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Dealing 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 Hoye, 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.

2. Study 1: self-compassion as a buffer against job search difficulties

Because job search is important for finding a job but also jeopardizes people's mental well-being, it is important to examine how individuals can cope with difficulties during job search. In the context of finding a job, individuals benefit from not only problem-focused but also emotion-focused forms of coping (Wanberg, Basbug, et al., 2012; Wanberg, Zhu, Kanfer, & Zhang, 2012). Emotion-focused coping may involve identifying, understanding, and expressing emotions in a psychologically adaptive way (Pennebaker, 1993; Stanton, Danoff-Burg, Cameron, & Ellis, 1994). An example of adaptive emotion-focused coping is self-compassion (Neff, 2003a). Self-compassion, taken from Buddhist tradition into contemporary western psychology, entails three basic components: "(a) self-kindness—extending kindness and understanding to oneself rather than harsh judgment and self-criticism, (b) common humanity—seeing one's experiences as part of the larger human experience rather than seeing them as separating and isolating, and (c) mindfulness—holding one's painful thoughts and feelings in balanced awareness rather than over-identifying with them" (Neff, 2003a, p.89). It differs from self-pity, because people with self-pity tend to lack the ability to recognize the shared nature of human experiences (Neff, 2003b). It also differs from self-esteem, because high self-esteem can give people an inflated self-image whereas self-compassion gives individuals greater self-clarity, allowing them to see shortcomings without indulging in them (Neff & Vonk, 2009).

Extant theorizing on self-compassion (Neff, 2003a; Neff et al., 2007) suggests that self-compassion aspects such as self-kindness and mindfulness may reduce the emotional impact of negative events. In contrast, low self-compassion relates to aspects such as self-judgment, rumination, and over-identifying with emotions, which may increase the impact of negative events on affective responses. Consistent with these theoretical notions, research indicates that self-compassion improves people's coping with negative events. For example, several scenario and lab studies using unpleasant self-relevant events (e.g., receiving unfavorable feedback, failing for a test, public embarrassment) showed that self-compassion supported students' mental health (Leary et al., 2007). More specifically, in one of Leary et al.'s (2007) lab experiments self-compassion was found to moderate the negative effect of receiving unfavorable feedback on how students felt. These lab findings suggest that self-compassion may buffer negative feelings that are associated with negative events and may help to maintain positive feelings when life goes badly. In addition, a field study on coping with academic failure indeed showed that students more effectively dealt with failures when they were more self-compassioned (Neff et al., 2005).

Considering the uncertainty and complexity of the job search process, job seekers will likely encounter difficulties during job search, such as receiving negative feedback or failing to find suitable job leads. These difficulties are generally unpleasant and often self-relevant, and as such resemble the events described in the self-compassion literature. Moreover, not only theory and research on self-regulation (Carver, 2001; Ilies & Judge, 2005) - as delineated above - but also qualitative research suggest that the demands and difficulties of the job search process increase negative affect and decrease positive affect (Wanberg, Basbug, et al., 2012). Job seekers are especially prone to feelings of self-doubt, reduced self-worth, anxiety, self-criticism, and rumination (Wanberg, Basbug, et al., 2012). Since self-compassion makes people less vulnerable to unpleasant and self-relevant experiences, we propose that self-compassion will attenuate the negative impact of job search difficulties on job seekers' emotions. We therefore propose:

Hypothesis 1.1. Self-compassion will moderate the positive relationship between job search difficulties and negative affect such that this relationship will be weaker for job seekers who have more self-compassion.

Hypothesis 1.2. Self-compassion will moderate the negative relationship between job search difficulties and positive affect such that this relationship will be weaker for job seekers who have more self-compassion.

Aside from its moderating role, we expect that self-compassion will also directly relate to affect, such that job seekers with high self-compassion will generally feel better than those with low self-compassion. Self-compassionate individuals' experiences of pain and failure are not amplified and perpetuated through harsh self-condemnation, feelings of isolation, or over-identification with thoughts and emotions (Neff, 2003a). Therefore, self-compassion relates to better mental health outcomes (e.g., more connectedness, and subjective well-being; lower incidence of anxiety and depression; Neff et al., 2005, 2007; Neff, 2003a, 2003b). Thus, self-compassioned job seekers likely feel better because they have more functional thoughts, making them less prone to negative affect and allowing for more positive affect. Based on this we expect:

Hypothesis 1.3. Self-compassion will negatively relate to negative affect regarding job seekers' experienced job search difficulties.

Hypothesis 1.4. Self-compassion will positively relate to positive affect regarding job seekers' experienced job search difficulties.

Previous job search studies on affect typically distinguish between positive and negative affect. Contemporary emotion research, however, has corroborated a two-dimensional structure of affect (Feldman Barrett & Russell, 1998) and emotions (Russell, 2003; Yik, Russell, & Steiger, 2011), characterized by hedonic tone (i.e., positive vs. negative) and activation level (i.e., activating vs. deactivating). Negative affect can have a high (e.g., feeling distressed) or low (e.g., feeling down) activation level, and positive affect can have a high (e.g., feeling energized) or low (e.g., feeling at ease) activation level (Yik et al., 2011). Based on this two-dimensional model of affect, we will take activation level into account and test our hypotheses separately for all four types of affect. As such, we align our conceptualization of affect with the growing body of literature distinguishing activating and deactivating affect (e.g., Baas, De Dreu, & Nijstad, 2008; Carver, 2004; Taylor, 1991; Watson & Tellegen, 1985; Wrzus, Luong, Wagner, & Riediger, 2015).

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants, design, and procedures

Participants were recruited via employment agencies and social media. Participants received tips to search for work more effectively and could win one of five €5, gift cards if they completed the questionnaire. A total of 266 job seekers responded to our call to participate. About half of these (N = 124) completed the questionnaire, of which 99 participants met our eligibility criteria of being engaged in a regular job search (rather than in search of an internship or student job). The average age was 40.83 (SD = 14.04), and 61.6% were women. More than half (57.57%) indicated being unemployed, 19.19% had a part time or student job, 7.07% was studying while searching for a job, 4.04% was under temporary contract, and the remaining 15.15% was freelancer, intern, or volunteer. The sample was highly educated (35.35% university degree, 43.43% higher vocational education, 15.15% intermediate vocational education). The median job search duration was 6 months (SD = 9.77).

We used a cross-sectional design assessing participants' self-compassion, followed by the extent to which they experienced job search difficulties and how they felt (i.e., affect) about the last four days.[1] To enable accurate recall of job search experiences and affective responses, we specifically asked about the last four days, rather than longer ago. We purposefully recruited participants who were engaging in job search activities at least once every four days to ensure that the participants would have had a job search experience in the last four days. This allowed us to measure affect shortly after participants had engaged in job seeking, because people's affective states fluctuate over time (Ilies, Scott, & Judge, 2006; Zohar, Tzischinski, & Epstein, 2003).

2.1.2. Measures

Self-compassion was assessed with the 26 item Self-Compassion Scale (Neff, 2003b; Neff & Vonk, 2009), using a 5-point scale ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5). Sample items include "I'm tolerant to my own flaws and inadequacies" and "I try to see my failings as part of the human condition" (α = 0.87).

Job search difficulties were measured with one item[2] from the Unemployment Stressor Inventory (Zhang et al., 2007; see also Song et al., 2009): "I encountered difficulties in my job search". Participants indicated their agreement with this statement considering the last four days of job search using a 5-point scale ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5). Although single-item measures are not ideal, these can yield valid results (Wanous & Reichers, 1996).

Affect was measured using a selection of 20 emotions from the PANAS (Crawford & Henry, 2004). The emotions were classified into one of four affect categories based on the emotion circumplex (Yik et al., 2011). Only emotions that clearly fell within one category were selected. Participants were asked to indicate to what extent they felt the emotions when they considered their job search experiences and progress or lack thereof of the last four days on a 5-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). Negative activating affect was measured with the items nervous, irritable, angry, upset, jittery, and stressed (α = 0.82), and negative deactivating affect with the items weary, apathetic, downcast, dissatisfied, and sad (α = 0.83). Positive activating affect consisted of the items interested, enthusiastic, lively, happy, and energetic (α = 0.86), and positive deactivating affect consisted of the items relaxed, content, at ease, and calm (α = 0.78). Although confirmatory factor analyses indicated that a model with four factors (four types of affect) did not fit the data very well, χ^2(164, N = 99) = 440.38, p < .001, RMSEA = 0.13, CFI = 0.92, it fit significantly better than a model with one factor, χ^2(170, N = 99) = 708.38, p < .001, RMSEA = 0.18, CFI = 0.88, $\Delta\chi^2$(6, N = 99) = 268.00, p < .001, two hedonic tone factors (positive and negative), χ^2(169, N = 99) = 551.99, p < .001, RMSEA = 0.15, CFI = 0.90, $\Delta\chi^2$(1, N = 99) = 111.61, p < .001, or two activation level factors (activating and deactivating), χ^2(169, N = 99) = 711.12, p < .001, RMSEA = 0.18, CFI = 0.88, $\Delta\chi^2$(1, N = 99) = 270.74, p < .001.

2.1.3. Demographics

Age, gender, education (primary school, high school level 1, 2 or 3, intermediate vocational education, higher vocational education, or university degree), employment position (employed or unemployed), and job search duration (in months) were measured as control variables because previous research showed that these may relate to job search-related variables (Kanfer et al., 2001).

2.2. Results

Table 1 presents descriptives and correlations. Regarding our control variables, age related positively to self-compassion, and education negatively to negative deactivating affect. Employment position related positively to negative deactivating affect and negatively to positive activating affect. Gender and search duration did not relate significantly to any of our outcomes. In all analyses, we therefore controlled for age, education, and employment position only. Table 1 further shows positive correlations between the

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[1] We included several other variables for exploratory purposes. At Time 1 we also measured: action state orientation, learning goal orientation, challenge and threat appraisals, and core-self evaluations.

[2] The job search difficulties item was administered together with another item from the Unemployment Stressor Inventory (Zhang, Sun, Uy, Song, & Shi, 2007) to measure negative job search experience (i.e., 'I feel pressured for not having found a suitable job lead'), and two negatively framed items from the job search goal progress scale developed by Wanberg et al. (2010). Factor analyses indicated that these items fell apart in two constructs, that is, progress and negative job search experience. Based on our aim of focusing on job search difficulties and its relationship with affect, we choose to operationalize this construct with the item that most clearly addressed this construct, without an affective component, that is "I encountered difficulties in my job search". The other items were left out because these either measured self-perceived progress or included more affect-laden descriptions of negative experiences (i.e., experiencing pressure).

Table 1
Study 1 descriptives and correlations of control variables, self-compassion, job search difficulties, and affect.

	M	SD	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.
1. Age	40.83	14.04											
2. Gender[a]	1.62	0.49	−0.25*										
3. Education[b]	4.16	0.75	−0.27**	0.23*									
4. Employment position[c]	0.58	0.50	0.23*	−0.09	−0.33**								
5. Job search duration[d]	6.00[e]	9.77	0.63**	−0.31**	−0.27**	0.25*							
6. Self-compassion	3.24	0.60	0.25*	−0.03	0.02	−0.10	0.11	**0.87**					
7. Job search difficulties	3.17	1.10	−0.12	0.05	−0.02	0.15	−0.08	−0.23*					
8. Negative activating affect	2.75	0.87	−0.19	0.07	−0.18	0.13	−0.08	−0.54**	0.30**	**0.82**			
9. Negative deactivating affect	3.01	0.96	−0.06	0.07	−0.21*	0.20*	0.11	−0.48**	0.25*	0.76**	**0.83**		
10. Positive activating affect	3.09	0.80	−0.07	0.07	0.16	−0.21*	−0.18	0.47**	−0.21*	−0.47**	−0.65**	**0.86**	
11. Positive deactivating affect	2.82	0.80	0.08	−0.06	0.11	−0.11	0.03	0.53**	−0.20	−0.68**	−0.72**	0.66**	**0.78**

Note. Reliability coefficients are in boldface italics on the diagonal. N = 99.
[a] 1 = male, 2 = female.
[b] 1 = primary school, 2 = high school level 3, 3 = high school level 2 or intermediate vocational education, 4 = high school level 1 or higher vocational education, 5 = university degree.
[c] 0 = employed, 1 = unemployed.
[d] Measured in months.
[e] Median.
* p < .05 (2-tailed).
** p < .01 (2-tailed).

different types of affect, indicating that the four affect variables indeed share an underlying dimension (i.e., hedonic tone or activity level).

We tested our hypotheses with four hierarchical regression analyses with the four types of affect as dependent variables (see Table 2). In each regression, we entered age, education, and employment position (Step 1), job search difficulties (Step 2), self-compassion (Step 3), and the interaction between difficulties and self-compassion (Step 4).

Hypothesis 1.1 predicted that self-compassion moderates the positive relation between job search difficulties and negative affect. The Step 2 results indicate that job search difficulties positively related to both types of negative affect. However, the results of Step 4 showed that the job search difficulties × self-compassion interaction was not significant (Hypothesis 1.1 not supported).

Hypothesis 1.2 predicted that self-compassion moderates the negative relation between job search difficulties and positive affect. Step 2 showed no significant relations of job search difficulties with both types of positive affect. However, in line with our hypothesis, the interaction of job search difficulties with self-compassion was significant for both positive activating affect and deactivating affect. Subsequent simple slope analyses (Fig. 1) showed a similar pattern for both types of positive affect, indicating that self-compassion attenuated the negative relationship between job search difficulties and positive affect. When self-compassion was 1SD below the mean (−0.60), the relationships of job search difficulties with positive activating and deactivating affect were significantly negative (B = −0.21, t = −2.24, p < .05, and B = −0.20, t = −2.10, p < .05, respectively). When self-compassion was 1SD above the mean (0.60) the relationships approached zero (B = 0.05, t = 0.57, p = .57, and B = 0.06, t = 0.78, p = .44, respectively). In support of Hypothesis 1.2, these results indicate that for individuals with low self-compassion, job search difficulties related negatively to positive affect, while for individuals with high self-compassion there was no significant relationship.

Lastly, Table 2 shows that in support of Hypotheses 1.3 and 1.4 self-compassion related significantly negatively to both types of negative affect, and significantly positively to both types of positive affect.

2.3. Discussion

The findings of Study 1 generally support the idea that self-compassion may serve as a helpful coping mechanism during job search. In support of self-compassion theory (Neff, 2003a), self-compassion related negatively to negative affect and positively to positive affect in the context of experiencing job search difficulties. Thus, individuals high on self-compassion tend to experience less negative and more positive emotions. In addition, self-compassion moderated the negative relationship between job search difficulties and (de)activating positive affect, such that the relationship was weaker for job seekers with more self-compassion. Thus, when experiencing difficulties individuals high on self-compassion preserve their enthusiasm, happiness, and calmness, whereas individuals low on self-compassion feel less enthusiastic, happy, and calm.

Consistent with previous research (Song et al., 2009; Wanberg et al., 2010), job search difficulties related positively to negative (de)activating affect. However, while job search difficulties explained unique variance in negative activating affect only, self-compassion was strongly related to, and explained unique variance in all four affect variables. Although this finding may be explained by our limited measurement of job search difficulties, it seems to suggest that it is not so much the things that people go through, but their level of self-compassion that determines their affective responses.

Unexpectedly, the relation between difficulties and negative affect was not moderated by self-compassion. Rather, the results show a direct relationship of job search difficulties with negative affect. Thus, the more difficulties job seekers encountered, the more negative they felt, regardless their level of self-compassion. A possible explanation may be that difficulties indisputably have a

Table 2
Study 1 hierarchical regression of negative and positive activating and deactivating affect on job search difficulties, self-compassion, and their interaction.

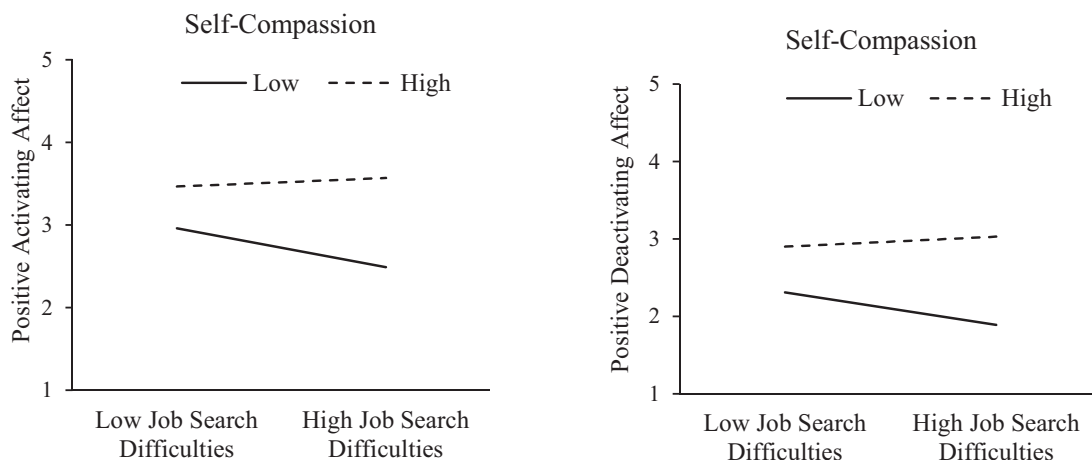| Predictors	Negative activating affect (β)				Negative deactivating affect (β)				Positive activating affect (β)				Positive deactivating affect (β)			
Steps	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
Age	-0.27*	-0.23*	-0.10	-0.09	-0.15	-0.11	0.01	0.02	-0.01	-0.04	-0.16	-0.18	0.13	0.11	-0.04	-0.05
Education[a]	-0.21*	-0.21*	-0.19*	-0.19*	-0.19	-0.19	-0.17	-0.17	0.09	0.09	0.07	0.07	0.11	0.11	0.09	0.09
Employment position[b]	0.12	0.07	0.01	0.00	0.17	0.13	0.08	0.07	-0.18	-0.14	-0.08	-0.07	-0.10	-0.07	-0.01	0.01
Job search difficulties		0.26*	0.17	0.18*		0.21*	0.13	0.14		-0.19	-0.10	-0.11		-0.17	-0.08	-0.09
Self-compassion			-0.46***	-0.48***			-0.44***	-0.45***			0.48***	0.50***			0.52***	0.54***
Job search difficulties * self-compassion				-0.12				-0.13				0.19*				0.18*
Multiple R	0.32*	0.41*	0.60***	0.61	0.29*	0.35*	0.54***	0.55	0.23	0.29	0.53***	0.56*	0.18	0.25	0.55***	0.57*
ΔR^2	0.08*	0.06*	0.19***	0.01	0.05*	0.04*	0.17***	0.02	0.02	0.03	0.20***	0.03*	0.00	0.03	0.24***	0.03*
Adjusted R^2		0.13*	0.32***	0.33		0.09*	0.25***	0.26		0.05	0.25***	0.27*		0.02	0.26***	0.29*

Note. $N = 99$.

[a] 1 = primary school, 2 = high school level 3, 3 = high school level 2 or intermediate vocational education, 4 = high school level 1 or higher vocational education, 5 = university degree.

[b] 0 = employed, 1 = unemployed.

* $p < .05$ (2-tailed).

*** $p < .001$ (2-tailed).

Study 1

Study 2

Fig. 1. Depiction of the relation between job search difficulties and positive activating and positive deactivating affect (Study 1), and the relation between lack of job search progress and negative activating and deactivating affect (Study 2), as moderated by self-compassion (1*SD* below and above the mean).

negative connotation. Asking job seekers about difficulties during job search may particularly tap into negative affective responses for both high and low self-compassioned individuals. In the second study we therefore opted for a broader conceptualization of negative job search experiences by assessing perceived lack of progress (cf. Wanberg et al., 2010).

Because job search has been conceptualized as a dynamic self-regulatory process which unfolds over time (e.g., Song et al., 2009; Sun, Song, & Lim, 2013; Wanberg et al., 2010; Wanberg, Glomb, Song, & Sorenson, 2005; Wanberg, Zhu, et al., 2012), and job seekers' emotional responses fluctuate over time as they engage in job search (Song et al., 2009; Wanberg et al., 2010), it is important to examine how the relationships between job search experiences and affect function within individuals over time. In the second study, we elaborate on the first study by following job seekers over a longer period of time, keeping four days between different measurements. Our second study extends our first study by using a multi-wave design to examine the moderating role of self-compassion on the within-person dynamics regarding negative job search experiences and subsequent affect. Furthermore, we used a broader conceptualization of negative job search experiences by examining perceived lack of progress, rather than specific job search difficulties. As mentioned above, the perception of (a lack of) progress more broadly encompasses how the job search is going (Wanberg et al., 2010). People who experience job search difficulties can still perceive progress, because difficulties can occur along

the way of making progress. Not making progress is a more comprehensive evaluation of the process over time. Therefore, in the second study we focused on the role of both progress perceptions and self-compassion in predicting affect, using a within-person design over a period of 20 days.

3. Study 2: self-compassion as buffer for perceived lack of progress

Building on Study 1, we aimed to further our knowledge about how job seekers' cognitions in terms of self-compassion affect the relation between negative experiences and how they feel. Job search is a dynamic process (Borgen & Amundson, 1987) and job seekers' experiences and their subsequent affective responses vary over time (Wanberg et al., 2012). Negative job search experiences, such as perceiving a lack of progress, relate to how job seekers feel, particularly under situations of financial hardship (Wanberg et al., 2010). However, job seekers typically do not have the liberty to change their financial situation to lower the pressure on their search. Therefore, we focus on a cognition that *can* be influenced and that may make job seekers more resilient to negative job search experiences. More specifically, we examine how negative job search experiences in terms of perceived lack of progress relate to how job seekers feel during job search, and test the potentially buffering effects of self-compassion (Leary et al., 2007; Neff et al., 2005). We extend our first study by investigating how self-compassion relates to within-individual variance in affect as a consequence of perceived lack of progress during job search.

In line with previous research (Song et al., 2009; Wanberg et al., 2010), we expect that a perceived lack of job search progress positively relates to negative affect, and negatively to positive affect. Moreover, we propose that self-compassion attenuates these relations, such that the more self-compassion, the weaker the positive (negative) relation between perceived lack of progress and negative (positive) affect. As explained in Study 1, self-compassion is an adaptive mindset that helps to put negative experiences in broader perspective and to take distance from negative emotions without self-judgment (Neff, 2003a). Although self-compassion is malleable (e.g., by training or inducement; Breines & Chen, 2012; Shapira & Mongrain, 2010; Smeets, Neff, Alberts, & Peters, 2014; Zhang & Chen, 2016), in the current study we conceptualize self-compassion as a relatively stable individual difference (Neff, 2003a, 2003b), because no training or experimental inducement of self-compassion occurred. Individual differences in self-compassion likely not only influence affective responses to a discrete event, but also influence how dynamic affective processes evolve within individuals during job search episodes over time. During job search episodes with low progress, self-compassioned job seekers are more likely to be caring and understanding rather than harshly critical, to realize the shared nature of such experiences rather than feeling isolated, and to have a balanced view in which they neither ignore nor amplify their painful thoughts and emotions, resulting in a calmer emotional response when reflecting on that episode. As such, we propose that self-compassion will influence the process of dealing with multiple negative experiences (e.g., perceiving a lack of job search progress) over time. Similar to Study 1, but adapted to the within-individual level, we therefore expect:

Hypothesis 2.1. Between-individual differences in self-compassion will attenuate the positive within-individual relationship between perceived lack of job search progress and negative affect over time period t.

Hypothesis 2.2. Between-individual differences in self-compassion will attenuate the negative within-individual relationship between perceived lack of job search progress and positive affect over time period t.

3.1. Method

3.1.1. Participants, design, and procedures

We recruited career starters who were actively searching for a paid job (of at least 20 h) via the alumni department of a Dutch university, employment agencies, and social media, to participate in a study about effective job search.[3] To be eligible for the study, participants had to be no older than 35 years, and had to finish their degree within 6 months or had to have finished their degree no longer than a year ago. Participants received a €5 gift card for completing the first survey and an additional €20 gift card for finishing all five surveys. A total of 348 people started the inclusion questionnaire. Of these, 283 met the selection criteria (active search, degree within 6 months or no longer than one year ago) and 240 participants finished the first survey. The final sample consisted of 227 unique participants,[4] of which 129 (56.83%) filled out all five repeated measures. The average age was 25 years (SD = 2.44) and 77.20% were women (N = 169). Most participants (70.80%) were recently graduated (8.14 months on average and no longer than 12 months ago), while some (29.20%) expected to graduate within 6 months (3.5 months on average). Of the participants 73.90% had a paid (student) job, in which they worked an average of 22.29 h a week (SD = 12.69). They were mainly (70.10%) under temporary employment, while 16.40% had tenure, and 7.20% worked as freelancer. The sample was generally highly educated (73.00% university master degree, 14.60% university bachelor degree, 11.10% higher vocational education). Mean job search duration was 2.68 months (SD = 2.99) at the time of the first questionnaire.

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[3] The data were collected as part of a larger study in which we addressed various research questions. We are writing a paper on another part of the data. The only overlapping variable is affect, which is the outcome in this paper and the predictor in the other.

[4] Data of 10 "participants" were deleted because, due to a suspicious amount of overlap in the personal sign in information (e-mail address, phone number, ip-address, timing), we suspected that two individuals made up these data. Four participants older than 35 were not used in the analyses as we did not consider them career starters. Lastly, although one participant did not finish the first questionnaire, the participant did finish the following questionnaires and was therefore included in the analyses.

To test our hypotheses, we used a diary design with five measurement points, each four days apart. We used a job search episode of four days (rather than longer) to enable participants to accurately recall their job search experiences and their accompanying affective state. To ensure that job seekers had (new) job experiences to reflect on every four day episode we specifically recruited participants who were actively searching for employment and who engaged in job search activities at least once every four days.

3.1.2. Measures

The Time 1 baseline questionnaire included self-compassion and demographics (i.e., age, gender, ethnicity, education level, job search duration, employment status). The repeated measures (Time 1–5) included perceived lack of job search progress and (de) activating negative and positive affect in the last four days.

Self-compassion was measured with the same items as Study 1 ($\alpha = 0.91$).
Perceived lack of job search progress was measured with five items of the job search progress scale from Wanberg et al. (2010). Participants were asked to indicate their agreement with the statements considering the last four days on a 5-point (1 = *totally disagree*, 5 = *totally agree*). Two items were positively framed (e.g., "I made progress in my search for a job") and three negatively (e.g., "I got a lot less done for my job search than I had hoped for"). We reversed coded the positively framed items such that a high score on the scale means less progress, while a low score means more progress. Reliability was 0.90 at each measurement time.
Affect was measured using a selection of 16 emotions from the PANAS (Crawford & Henry, 2004). The emotions were classified into one of four affect categories based on the emotion circumplex (Yik et al., 2011). Only emotions that clearly fell within one category were selected. Participants were asked to indicate to what extent they had felt the emotions the last four days on a 5-point scale ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5). Negative activating affect was measured with the items nervous, stressed, frustrated, and jittery ($\alpha = 0.84$–0.93 across measurement times). Negative deactivating affect with the items sad, disappointed, down, and downcast ($\alpha = 0.90$–0.95). Positive activating affect consisted of the items enthusiastic, cheerful, lively, and energetic ($\alpha = 0.93$–0.97). Positive deactivating affect consisted of the items at ease, calm, relaxed, and laid back ($\alpha = 0.93$–0.96).

3.1.3. Demographics

Age, gender, education (primary school, high school level 1, 2 or 3, intermediate vocational education, higher vocational education, or university degree), employment position (employed or unemployed), and job search duration (in months) were measured as control variables, as meta-analyses showed their importance to the job search process (Kanfer et al., 2001).

3.2. Results

Table 3 presents descriptive statistics and between-individual correlations among baseline measures and aggregated repeated measures and within-individual correlations computed using the standardized multilevel coefficients for each pair of variables (cf. Judge et al., 2009, Table 1, p.71). Regarding our control variables, age related positively to self-compassion. Gender related negatively to self-compassion and positively to deactivating affect. Older participants generally reported more and women reported less self-compassion. Moreover, women reported less positive deactivating affect than men. Search duration related positively to both types of negative affect, and negatively to positive deactivating affect. Education and employment position did not relate significantly to any of our outcome variables. In all analyses, we therefore only controlled for age, gender, and job search duration. In addition, since we have multiple measurement times and our variables may vary over time, we included measurement time as control. Table 3 further shows that, as in Study 1, the different types of affect correlated, which reflects their shared underlying dimensions (i.e., hedonic tone or activity level).

Before testing the hypotheses, we examined the within- and between-individual variance by comparing two intercept-only models (fixed vs. random intercept) for each dependent variable. A random intercept resulted in a significant better fit for all types of affect ($\Delta\chi^2$ varied between 255.98 and 527.59, $p < .01$). The within-individual variances of the four affects ranged from 35.51% to 54.21% (see *ICC* in Table 3), indicating sufficient within-individual variance in the dependent measures over time, thus supporting using repeated measures and multilevel analyses.

To test our hypotheses, we performed four multilevel multiple-regression analyses with the four types of affect as dependent variables. The five measurement times (Level 1) are nested within job seekers (Level 2). The control variables age, gender, and job search duration, and self-compassion are Level 2 predictors. Perceived lack of job search progress and the control variable measurement time are Level 1 predictors. We grand-mean centered the Level 2 variables, and person-mean centered the Level 1 variable lack of job search progress (measurement time was coded 0 to 4). To support our hypotheses, cross-level interactions between perceived lack of progress and self-compassion need to be significant and the simple slopes need to be in the expected directions. Consistent with recommendations (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002) we compared different multilevel models, starting with a model in which all parameters are fixed, then adding random coefficients, and then the study variables. First, we tested the intercept-only baseline models, in which we found support for a random intercept: $\Delta\chi^2_{\text{LogLikelihood}}$ ranged between 255.98 and 527.59 for the different types of affect (all p's $< .05$). In all subsequent models we therefore included a random intercept. In Model 1 we included the control variables only. In Model 2, we added the Level 2 variables, in Model 3 we added lack of job search progress, and in Model 4 we added the cross-level interaction between self-compassion and lack of job search progress.

Regarding negative affect, Table 4 shows that lack of job search progress positively and self-compassion negatively related to both

Table 3
Study 2 descriptive statistics, and between-individual and within-individual correlations.

	N	M	SD	ICC	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.
1. Age	219	25.00	2.44												
2. Gender[a]	219	0.77	0.42		−0.28**										
3. Education[b]	226	6.46	1.09		0.25**	−0.04									
4. Employment position[c]	226	0.74	0.44		−0.10	0.12	−0.02								
5. Search duration[d]	226	3.68	2.99		0.19**	−0.07	−0.03	0.12							
6. Self-compassion	222	3.05	0.53		0.17*	−0.15*	0.12	−0.05	0.01	*0.91*					
7. Lack of progress	227	3.10	0.74	0.71	−0.03	0.02	0.12	−0.02	0.07	−0.06	*0.90*	0.12**	0.21**	−0.34**	−0.19**
8. Negative activating	227	2.81	0.86	0.36	−0.03	0.13	−0.12	−0.00	0.24**	−0.37**	0.10	*0.84*	0.57**	−0.16**	−0.31**
9. Negative deactivating	227	2.50	0.83	0.42	0.05	0.10	−0.10	0.01	0.29**	−0.30**	0.19**	0.82**	*0.90*	−0.22**	−32**
10. Positive activating	227	3.17	0.71	0.54	0.00	−0.05	−0.03	0.04	−0.08	0.23**	−0.46**	−0.23**	−0.29**	*0.93*	0.44**
11. Positive deactivating	227	3.24	0.73	0.49	0.05	−0.26**	0.10	0.01	−0.16*	0.43**	−0.13	−0.61**	−0.52**	0.57**	*0.93*

Note. Correlations below the diagonal represent between-individuals correlations. For Variables 7–11 scores were aggregated across the five measurement occasions. Correlations above the diagonal represent within-individuals correlations. Following Judge, Fluegge Woolf, and Hurst (2009), we computed these correlations using the standardized multilevel coefficients for each pair of variables. Reliability coefficients are in boldface italics on the diagonal. For Variables 7–11 the lowest reliability across the measurement points is given. *ICC* = intraclass correlation.

[a] Male = 0, female = 1.
[b] Degree in intermediate vocational education = 4, degree in higher vocational education = 5, Bachelor degree = 6, Master degree = 7.
[c] Not employed in paying job = 0, employed in paying job = 1.
[d] Measured in months.
* $p < .05$ (two-tailed).
** $p < .01$ (two-tailed).

Table 4
Study 2 multi-level multiple regression of negative activating and negative deactivating affect on perceived lack of job search progress, self-compassion, and their cross-level interaction.

Predictors	Negative activating affect (β)				Negative deactivating affect (β)			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Intercept	2.74*	2.74***	2.82***	2.81***	2.36***	2.40***	2.46***	2.46***
Level 2 variables								
Age	−0.01	−0.01	0.00	0.00	0.01	0.01	0.02	0.02
Gender[a]	0.29*	0.29*	0.21	0.21	0.26*	0.27*	0.21	0.20
Job search duration[b]	0.07***	0.07***	0.07***	0.07***	0.08***	0.08***	0.08***	0.08***
Self-compassion			−0.56***	−0.57***			−0.41***	−0.48***
Level 1 variables								
Measurement time	−0.11***	−0.10***	−0.10***	−0.10***	−0.07***	−0.06***	−0.06***	−0.06***
Lack of job search progress		0.06*	0.06*	0.07*		0.16***	0.16***	0.16***
Cross-level interaction								
Lack of job search progress * self-compassion				−0.12*				−0.22***
−2 log-likelihood	2062.34	2057.93	2028.74	2023.59	2178.83	2157.14	2141.08	2126.50

Note. The Level 1 predictor lack of job search progress is person-mean centered. The Level 1 variable measurement time runs from 0 to 4. The Level 2 predictors are grand-mean centered. Due to incidental missing values *N* varies between 220 and 222.
[a] 0 = male, 1 = female.
[b] Measured in months.
* $p < .05$ (2-tailed).
*** $p < .01$ (2-tailed).

types of negative affect. Further, we found significant cross-level interactions of self-compassion and perceived lack of job search progress for both types of negative affect. Subsequent simple slope analyses showed a similar pattern for negative activating and deactivating affect (see Fig. 1). For job seekers with a self-compassion score of 1*SD* below the mean (−0.53), the relationships between perceived lack of job search progress and negative activating and deactivating affect were significantly positive (0.129, $t = 3.174$, $p = .002$, and 0.281, $t = 6.402$, $p < .001$, respectively). For job-seekers with a self-compassion score of 1*SD* above the mean (0.53), the relationships with activating and deactivating affect approached zero (0.002, $t = 0.072$, $p = .943$, and 0.047, $t = 1.100$, $p = .273$, respectively). These results indicate that within-individual lack of job search progress related positively to both

Table 5
Study 2 multi-level multiple regression coefficients of positive activating and positive deactivating affect on perceived lack of job search progress, self-compassion, and their interaction.

Predictors	Positive activating affect (β)				Positive deactivating affect (β)			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Intercept	3.24***	3.25***	3.21***	3.21***	3.55***	3.57***	3.49***	3.50***
Level 2 variables								
Age	0.00	0.00	−0.01	−0.01	0.00	0.00	−0.01	−0.01
Gender[a]	−0.10	−0.10	−0.05	−0.05	−0.45***	−0.45***	−0.37**	−0.37**
Job search duration[b]	−0.01	−0.01	−0.01	−0.01	−0.04*	−0.04*	−0.04*	−0.04*
Self-compassion			0.33***	0.33***			0.56***	0.55***
Level 1 variables								
Measurement time	0.00	−0.01	−0.01	−0.01	0.02	−0.01	−0.01	0.01
Lack of job search progress		−0.29***	−0.29***	−0.29***		−0.12***	−0.12***	−0.13***
Cross-level interaction								
Lack of job search progress ∗ self-compassion				0.05				0.06
−2 log-likelihood	2165.24	2103.11	2089.43	2088.77	2134.28	2114.08	2072.00	2070.28

Note. The Level 1 predictor lack of job search progress is person-mean centered. The Level 1 variable measurement time runs from 0 to 4. The Level 2 predictors are grand-mean centered. Due to incidental missing values *N* varies between 220 and 222.
  [a] 0 = male, 1 = female.
  [b] Measured in months.
  * $p < .05$ (2-tailed).
  ** $p < .01$ (2-tailed).
  *** $p < .001$ (2-tailed).

types of negative affect for job seekers with low self-compassion, while these relationships did not exist for job seekers with high self-compassion (Hypothesis 2.1 supported).

Regarding positive affect, Table 5 shows that lack of job search progress negatively and self-compassion positively related to both types of positive affect. However, self-compassion did not moderate the negative relation between lack of job search progress and positive affect (Hypothesis 2.2 not supported).

Lastly, Tables 4 and 5 also show the relationship between measurement time and affect. The findings indicate that measurement time related negatively to (de)activating negative affect, but did not relate to positive affect. This means that as the course of the study progressed, job seekers indicated to feel less negative affect whereas their level of positive affect remained rather stable.

3.3. Discussion

The Study 2 findings indicate that perceived lack of job search progress over a four-day job search episode adversely relates to job seekers' positive and negative emotional responses over these four days. These results regarding positive and negative affect are consistent with Wanberg et al.'s (2010) day-level study, but extend their findings by demonstrating that lack of progress during job search similarly relates to both activating and deactivating affect. Similar to Study 1, the Study 2 findings demonstrate strong relationships between self-compassion and all four types of affect. These findings extend previous research showing a positive relationship between self-compassion and mental health (e.g., Neff, 2003a, 2003b; Neff et al., 2005, 2007), by illustrating that self-compassion is related to reduced negative and increased positive affective responses during an emotionally laden process such as job seeking. Further, as in Study 1, self-compassion seems to relate more strongly to affect than negative job search experiences. This may indicate that self-compassion is more important for affect than perceiving progress.

In line with our hypotheses, self-compassion attenuated the positive within-individual relationships of lack of job search progress with both types of negative affect, such that these relationships did not exist for job seekers with more self-compassion. Thus, job seekers with high self-compassion responded to job search episodes during which they perceived a lack of progress with less negative emotions than job seekers with low self-compassion. However, in contrast to our expectations, self-compassion did not moderate the negative within-individual relationships of perceived lack of job search progress with positive affect. Instead, lack of progress related to lower positive affect for all job seekers, irrespective of their self-compassion levels. Given the strong relationships between self-compassion and affect and the role of self-compassion in buffering negative emotions, overall this study suggests that self-compassion is a beneficial mental strategy which can help job seekers to cope with negative job search experiences.

Lastly, the multi-wave design allowed us to examine the effect of time on job seekers' affect during the study. We found a weak negative relation of time with negative affect and no relationship of time with positive affect. This indicates that over time during the study the levels of negative affect among job seekers generally decreased. Although this might be an encouraging finding considering job seekers' well-being, it seems inconsistent with previous findings on the relationship between job search duration and mental health (e.g., McKee-Ryan et al., 2005). This may be explained by the relatively short study duration (i.e., 20 days), such that negative affect might increase again when job search and unemployment prolongs. Indeed in line with the literature we did find a positive relation between job search duration (in months) and negative affect. These results are exemplary of the dynamic nature of the job search process (Borgen & Amundson, 1987), in that relations differ depending on the level of measurement.

4. General discussion

The current studies aimed to examine to what extent self-compassion may serve as an adaptive mindset to help job seekers deal with negative job search experiences. In a cross-sectional and a five-wave repeated-measures study among job seekers we examined whether the relation of negative job search experiences with job seekers' emotions can be buffered by self-compassion. Overall our studies suggest that negative job search experiences such as experiencing difficulties or perceiving a lack of job search progress adversely relate to how job seekers feel, especially when they lack self-compassion.

Specifically, in line with self-regulatory theory (Carver, 2001) and previous job search studies (Wanberg et al., 2010; Wanberg, Basbug, et al., 2012) Study 1 indicates that job search difficulties may induce negative affect, and Study 2 shows that a perceived lack of job search progress is associated with both higher negative and lower positive affect. These main effect relationships occurred regardless individuals' levels of self-compassion. However, both studies show that self-compassioned job seekers generally experienced less negative and more positive emotions than job seekers low on self-compassion. These findings corroborate self-compassion theory and previous findings on the positive effects of self-compassion for mental health (Neff, 2003a, 2003b; Neff et al., 2005; Neff et al., 2007).

In addition, both studies indicate support for the moderating role of self-compassion in the relationship of negative job search experiences with affect. Study 1 shows that self-compassioned job seekers maintained their positive emotions more so than less self-compassioned job seekers when experiencing difficulties. Study 2 shows that the within-individuals relationship between perceived lack of job search progress and negative affect is less negative for job seekers high on self-compassion as compared to those low on self-compassion. The results of both studies extend previous research among students (e.g., Leary et al., 2007; Neff et al., 2005) and support the idea that self-compassion may help job seekers to cope with negative job search experiences.

Although the general pattern of findings is rather similar across the two studies, there were also some differences. First, the moderating role of self-compassion for the relation between negative job search experiences and affect differed. Study 1 findings suggest that self-compassion buffers a decrease in *positive* emotions when experiencing difficulties during the job search process, whereas Study 2 findings suggest that self-compassion buffers an increase in *negative* emotions when experiencing lack of progress. Second, the main effect relations of negative job search experiences with affect differed. In Study 1, experiencing difficulties during job search related to increased negative affect regardless of job seekers' self-compassion, while it related to decreased positive affect only for those with low self-compassion. In Study 2, a perceived lack of job search progress related to decreased positive affect regardless of people's self-compassion, while it related to increased negative affect only for job seekers with low self-compassion.

A potential explanation for the differences between Study 1 and 2 findings may relate to the different designs used. Whereas Study 1 examined the role of self-compassion for the between-individual relationship of negative job search experiences with affect, Study 2 focused on the role of self-compassion for the within-individual relationship of negative job search experiences with affect. A conceptual difference between the two studies is that in our within-individual analyses the between-individual differences in perceived lack of job search progress are removed by person-mean centering. Therefore the within-individual relationships are devoid of between-individual bias in perceived lack of progress. Previous studies have reported differences in effects depending on the design used in both the job search domain (e.g., between progress and time spent on job search; Wanberg et al., 2010) and in the general motivation literature (e.g., between self-efficacy and performance; Vancouver, Thompson, Tischner, & Putka, 2002; Vancouver, Thompson, & Williams, 2001). Although these studies also focused on self-regulatory processes, they addressed main effects of within-individual differences in cognitions on behaviors, while we focused on moderating effects of a between-individual difference. Furthermore, when we compare within- and between-individual correlations in Table 3, the pattern seems rather similar.

Therefore, a more plausible explanation for the differences in findings between the two studies may relate to the different conceptualization of negative job search experiences across the two studies. Experiencing difficulties during job search (Study 1) and perceiving a lack of job search progress (Study 2) are conceptually related though somewhat different constructs. As mentioned in the discussion of Study 1, difficulties indisputably have a negative connotation, while progress may be an evaluation of the amount of work that has been done for reaching a goal. Asking job seekers about their difficulties during job search may particularly tap into negative affective responses, resulting in a stronger correlation with negative affect than with positive affect, regardless of self-compassion. In contrast, asking job seekers about their progress may particularly tap into positive affective responses, resulting in a stronger correlation with positive affect than with negative affect, regardless of self-compassion. Furthermore, difficulties may refer more to external attributions (e.g., organizations who do not respond), whereas lack of progress may also refer to an individual's own actions (e.g., procrastination of search activities), thus involving internal attributions. Attribution theory (Weiner, 1985) poses that different emotions may occur depending on the causal attributions for successes or failures. Attributing experienced difficulties externally may evoke emotions such as angriness, irritation, and dissatisfaction for all individuals irrespective of their self-compassion because individuals will criticize others (i.e., employers, lack of information) rather than themselves. However, individuals low rather than high on self-compassion may also blame themselves for the experienced difficulties, which will diminish their positive emotions. Generally, internal attributions when experiencing lack of progress may primarily reduce positive emotions such as happiness, enthusiasm, and feeling energetic, also for individuals higher on self-compassion. These individuals, however, will less likely than low self-compassioned individuals over-identify with their lack of progress and may focus on solutions rather than dwelling in negative emotions such as stress, sadness, or angriness. Future research is needed to test these mechanisms by examining the role of attributions in the job search process.

Considering the different activation levels, we generally found comparable results for activating and deactivating affect. The direction of the relationships was the same across the activation levels, and the size of the relationships differed only slightly. For example, our findings show that self-compassion has similar main and moderation effects across types of affect with similar valence

regardless of activation level. That being said, our results do not rule out that activating and deactivating affect may have differential relationships with other relevant variables in the job search process. For example, activating affect might have different consequences for job search intensity as compared to deactivating affect. The relation between affect and job search intensity thus far yields mixed findings, with some studies reporting positive relations of negative affect with job search effort (e.g., Song et al., 2009), some reporting negative relations (e.g., Waters, 2007), and some finding no relationship (e.g., Turban et al., 2013; Wanberg et al., 2010). One explanation for these mixed findings may relate to the conceptualization of affect. Including activation level in future research may help to better understand these relationships.

4.1. Theoretical and practical implications

Our results contribute to extant job search literature in several ways. First, although previous research identified self-compassion as a healthy and adaptive response to failure, regret, and setbacks (Breines & Chen, 2012; Leary et al., 2007; Neff et al., 2005; Zhang & Chen, 2016), to our knowledge no research has examined the role of self-compassion in the job search context. The present research extends previous job search theories and models (e.g., Saks, 2005; Van Hooft et al., 2013; Wanberg et al., 2002) by introducing a novel emotion-regulation strategy that may benefit the job search process. More specifically, as compared to typical emotion-regulation strategies that focus on altering one's emotions (e.g., Wanberg, Zhu, et al., 2012), self-compassion offers an alternative approach on effective emotion regulation focusing on acceptance. Second, by showing that self-compassion is also associated with more favorable affective responses to negative job search experiences within individuals over time, we extended job seekers' arsenal of possible coping strategies. For example, our findings extend previous research indicating the adaptive effects of mindsets such as a learning goal orientation and resilience. Altogether, our findings add to our understanding and extend previous research that generally reported negative relationships between job search and well-being (McKee-Ryan et al., 2005; Song et al., 2009), by specifying the conditions under which job search experiences may and may not relate to negative emotions and reduced well-being.

Considering that self-compassion can be learned, our results have promising practical implications. Employment and career counselors can foster more self-compassion in their clients by telling and reminding them to be self-compassioned (cf. Adams & Leary, 2007; Breines & Chen, 2012, Experiment 3), or by having their clients engage in self-compassioned writing exercises (e.g., see Leary et al., 2007; Shapira & Mongrain, 2010; Zhang & Chen, 2016), or by training self-compassion more extensively with a multitude of exercises intended to steer away from negative self-critical thoughts towards a kinder, more mindful mindset that acknowledges the shared nature of the negative job search experiences (see Neff, 2011; Smeets et al., 2014). Identifying the buffering effects of self-compassion on negative job search experiences, opens up the possibility to equip job seekers with an adaptive mindset that helps them cope better with adverse experiences during job search.

In addition to the positive role of self-compassion for job seekers' affective responses, self-compassion may also increase self-regulatory abilities of job seekers. Research has shown that inducing self-compassion increases personal responsibility for an undesirable event (Leary et al., 2007), increases self-improvement motivation (Breines & Chen, 2012), and spurs positive adjustment in the face of regrets (Zhang & Chen, 2016). Self-compassion involves recognizing mistakes without becoming overwhelmed with negative emotion, thereby possibly increasing self-regulation in the future (Adams & Leary, 2007). However, future research is needed to test such effects of self-compassion on self-regulation in the context of job search.

4.2. Limitations and future research

To put our results into perspective, we need to consider some limitations of our research. First, it is important to recognize that our data are correlational in nature and based on self-report. Therefore, we must be cautious with drawing causal conclusions and be aware of possible influences of common method bias and social desirability (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003; Podsakoff & Organ, 1986). By emphasizing the anonymity of our participants we tried to minimize concerns of social desirability responding (Podsakoff & Organ, 1986). In addition, in our second study we examined within-individual dynamics. Assuming that social desirability would have the same effect on the different measurement points over time within individuals, this design may have reduced these concerns. Nonetheless, future research could include other sources (e.g., database, counselor reports; see Van Hooft, 2014) to further counteract confounding influences. Furthermore, future research should focus on effects of interventions on job seekers' job search experiences and include objective job search outcomes such as the number of vacancies job seekers applied to, the number of job interviews, the number of job offers, and employment quality (Saks, 2006).

Another limitation is the single item measure of job search difficulties in Study 1. We therefore used a more extensive measure of job search experiences in Study 2. Still these measures both reflected job seekers' overall cognitive evaluation of specific job search events and progress. We preferred such subjective measures over a more objective measure because job seekers may experience similar 'objective' job search events differently. However, it would be interesting to examine which factors explain why similar events are experienced differently. Future research should therefore examine specific events (e.g., being rejected on an application).

Another limitation of the current study is that we did not include variables such as self-efficacy, job level, and wage level in our design. Self-efficacy has been shown to relate to positive affectivity (Turban et al., 2013) and other job search variables (Kanfer et al., 2001; Saks, Zikic, & Koen, 2015), and self-compassion has been shown to positively relate to self-efficacy (Smeets et al., 2014). Future research should examine whether our conclusions hold for different levels of self-efficacy and across different job and wage levels.

Further, as mentioned the job search process is a dynamic process which unfolds over time. To fully understand the process it is important to take time into account. While we included time in Study 2 to show that self-compassion also benefits within-individual responses to negative experiences, and we found that affect changes over time, we did not make predictions about how the job search

process changes over time. Future studies could incorporate job search dynamics more thoroughly by examining lagged effects and growth models. For example, building on Song et al. (2009) and Wanberg et al. (2010) future work may examine how self-compassion affects the relation of job seekers' affect at one day with job search effort the next day.

Lastly, in the current study we treated self-compassion as an individual difference variable that moderates the between-individual (Study 1) and within-individual (Study 2) relations of negative experiences with affect. Future studies could measure self-compassion as a within- individual variable, because previous research has indicated that self-compassion can be altered through exercise (Leary et al., 2007) or instruction (e.g., Adams & Leary, 2007). Because within- and between-individual designs have been show to yield different findings (e.g., Vancouver et al., 2002, 2001), job search scholars could study how within-individual differences in self-compassion relate to affect during job search.

5. Conclusion

Taken together the present study suggests self-compassion as a promising emotion-regulation strategy in the context of job search. Our findings extend previous theory and research on job seeking by illustrating the beneficial effects of self-compassion as an acceptance-based approach towards regulating affective responses to negative job search experiences. Self-compassion can thus be viewed as a positive adaptive mindset that job seekers can apply to counteract the detrimental emotional effects of experiencing difficulties and lack of progress during job search. These findings suggest that employment and career counselors should foster self-compassion to help job seekers having a more emotionally balanced job search experience.

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