, & Walter, 2015), which is a scourge associated with unemployment.

The Current Study

The present research is an exploration of the lived experience unemployed adults who were in receipt of payments from *Centrelink*, the Australian Government's comprehensive welfare service agency for recipients of financial benefits and services, and who had to take periods of casual (i.e., contingent) employment to meet basic needs. The present study

involves a post hoc analysis of archival interview data collected as part of an earlier study (Kossen, 2008; Kossen & Hammer, 2010) into the lived experiences of mature-aged individuals (45 years of age and over) who believed that their age contributed to their inability to gain adequate work during the Great Recession. Kossen's original study sought to understand the effects of unemployment from the perspective of people experiencing it with an interest in exploring the hardships it brings to their lives and how they cope with the circumstances in which they find themselves To contextualize our approach to this research, we follow Morrow's (2005) recommendations for reporting qualitative research.

Method

Philosophical Assumptions and Research Design

The present research was post-positivist in paradigm (Morrow, 2005; Ponterotto, 2005) and the archival interview data were analyzed through a conceptual lens of PWT. The original research by Kossen (2008) was exploratory (i.e., open-ended) and naturalistic, which was well suited for studying phenomena in their natural setting. Accordingly, an unstructured open-ended style of interviewing known as conversational interviewing (Marshall & Rossman, 2016) was used to allow interaction to proceed along everyday conversational lines rather than a formulaic question and answer format. Structured interviewing can inhibit depth and generation of new insights (Patton, 2015) and therefore conflict with the participant-generated aims of exploratory research. The open approach enables and encourages participants to raise and explain what they feel are the key issues and concerns they face in their life circumstances (Kvale, 1996). Given the Great Recession and the experiences of the participants were documented before publication of the PWT, the archival nature of the data enabled a critical analysis of the PWT's capacity to explain past research data.

Participants

There were $N = 32$ participants: 15 men ($M_{age} = 55.73$ years, $SD = 5.40$, range = 46–63, $Mdn = 57$); and 17 women ($M_{age} = 51.18$ years, $SD = 6.20$, range = 45–62, $Mdn = 48$).

The participants were residents of a large regional Australian city with a population of approximately 130,000 persons and a mixed economy primarily comprising health and human services, education, business services, agriculture, and mining. Participants were recruited via invitation displayed at the offices of Centrelink and employment agencies that were subcontracted by the Australian Government to provide job-search services for unemployed people. Local media outlets were also used to publicise the study. Intensity sampling (Patton, 2015) was used to select participants who had experienced what they perceived to be negative bias from prospective employers. Participants were selected on the following eligibility criteria:

1. They were 45 years of age or over
2. They were unwillingly marginalised from the labour market i.e. unemployed or underemployed/unsatisfactorily employed upon commencement of this research; and
3. They felt strongly that age discrimination had adversely affected their employment prospects and subsequent marginalization from the employment market.

Researcher-as-Instrument Statement

The first author is a researcher in sociology and communication studies, and focuses on disadvantage associated with ageing in society (Kossen & Hammer, 2010). The second author is a psychologist and researcher in vocational psychology and counseling, with a demonstrable track-record of reflexivity in research (McIlveen, 2007; McIlveen, Beccaria, du Preez, & Patton, 2010). The second author acted as an auditor of the data analysis whereby both authors engaged in critical reflections on the interpretation of data.

Sources of Data

In accordance with the open-ended nature and naturalistic design of the original study (Kossen, 2008) the overarching research questions were:

1. What are the (subjective) life world experiences of mature-aged workers who believe they are unable to gain adequate work due to age discrimination?
2. What strategies do participants use to cope with the hardships they encounter under their marginalised employment circumstances?

The interviews with participants were in-depth conversations that were flexibly set around a range of topics. Interview questions were open-ended so as to facilitate a wide-ranging conversation about the participants' personal experiences of unemployment. Sample questions included: What lengths do you go to in trying to gain employment? What are your experiences with employers, job agencies, and job interviews? What hardships have you experienced when unable to obtain employment and/or sufficient employment? Data were collected using multiple interviews and prolonged engagement over an 18-month period. Interviews ranged from 1 to 1.5 hours in duration and were conducted by the first author in locations of participants' choosing or by telephone. Transcripts were presented to participants for them to verify the data and add depth to the description through further reflection. Multiple interviews, prolonged engagement, and participant checks are indicators of credibility and trustworthiness (Morrow, 2005). The study was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of James Cook University.

Data Analysis

The original interview transcripts were subject to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013) and followed the recommended six-step procedure: (a) familiarization with the data; (b) generating initial codes; (c) searching for themes; (d) reviewing themes; (e) defining and naming themes; and, (f) producing the report (p. 87). Interview transcripts were progressively reviewed to extract commonly recurring themes from the data. The processes of data

generation and analysis were intrinsically linked in an interactive process whereby data from each interview were compared and analysed with the previous data, as a form of *constant comparison* (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). The excerpts reported here have been selectively identified as representational anecdotes and pseudonyms are used to represent the participants' names. Their reports are organized in terms of the PWT's predictors, moderators, and mediators.

Results and Discussion

The findings are thematically organized according to the PWT's categories of predictors (i.e., marginalization, economic constraints), mediators (i.e., volition, career adaptability), and moderators (i.e., proactive personality, critical consciousness, social support, and economic conditions).

Marginalization

Marginalization in the labour market is not evenly distributed. After 45 years of age, increases in age are associated with increased likelihood of unemployment and underemployment (Duncan 2003; Sheen 2000). Mature-aged workers have higher susceptibility to employability profile scarring and, as such, are more vulnerable to long-term unemployment if they are unfortunate enough to lose a job. The following data reflect this from the viewpoint of participants, in which they hold that losing work at their age was a case of misfortune and at the heart of their problems, rather than any inherent lack of capacity for productive work.

Out of nowhere the company was taken over by another, and with the stroke of a pen I was unemployed. It was really bad timing for me as I was now 50, and no matter how good you were at your job, getting a good job again after 50 can be very difficult. (Steven, mid 50s)

Personal experiences of marginalization felt like being deprived of a normal life across all facets of their lives including ability to fund the basic costs of living. The views expressed were consistent with relative poverty and reveal a sense of isolation from mainstream life and subsequent relegation to an underclass, the impacts of which, in many cases, affected children and other family members.

Our son wanted a new shirt. I have no way of affording that! He needs good gear to feel good about himself. He says other kids have this stuff and complains about how unfair it is. (Bronwyn, early 50s)

We miss out on a lot. We can't even have people over for a meal. This stops us from being able to have friends or socialize with family. It's getting hard to see any bright side in our lives. (Bert, mid 50s)

Participants revealed resourcefulness in managing restricted finances; buying discounted groceries close to supermarket closing times and bringing prepared food on shopping trips which in Sally's (early 60s) case results in her granddaughter questioning: "Why can't we buy lunch like everybody else?" This again exemplified feelings of marginalization from mainstream into a class of under-privileged.

In addition to growing up in pressured and constrained developmental circumstances, Duffy et al. (2016) notes that the impacts of marginalization often flow through to negative educational opportunities and outcomes for children in these families.

It's the kids that miss out on so much compared to others, it's degrading for them. (Rosie, mid 40s)

Participants strongly rejected what they believed was a widespread belief among employers that people their age tended to be less adaptable and proactive and positive in disposition.

Once you're over 50 they start treating you differently – younger managers begin to doubt your ability simply because of your age, they think you're "not with it", "past your use by date". Age is a really bad sign, unless you're higher up... (Ben, early 60s)

Participants in this study strongly rejected the notion that they were less adaptable and less able and willing to learn compared with younger counterparts.

Economic Constraints

Financial stresses appeared to increase substantially for participants as length of time without access to adequate paid employment and income increased.

I'm managing to pay rent, buy enough to eat, but eventually you start running into trouble. I can handle driving an old van it does the job, but my tires are worn. If the police see it I could get into trouble, but I can't afford to fix it. (Colleen, mid 50s)

We had to pull back our spending, we learned to do without things. But the longer it went on the harder it got especially with unexpected expenses. The fridge went, our budget can't cope with any surprises. We can't afford for anything to go wrong. It was extremely stressful you can't get by without a fridge. (Trudy, mid 50s)

For participants in this study, part-time or casual employment did not necessarily ameliorate economic constraints. Saunders (2004) argues that fulltime employment is required to escape poverty and that labor market reforms undermining the fulltime job market are likely to exacerbate poverty.

I can no longer afford to keep living on the little bit of money my casual jobs pays. I need a full-time wage that you can live off. (Maureen, early 60s)

When I'm able get some work, it's unreliable, I can't count on it to pay the bills. The hours I'm given could mean the difference between losing the house or keeping it. (Greg, late 40s)

Indeed, Hartman (2002) argues that low-paid employment serves as a facade that works to conceal poverty.

Employment that does not meet the criteria of decent work, particularly casual or contingent employment, is likely to be as stressful as unemployment (Butterworth, Leach, McManus, & Stansfeld, 2013; Butterworth et al., 2011). This compelling longitudinal research by Butterworth and colleagues dispels the myth that "any job is a good job", which is also disputed by the participant's comment below.

With casual work a lot of people still say that any work is good work, because you get your foot in the door. But this isn't true anymore. Casual jobs these days are very unreliable and a road to nowhere. (Julie, mid 40s)

The trauma is not only isolated to the main breadwinner who is out of work. There are pernicious effects on relationship quality that, in turn, diminish social and emotional wellbeing.

It's a strain on the relationship too. It puts us under a strain because our needs are not being met. The constant battling, it gets you down and you do start to take it out on each other a bit. (Heather, early 50s)

Volition

Participants in the study also claimed that being unemployed had led to a decreased sense of control in terms of agency restriction through disruption to an individual's capacity to exercise control over their lives.

I don't get to make choices; I can't even afford to do the right thing. A car is a necessity, something you need to get to interviews and work. (Colleen, mid 50s)

I've learned that money and work give you confidence. Take people's job away and see what happens to them – they lose their confidence overnight it takes your confidence away very quickly. Now I understand how my son felt – when he was nineteen he tried and tried and just couldn't get a job. But once he got a job everything started to fall into place, he's been fine ever since. (Robert, early 60s)

Prolonged lack of access to adequate paid employment among participants in this study appeared to intensify negative impacts on their sense of optimism and volition.

I felt great when I started. I felt more confident. Just having a job was great something to do and having money. But after a while being casual eats away at your confidence when you start to find that you're not making enough money to live ... when you start cutting back on basics like food, you know you're in trouble. (Suzie, late 40s)

I'm completely trapped. Everything stands still, day after day after day ... going nowhere, nothing to look forward to, no hope, and no plans. (Phillip, late 50s)

The notion of volition is not unfamiliar to Australian culture and its notion of “have a go”. According to social mores, a person will be supported and lauded for working toward his aspirations and, moreover, to do so against the odds, the challenges, and the barriers put before him by circumstance and bad luck. This is the idealized image of the “Aussie Battler”. The following comment highlights a cultural tendency in affirming the traditional Australian male identity:

... as a bloke you're expected to be the breadwinner, I feel inadequate. A job is a very big part of who you are, it's what you do. You're a 'nobody' when you don't have a job, especially when you're male. (Stephen, mid 40s)

Despite these caricatures, Australian culture is tainted by the tall poppy syndrome (Feather, 1990), manifest as disrespect for a person who rises above his/her class and stereotyped expectations. This culture reviles “the Bludger”, manifest as disrespect for a person who, according to perceptions, falls beneath his class as a result of his character (e.g., laziness or stupidity) or actions (e.g., not working hard enough) only to draw on the resources of the system (e.g., the government-funded payment provided to unemployed persons) to which the middle- and working-class hold up with their hard-earned pay and taxes. Only when s/he earnestly works against the system and the odds to earn again will s/he be lauded as an Aussie Battler and concomitantly absolved of the negative appellation of “bludger”. Thus, the idea of a person aspiring and achieving within the constraints of his given context is not unfamiliar to Australian culture.

Career Adaptability

Participants complained about frustrations of not feeling able to “move forward” with their lives, not being able to make plans or progress beyond their current circumstances

There’s no future. You can’t have dreams, you can’t have goals, you can’t plan holidays, and you can’t think about a new car, you can’t do anything.

(Julie mid 40s)

This diminished future orientation is the obverse of the Concern dimension of career adaptability.

There was evidence of gaining back some sense of the Control dimension of career adaptability that was counterbalanced by diminished Concern for the future:

It doesn’t really worry me. I’ve got a trade, but I’d be happy to just see out my time as a laborer. You get less pay but there’s less responsibility, less worries... I’m not really ambitious at this stage. (Graham, mid 50s)

In terms of flexibility, there was an evident willingness among many participants to take lower level positions in order to gain entry back into the workforce and gain some career

Control, a component of career adaptability:

Over the past four years, you name it, and I've gone for it, I've applied for labouring, sales work, car sales, car detailing, chef's jobs.... I've never really gone for anything that I thought I wasn't able to do. I've tried to be realistic. I never applied for higher jobs. (Bob, early 60s)

I'll take whatever I can get. I'm not fussy and I don't mind getting my hands dirty. Even a few days labouring a week would be something, it's better to be doing something and having some money coming in than nothing at all. (Stephen, mid 40s)

While Bob has a preference for work with which he is most familiar, he like many participants said he was still willing to take on "just about anything".

In this sense, many participants expressed a willingness to discount their labour by taking on lower level jobs as a strategy to regain entry into the workforce. This is evident when Phoebe makes the point below that working would provide her with better opportunities for networking to help allow her to "take something else up later".

When I've asked for feedback on why I didn't get the job, they replied, "we can't understand why someone of your skill level would apply for a job like this". When I say to them "because I want a change, I feel like getting out of management." They don't like the idea that you're taking a job, that they believe is below what you've done before. At that stage I was thinking – any job would help me, it would give me some income. (Phoebe mid 40s)

Participants in this study overwhelmingly believed that they were employable in the market, which is evident in their taking any form of work. Most felt that the increased life

experience added value to their knowledge and a depth to their understanding on a range of areas, such as how to relate to others and tackle work tasks efficiently and effectively. They held strong and positive views about ageing, particularly in relation to their beliefs that experience gained with age gave them a range of relative advantages.

We have years of experience under our belts - this gives us quite an advantage. We've got a lot of experience to draw from, when it comes to working out the best way to handle tricky situations. Experience adds to our flexibility, it doesn't reduce it. (Brenda, mid 50s)

I've spent my life developing and honing my skills as well as picking up new ones. I now have a better perspective for understanding of people and situations. The stereotype that we can't learn and adapt or that we're not interested is wrong. (Malcolm, mid 50s)

I think because of my years of experience, I am in my prime, I think I have more ability now than ever before. I've got things I can pass onto the younger ones, but I can also learn from them too. Working together gets the best results. (Kev, late 50s)

While the views expressed by these participants reflect their own confidence, this contrasts with their exasperation with the dispiriting belief that mature-aged workers count for very little in the eyes of employers.

Proactive Personality

While positive personality and eagerness among many participants contributes positively to confidence in skills and perceived ability, it appears that a marginalized employment profile ultimately limits their opportunity and access to the labor market.

You do need to be very proactive, you need to use a lot of self-discipline when you're out of work, or you will fall into bad habits. I think it's a real

danger period and people really need to understand this ... I think it's important to explain this to people who get affected by unemployment, for the good of their own health, I think this is really important information.

(Graham, mid 50s)

I feel like I'm being left behind, other people are getting ahead and getting on with their lives they have career goals and other personal goals... and here I am, I have very little of that... it's pretty difficult. (Greg, late 40s)

Some participants drew comfort from viewing their circumstances in comparison to people much worse off, enabling them to develop a sense of appreciation and gratitude for their situation.

It's true there's always someone else worse off. People suffering with health problems and diseases like cancer, people with bad injuries. So you've got to be thankful for what you have got. (Bruce, early 50s)

Critical Consciousness

Some participants had begun to take on more reflective views about their life circumstances and to ascribe their power, or lack of power, to agencies beyond their control.

...it makes sense, business want to make as much money as possible, then they not really going to want to go on sharing it around... pay fair wages.

But that is the reality, and we have to deal with and live with that reality.

(Bevan mid 40s)

Participants' did feel that workplaces had become increasingly exploitative underpinned by an economic condition of drive for maximum profits. While on one hand, Maria sympathised with small businesses using casual employment to trial workers before offering permanency, she also felt that many large businesses abused casual employment arrangements by having people classified as casual for positions that are really ongoing:

I'm not against putting people on as casuals but the wages should be higher for this. Small businesses really struggle to pay people and make ends meet. I think casual work is a good way of seeing if someone's going to work out before making them permanent. But there are big companies that abuse the system by making them casual when they should be permanent. (Maria, late 40s)

Kinsella-Taylor (2000) has also argued that large numbers of displaced mature-aged workers are being forced to deplete their asset base: a process in conflict with the current policy aim of ensuring financial independence into retirement. Comments reflecting this sense of injustice included:

People my age have worked and paid taxes for a long time and yet we get no help just because of a few assets. It's not fair to expect people to spend their life savings before they can get any support. How is this going to help me be independent in retirement? I thought the government wants us to be independent in retirement to help them save money on pensions down the track... (David, mid 50s)

There's no incentive for people trying to get ahead with money to help you with retirement because you get penalized for having savings but rewarded with welfare to help you if you haven't saved, this is very unfair. (Phoebe, mid 40s)

Not only are people in these kinds of jobless circumstances ineligible for a social service income, they constitute a large proportion of those in the category of hidden unemployed.

Social Support

Participants drew on an appreciation of their social supports as a means of maintaining positivity in their outlook.

It's important to stay optimistic and realize what you do have. When I think about it I'm not really that poorly off, because I have a beautiful family, a terrific husband and a funny old dog. (Sally, early 60s)

You have to start thinking about all of the good things you do have otherwise you get sucked up by all of the negatives. I've got a loving family, while many others have to face these things all on their own. (Phillip, late 50s)

Participants noted that social networks in relation to employment contacts diminish quickly after becoming jobless.

I applied for about 50 different jobs, but it's hard, when you lose a job, you lose a lot of friends: people who can help with getting a job. I'd take on any job to give me the opportunity to network and then take up something else later. (Phoebe, mid 40s)

I was able to keep up with some of the ladies I used to work with. I asked them to keep an eye out for me for any job opportunities they see come up. We used to catch up over coffee but that dropped off. It's just the way it goes, when you no longer work with people you lose contact. When jobs come up they'll probably have forgotten me. (Rachel, mid 40s)

Regretting the deprivation of latent and manifest benefits of employment (Hoare & Machin, 2010; Jahoda, 1982), Phillip stated,

When you have the job you don't realise the many ways you are rewarded besides the pay packet. You have the company of other people - you develop friendships. You get satisfaction from the work you are doing you

get satisfaction from working as a part of the team and the gain when you see goals reached and you know that your contribution is appreciated. (Phillip, late 50s)

Indeed, it is evident that long-term unemployment and marginalization can lead individuals to remove and disengage from a world they see as beyond their control.

It's much harder to socialize when you're out of work, when people socialize just about everybody 'talks shop'. You can't 'talk shop' when you no longer have a 'shop' to talk about. (Greg, late 40s)

I find social occasions and meeting new people really difficult because when people ask "What do you do for a living?" Well what do I say to that? "That I'm a house husband?" It's really difficult when you're a bloke out of work.

A woman can say "I'm looking after the kids while my husband works".

(Stephen, mid 40s)

While this kind of resigned adaptation can lead to some improvement in psychological wellbeing, it can also lead to reductions in skills and personal autonomy, and perceptions of self-worth normally regarded as psychologically unhealthy.

Economic Conditions

The subjective experiences of competitiveness and work intensification also emerged as a topic in participants' interviews. McQueen argues that this kind of competitive work culture alienates employees as it creates an environment in which "every worker is confronted by every other worker as a competitor" (2001, p. 13). Competition between casual workers to 'win' work also emerged as a major theme in Pocock, Prosser and Bridge's (2004) study. In this sense the casualization of labour, including the proliferation of other non-permanent forms of employment, may play a significant role in the intensification of work. Pocock, Prosser and Bridge (2004) refer to this form of work intensification as

insecurity driven effort which is, in essence, a productivity strategy based on fear brought on by the threat of job security and insufficient income that would result when a worker loses hours of work on offer. Participants' comments below reflect experiences of both insecurity and work intensification:

You're working under the pressure of always trying to outdo the others to make sure you keep your job. The casuals copped the worst [work pressure] because they don't have any job security. Every day the manager would walk past... "What are your targets for the day?" (Heather, early 50s)

You have to make yourself look impressive. [If] people doubt your ability you're on the back foot. You're always trying to impress everyone so they support you, so you get picked for more work. Living life in a state of never ending stress, it's not a good work situation and makes my life quite horrible. (Trudy, mid 50s)

When you're working as a casual you're always in a state of worry because you could lose your job at any time. All casuals compete with each other to keep their jobs and get enough hours... Your worth is always in question, being so dispensable is very hard on your confidence. Your job can be taken away from you at any minute... constantly living with fear and not much chance of moving into a permanent job. (Suzie, late 40s)

General Discussion

The present research sought to determine if the factors considered as antecedents to decent work, as posited in the PWT (i.e., predictors, mediators, moderators), are relevant to the experiences of persons who do not have decent work. Inductive analysis of the narratives of the 32 unemployed participants in this study reveals evidence for each antecedent factor in the PWT. Thus, the present study provides an affirmative response to the initial research

question, “Is the PWT conceptually useful for understanding the experience of unemployment?” Furthermore, Australia is similar to the USA in many respects; however, there are significant cultural, historical, and economic differences that make distinguish the two nations. Thus, the present findings provide the first support for the PWT in a cultural context different to its original.

Blustein (2013) and others (Blustein, Olle, Connors-Kellgren, & Diamonti, 2016) argue that decent work (International Labour Office, 2015) is a human right. Indeed, the latent and manifest benefits of employment (Hoare & Machin, 2010; Jahoda, 1982) and working are a source of mental health and wellbeing (Blustein, 2008; Modini et al., 2016). The evocative expressions of the participants in the current study affirm the psychological injury—the trauma—of unemployment and the secondary trauma of the indignity conflated with the need for and use of social services. The findings of the present study affirm the vital function of decent work for those who do not have it.

Whilst current psychological perspectives of unemployment (Wanberg, 2012) remain relevant, the present study affirms the PWT perspective that the mediators career adaptability and volition. In addition, the study affirms the relevance of the moderators: proactive personality, critical consciousness, social support, and subjective experiences of economic conditions. It may be the case that career adaptability is diminished by periods of unemployment (Maggiori et al., 2013); however, the PWT’s proposition, that there may be utility in the PWT’s moderators, such as critical consciousness (Diemer & Hsieh, 2008) or social support (Milner et al., 2016), being enhanced and recruited to buffer against the negative effects of the predictors, economic constraints and marginalization, on activities aimed at acquiring decent work.

Blustein (2006) asserted vocational psychology provides limited attention to the phenomena of unemployment and underemployment. Furthermore, Blustein suggested that

research and practice should be “experience-near” (p. 238), so as to enable a better understanding of peoples’ experience of their travails. The original research (Kossen, 2008) and the present research are a positive response to Blustein’s exhortation to close the gap between researcher and participant. We believe that it is the qualitative nature of the research design that enables this closure and being experience-near to the phenomenal worlds of the participants.

Limitations & Future Directions

The current findings are an in-depth report of the presence of PWT antecedent factors identified with an archival data set, but they do not reveal the putative valence and directionality of the relations among these factors. Hypothetically, there are mediating pathways between the predictors and decent work that may be affected by the moderators, such as proactive personality. For example, participants in the present study had expressed positive thoughts and beliefs (e.g., proactive personality) but were nonetheless unemployed. The complexity of the relations among the antecedent factors may reflect conditional causality in their being necessary, but not sufficient, for decent work. Latent growth modeling may tease out the valence and directions of the PWT’s propositions. Notwithstanding the contribution that quantitative modelling can make to articulating relations among the factors within the PWT, we encourage other researchers to engage in qualitative research to better understand the phenomenology of the factors within the theory. The findings are limited to the experiences of mature-aged individuals. Younger individuals’ interpretations may be quite different due to their norms and expectations.

Conclusion

The effects of unemployment on health and wellbeing make it a public health problem of virtual pandemic proportions. Though nations experience fluctuations in their unemployment rates, the effects unemployment have on any one person may be devastating.

In a world-of-work in constant flux, new psychological theories that account for dynamic systems can offer perspectives that inform policy and practices to ameliorate the wrath of unemployment. The present findings are evidence of the PWT's utility for research into the experience of unemployment, which is the ostensible antithesis of the PWT's centerpiece: decent work.

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