The relationship between emotion regulation strategies and job search behavior among fourth-year university students

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ABSTRACT

The job search process is a stressful experience. This study investigated the effect of emotion regulation strategies on job search behavior in combination with anxiety and job search self-efficacy among Chinese university fourth-year students (N = 816, mean age = 21.98, 31.5% male, 34.9% majored in science, 18.0% from “211 Project” universities). Results showed that cognitive reappraisal was positively related to job search behavior, while expressive suppression was negatively related to job search behavior. Additionally, anxiety was negatively related to job search behavior, while job search self-efficacy was positively associated with job search behavior. Moreover, both anxiety and job search self-efficacy mediated the relationship between emotion regulation strategies and job search behavior. In general, emotion regulation strategies played an important role in job search behavior. Implications include the notion that emotion regulation interventions may be helpful to increase job search behavior among university students.

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Unemployment can impair the financial and psychological status of individuals and their families (Liu, Huang, & Wang, 2014), as well as inhibit economic growth and elicit social problems, such as alcohol and drug abuse, or even crime (Guindon & Smith, 2002). Finding a job is important to every job seeker, and perhaps especially important to university graduates. For university graduates, an important task is the transition from school to work, and a successful transition is a precursor of positive career consequences in later career stages (Pinquart, Juang, & Silbereisen, 2003).

Since the end of the 1990s, higher education in China has experienced a remarkable expansion. In China, university students are expected to find a job after graduating from university, though about 10% of students choose to pursue postgraduate study. Along with the increase in university students, graduates are facing severe employment pressure. In order to improve the employment of university students, the government provides support through programs such as the “Specially Contracted Teachers Plan,” “Three Supports and One Assistance Policy,” and “Employment Promotion Plan for Unemployed University Graduates” to help university students to find a job. Universities have established courses related to job search and career development before students enter their fourth year. In addition, universities hold employment exhibitions on campus for fourth-year university students and employers during the period from October to May of the next year.

Job search behavior has been shown to be one of the most important predictors of job attainment and employment status (Kanfer, Wanberg, & Kantowitz, 2001; Saks & Ashforth, 1999, 2000; Van Hooft, Born, Taris, & Van der Flier, 2004). From the...
perspective of self-regulation, job search behavior is conceptualized as “a purposive, volitional pattern of action that begins with the identification and commitment to pursuing an employment goal” (Kanfer et al., 2001, p. 838). Job search behavior is a complex and intensive procedure requiring investment in time and effort on behalf of job seekers (Georgiou, Nikolau, Tomprou, & Rafailidou, 2012). Job search behavior can be evaluated by job search effort and job search intensity (Blau, 1993: Kanfer et al., 2001). According to Blau (1994), job search intensity includes preparatory job search behavior intensity (i.e., gathering information and identifying potential jobs during the planning phase of the job search) and active job search behavior intensity (i.e., the actual job search and choice process, such as sending out resumes and interviewing with prospective employers).

To some degree, the job search process is a stressful experience (e.g., Crossley & Stanton, 2005; Song, Uy, Zhang, & Shi, 2009), and this is especially true for university graduates because they often have difficulties finding satisfactory jobs due to their lack of prior work experience and professional networks (Koen, Klehe, & Van Vianen, 2012). Anxiety occurs when an individual perceives high uncertainty over an outcome and low control over a situation (Raghunathan & Pham, 1999). The job search process often evokes a high level of anxiety; for example, individuals might worry about not getting the chance to go to an interview or being rejected in the interview. Moreover, high anxiety might reduce performance on difficult tasks (Devine, Fawcett, Szucs, & Dowker, 2012). Bonaccio, Gauvin, and Reeve (2014) argued that emotionality reduces job search clarity. Furthermore, job seekers with high anxiety delay engaging in job search activities or reduce their job search efforts (Bonaccio et al., 2014; Turban, Lee, Veiga, Haggard, & Wu, 2013). On the contrary, university student job seekers with higher positive affect show higher scores on job search intensity (Côté, Saks, & Zikic, 2006). Therefore, using effective strategies for emotion regulation is critical for university students in maintaining job search behavior and achieving a successful school-to-work transition.

Emotion regulation has been linked to many important outcomes, such as mental health (Gross & Munoz, 1995), physical health (Sapolsky, 2007), social relationships (Gross & John, 2003), and work performance (Diefendorff, Hall, Lord, & Strean, 2000). Emotion regulation involves the application and selection of strategies that influence the expression and experience of emotions (Gross & John, 2003; Hu et al., 2014). Cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression are two types of emotion regulation strategies that have been widely discussed in the literature. During cognitive reappraisal, people reduce the emotional impact of an event by altering their subjective evaluation of the event (Gross, 1998a, 1998b, 2000). In contrast, during expressive suppression, people consciously inhibit emotional-expressive behaviors when emotionally aroused (Gross & Levenson, 1993). Previous studies have provided support for the superiority of the effect of cognitive reappraisal over expressive suppression (e.g., Aldao & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2012b; Ehring, Tuschen-Caffier, Schnulle, Fischer, & Gross, 2010; Werner, Goldin, Ball, Heimberg, & Gross, 2011). Compared to cognitive reappraisal, expressive suppression is less effective not only in managing emotions such as anxiety, but also in strengthening subjective well-being and general life satisfaction (Hu et al., 2014). Llewellyn, Dolcos, Jordan, Rudolph, and Dolcos (2013) argued that the use of expressive suppression versus cognitive reappraisal may, in turn, confer risk or resilience to anxiety, respectively. In other words, using cognitive reappraisal to positively reframe how we think about negative events may reduce anxiety, while using suppression to decrease the expression of anxious feelings may exacerbate anxiety.

Job search self-efficacy refers to “an individual’s confidence in his or her ability to successfully perform a variety of job-search activities” (Wanberg, Watt, & Rumsey, 1996, p. 76). According to Bandura (1977), individuals with high self-efficacy prefer challenging goals and strive to achieve them with great effort, while individuals with low self-efficacy avoid challenging tasks and are more likely to withdraw effort or even give up when facing challenging tasks. Similarly, Boswell, Swider, and Zimmerman (2012) argued that job search self-efficacy has a positive effect on job search behavior because individuals with high job search self-efficacy are more likely to engage in job search behavior with great effort. Research also supports job search self-efficacy as one of the most important predictors of job search behavior, and many predictors exert their influence on job search behavior through job search self-efficacy (Côté et al., 2006; Kanfer et al., 2001; Vanryn & Vinokur, 1992; Wanberg, Glomb, Song, & Sorensen, 2005). For example, Crossley and Stanton (2005) found that negative emotions influence job search intensity by reducing job search self-efficacy.

1. The present study

Emotion plays an important role during the job search process (Stevens & Seo, 2014). Although some research reports that emotional control or stress coping is not related to job search intensity (Liu et al., 2014; Wanberg, Kanfer, & Rotundo, 1999), other research suggests that it is important to consider emotion regulation when investigating job search behavior (Guindon & Smith, 2002; Stevens & Seo, 2014; Wanberg, Basbug, Van Hooft, & Samtani, 2012), in that there may be a close link between emotion regulation strategies and job search behavior. In addition, emotions may influence job search behavior through job search self-efficacy (Crossley & Stanton, 2005). Thus, job search self-efficacy might represent the possible mechanism underlying the relationship between emotion regulation strategy and job search behavior. On the other hand, in recent years, university students in China have been facing high employment pressure along with the implementation of government policies regarding university enrollment expansion. Therefore, the present study aimed to investigate the relationship between emotion regulation strategies and job search behavior in conjunction with job search self-efficacy among Chinese fourth-year university students.

Cognitive reappraisal rethinking the meaning of an emotion-eliciting event so as to change its emotional impact, whereas expressive suppression involves inhibiting or reducing the ongoing emotional-expressive behavior (Cutuli, 2014).
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