

The Adaptation Concept, the Latent Deprivation, and Agency Restriction in the Employment Context

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Abstract

Research was successful in explaining how the experience of unemployment can be harmful on the psychological well-being of unemployed individuals. The underlying assumption of this body of research is that being employed per se provides a set of benefits that meet well-being related needs of an individual. Hence, the deprivation of these benefits by unemployment causes negative well-being experiences.

Research on the adaptation to the unemployment experience, the propositions of the Latent Deprivation Model by Jahoda (1981), and the Agency Restriction Model by Fryer and Payne (1986) were used to derive 5 testable theoretical propositions. The new propositions aimed at enhancing our understanding of how the provision of the psychological employment benefits can impact the well-being of employed individuals. The discussion was preceded by a section for the definitions of "unemployment", "employment", "work", and "well-being" given the compellingly broad nature of these terms.

1. Introduction

During the past three decades, research in work and well-being was dominated by the concept of stress (Briner, 2008: Ch 2). Academic researchers and journal article writers made countless attempts to establish correlations between various job conditions and stress symptoms (Barely and Knight, 1992). Interestingly, the interest in how work can be psychologically harmful was not confined to stress. The literature is packed with work specific and non-work specific models and theories of well-being. The psychological contract, the effort reward imbalance, the job-demand job-control model, and work-family conflict are just a few examples of such models and theories.

Astoundingly, the same period witnessed an exceptional interest in the psychological distress that results from being unemployed (Vansteenkiste et al., 2005). Researchers were able to establish associations between the unemployment experience and symptoms of anxiety (Vansteenkiste et al., 2004), decreased self-esteem, higher rates of child abuse, and suicide (Vansteenkiste et al., 2005). Marie Jahoda (1982) argued that in addition to the financial deprivation that unemployment imposes, unemployment deprives an individual from an array of psychological benefits that only employment can provide.

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This situation presents a dichotomy. On one hand, work or employment has become strongly associated with psychological strain to both researchers and practitioners, not to mention how stress has become embedded in general society discourse (Barely and Knight, 1992). On the other hand, only work or employment can satisfy a set of deeply seated psychological needs that no other institution in the modern society can possibly provide (Jahoda, 1982). This leaves us with a question: can these research findings in unemployment and well-being be used to accentuate the psychological benefits of work or employment, or explain the well-being experiences of employed individuals?

This paper uses some of the research findings on the relationship between unemployment and well-being to increase our understanding of the relationship between employment and well-being. The paper is divided into two sections. Given the compellingly broad nature of the terms; unemployment, employment, work, and well-being, the first section was devoted for discussing their definitions. The second section presents testable theoretical propositions derived from the literature of unemployment and well-being. The propositions explain how work conditions provide the psychological benefits of employment, and how changes in the level of these benefits can reflect on an employee's psychological well-being levels. This is followed by concluding remarks and limitations.

2. Section One- Key Terms

The term **unemployment** can be defined using the International Labour Organization's resolution concerning statistics. The resolution was adopted by the Thirteenth International Conference of Labour Statisticians (1982). Paragraph 10 of the resolution states: "The unemployed comprises all persons above a specified age who during the reference period were without work, currently available for work, and seeking work." Hence, for an individual to be considered unemployed, he/she must be able to work, be available for work, and is actively seeking work.

The term **Employment** can also be defined using the resolution mentioned above; "The employed comprises all persons above a specified age who during a specified brief period either one week or one day, were in paid employment (performed some work for wage or salary in case or in-kind) or self-employed". Hence, an employed person is an individual who during a specified period of time performed work for payment or was self-employed.

The term **work**, on the other hand, can refer to a wide range of meanings; it could be any meaningful activity (Warr and Jackson, 1987) that has not economic implications, as well as a contractual arrangement for paid activities (Jahoda, 1982). Rob Briner (2008) suggested viewing work as a multifaceted construct; it could be thought of in terms of work conditions, employee-employer relationship, and/or employee behavior.

At this point, it becomes essential to distinguish between the terms "employment" and "work". Uncomfortable as it may seem, the distinction is neither well-concluded by the literature, nor could such discussion be wrapped in a couple of paragraphs. Despite the profoundness of these terms in both disciplines, economics and socio-psychology, the distinction remains widely debatable (Jahoda, 1982).

The author observed that the term "employment" is customary in socio-economic studies of well-being, while the term "work" is customary in organizational studies of well-being. Both terms are used interchangeably in this paper. Work, or employment, in this paper refers to any paid work that encompasses a range of meaningful activities and relationships. The propositions are mainly meant towards the well-being experiences of employees, albeit they could apply to self-employed individuals.

Similar to "work", **well-being** is also a multifaceted construct that cannot be measured using a single variable. It is a general term used to describe how someone feels. It refers to both psychological and physiological health. The discussion in this paper is largely in psychological well-being. To operationalize it for research, researchers resorted to the concept of *mental health* (Briner, 2008). Mental health can be described by a number of variables: *happiness being the degree of judging one's life positively, the absence of physical and psychological illness, normality within social & moral norms, adaptation to the demands and changes in the environment, intrapsychic harmony between the presumed "parts of the self" or "needs"* (Briner, 2008).

To measure well-being, researchers measured one variable or groups of variables that fall under the well-being term. For example, anger is an emotion that could be studied as a well-being variable (Briner, 2008). Typically, an experience of anger or an increase in the frequency or intensity of experiencing anger signifies a deterioration in psychological well-being. Similarly, the absence of anger or the decrease in the frequency or intensity of experiencing anger denotes an improvement in psychological well-being.

3. Section Two- Using Research in Unemployment and Well-being to Understand the Well-being Experiences of Employed Individuals (Literature Review):

Cross-sectional research on the effects of unemployment on well-being correlated unemployment as an independent variable to a wide range of well-being variables. For example, unemployment was correlated to a decline in positive affect such as joy, happiness, and mental health. It was also correlated to an increase in negative affect such as guilt, shame, sadness, anxiety, worry, anger, as well as stress and depression. Unemployment was also associated with a decrease in domain and global life satisfaction (McKee-Ryan et al., 2005).

Cross-sectional designs were heavily used by this body of research. Some of them took an aggregate form; they compared national unemployment rates to national indices that signify deteriorated well-being such as number of heart disease cases, number of mental health cases, and usage of mental health services (McKee-Ryan et al., 2005). Accordingly, it was deduced that unemployment is associated with deteriorated well-being. Other cross-sectional studies compared self-reported well-being of a group of unemployed individuals to the self-reported well-being of a group of employed individuals. The difference in well-being levels was then attributed to the unemployment experience (Briner, 2008: Ch 7).

3.1 The Adaptation Process

While cross-sectional studies provided snap-shot *associations*, longitudinal studies established *causal relationships* between unemployment and poorer well-being. Longitudinal studies recorded the changes in well-being levels by following groups of unemployed individuals through their unemployment period (Briner, 2008: Ch 7), and hence the causality was established. Further to causality, these studies revealed that well-being levels do not take a one direction change throughout the experience. Warr & Jackson's (1987) longitudinal observations of unemployed men showed significant improvement in well-being from 15-25 months after getting unemployed (Winefield & Tiggemann, 1989). These observations were confirmed by a subsequent test on younger unemployed individuals by Winefield & Tiggemann (1989). The results revealed that unemployment causes a sharp deterioration in well-being at the initial stage. However, a gradual adjustment takes place later suggesting a process of adaptation (Winkelmann, 2008).

To achieve the psychological adaptation to the experience of unemployment, individuals are said to mobilize a set of internal and external resources (McKee-Ryan et al., 2005). Internal resources can be personality traits such as self-esteem, self-efficacy, and locus of control (McKee-Ryan et al., 2005). External resources can be either moral support provided by social network, or financial resources that cover basic needs of an unemployed individual (McKee-Ryan et al., 2005).

These research findings suggest that individuals can adapt to negative well-being experiences after a reasonably long period of time. This deduction can be used to understand how employees cope with the negative well-being experience caused by work conditions or relationships. After a reasonably long period of time, an employee learns how to use one's internal and external resources to cope with situations that cause negative well-being experiences.

For example, a marketing officer experiencing anxiety and fear before every presentation to a new client would pull her internal and external resources to cope with these emotions. Given her internal locus of control, she believes that rehearsing the question-and-answer section saves her from surprising questions at the time of the presentation. She might have learned from previous presentations that every time she practiced before family members the night ahead of the presentation, she experienced less anxiety at the time of the presentation. She might have also learned that making a joke about the presentation on her social network accounts released some of her fear before the presentation. In that sense, this marketing officer can pull her internal resources being her internal locus of control, and her external resources being the support of her friends and family, to cope with the fear and anxiety that her job conditions impose. This leads us to the first proposition:

Proposition 1: *an employee learns to utilize internal and external resources to adapt with negative well-being experiences imposed by work conditions*

3.2 The Latent Deprivation Model

The Latent Deprivation Model was introduced by Marie Jahoda (1982). The model was recognized as the most influential in this area of research. It gained extensive

testing and scrutiny by subsequent research. The model posited that being employed *per se* provides two sets of functions or benefits; *manifest benefits* and *latent benefits*. The manifest benefits meet an individual's needs that can be accessed with a sufficient amount of money like food, housing, clothing, and medical care. The latent benefits, on the other hand, are linked to psychological needs; having a time structure, having sufficient social contacts, having common goals with a group of people, having an acceptable social status, and taking part of an enforced and regular activity (Arnold, 1997).

Jahoda posited that latent deprivation results from deeply seated, unmet psychological needs, and hence, it has greater influence on the psychological well-being of individuals than the financial deprivation (Paul Geithner, & Moser, 2009). According to Jahoda, these needs can only be satisfied by being employed (Gill, 2006). This proposition gained robust evidence. For example, Winkelmann (2008) found that being part of a rich social network could not shield unemployed individuals from the psychological distress resulting from latent deprivation. Furthermore, Waters and Moore (2002) found that taking part in meaningful social activities could not prevent an unemployed individual from the said decrease in well-being.

An empirical study by Paul, Geithner, & Moser (2009) compared the latent deprivation levels of employed, unemployed and out of the labour force individuals revealed that Jahoda's propositions are capable of predicting the well-being experiences of all sampled individuals. Latent deprivation was found to be significantly lower, yet not absent, among employed individuals.

This evidence confirms that only employment provides the set of benefits that can satisfy latent needs of an individual. Nonetheless, it suggests that employed individuals can also experience latent deprivation. The available literature is in short on suggesting the right mixture and level of these benefits; the model was never tested within an employment context to identify *how* different work conditions satisfy these needs. In the following section, the latent needs will be discussed in an employment context.

3.2.1 The need for a disciplined life

The propositions of *having a time structure* and *being part of an enforced and regular activity* imply that individuals need to have a disciplined life. Individuals need consistency and expectability in their daily routines to allow them to plan and make long-term decisions. Work conditions vary at the levels they provide this kind of discipline. For example, surgeons are called to perform a surgery when the need arises and at the time that is most suitable for the patient. Actors, musicians, and painters work according to the needs of the project in hand which does not provide a regular time structure. Given the Latent Deprivation Model propositions, such employees experience lower levels of well-being than employees that enjoy previously agreed work hours. This leads us to the second proposition:

Proposition 2: an employee experiences higher levels of well-being if work conditions provide time structure and lower levels of well-being if work conditions do not provide time structure

Further to previously agreed work hours and timing, the model suggests that some level of enforced and regular activity is required to achieve higher levels of well-being. A regular activity provides expectability on the kind of skills and effort required to attain it. For example, the skills and effort required to accomplish the regular hygiene procedure and paper work before any surgery are known to a practicing surgeon. These activities do not require much thinking and planning ahead; after a while from practicing them, the surgeon stops worrying about them, and rather devotes her attention to the medical procedure in the surgery. Furthermore, such regular and routine activities provide opportunity to feel that one has accomplished using minimum cognitive and psychological effort. This leads us to the third proposition:

Proposition 3: *an employee experiences higher levels of well-being if work conditions enforce some level of regular activity and lower level of well-being if work conditions do not enforce regular activities*

3.2.2 The need to take part of a new community

Jahoda proposed that by being employed, an individual takes part of a social network that was not accessible otherwise. This is displayed clearly in the latent needs of having sufficient social contacts, having common goals with a group of people, having an acceptable social status. The employment social network provides an employee with an array of opportunities to interact and build relationships within the employment context. Donald Super's (1953) life-stage model implies that social interactions can facilitate the development of the self-concept. By interacting with the manager, colleagues and subordinates, an individual gets to play new social roles that are not available outside the employment context (Arnold, 1997). These interactions provide opportunity for discovering one's self, abilities, feelings, and beliefs independent from the self-concept that was previously conceived within the personal social network.

In view of that, it can be assumed that work conditions that provide opportunity for social interactions with coworkers and customers can produce enhanced well-being experiences. On the contrary, work conditions that minimize the opportunity for such interactions, if not harmful, are incapable of producing such positive well-being experience. In this direction, working from home, or working as call centre attendant can be described as incapable of providing social settings that produce positive well-being experiences. This inference, in specific, must be taken reservedly. This is because there is unchallengeable evidence advocating that social interactions in the work environment can cause an array of negative moods and emotions such as anger, sadness, and frustration. Consequently, the fourth proposition is as follows:

Proposition 4: *an employee experiences higher levels of well-being if work conditions provide an adequate level of social interactions and lower levels of well-being if work conditions impose inadequate level of social interactions*

3.3 The Agency Restriction Model

The Agency Restriction Model by Fryer and Payne (1986) is credited for presenting the individual as more proactive and self-managing than is presented in the Latent

Deprivation Model (Arnold, 1997). The model regards an individual to be an *agent* who undertakes tasks of organizing information, searching for meanings, and making personal decisions about the future (Ervasti & Venetoklis, 2006).

Although it acknowledged the importance of the latent needs, the model posited that the *coercive poverty* that the financial hardship enforces on an unemployed individual has greater impact on the psychological well-being. This poverty takes away a person's access to basic needs like food, decent housing, and leisure. It further deprives an individual from access to essential information to make crucial personal plans and decisions about the future. And in that sense, being unemployed restricts an individual's *personal agency* (Creed et al., 2005).

3.3.1 The need to feel in control of one's personal decisions

Given that an employee is arguably financially fulfilled, the Agency Restriction Model introduced us to the need to feel that one holds some level of control on decisions that have personal implications. Again this proposition must be applied consciously to the employment context. Almost all work conditions have personal implications on an employee; the work hours, the location, the tasks, the work environment, and the work colleagues. Previously settled conditions that can be accepted by an employee without further contemplation do not restrict an employee's personal agency. However, what could be proposed is that decisions that extend beyond the agreed or customary limits of previously settled conditions can produce poorer levels of well-being. For example, employer-solely-made decisions to change official work hours, extend overtime hours, or impose a uniform dress-code can violate the limits of an employee's personal agency. And hence, such decisions can result in poorer well-being levels. This leaves us with the final proposition:

Proposition 5: *an employee experiences higher levels of well-being if organizational decisions that have personal implications are made in consultation with the employee, and lower levels of well-being if work decisions that have personal implications are rather imposed*

4. Conclusion and Limitations

This paper aimed to use the research findings on the relationship between unemployment and well-being to increase our understanding of well-being experiences of employed individuals. Five testable propositions were derived from the research on the adaptation process, the Latent Deprivation Model, and the Agency Restriction Model. These models were chosen given their profound influence on the movement of this literature.

The paper proposed that employees can adapt to negative psychological experiences imposed by their work conditions after being exposed to them for a long period of time. Using the Latent Deprivation Model, two sets of psychological needs were identified; the need for a disciplined life and the need to take part of a new community other than family and friends. It was proposed that work conditions that satisfy these needs can produce higher levels of employee well-being. The Agency Restriction Model provided that limiting an individual's *personal agency* can result in poorer well-being. Accordingly, the paper proposed that organizational decisions with

personal implications extending beyond the previously agreed settings can possibly restrict employees' personal agency, and hence produce negative well-being experiences.

This paper was limited to using the research in variables that fall under the umbrella of the "well-being" term. The literature is rich with other psychological variables that can be affected by unemployment such as self-esteem, self-concept, and self-efficacy. Additionally, there are remarkable research findings on the effects of the unemployment duration on self-motivation and job search behavior. In spite informative to the discussion of this paper, these psychological variables do not fall under the well-being umbrella construct. And hence, they were excluded from this paper to remain open for scrutiny by future research.

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