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Negative affect and job search: Further examination of the reverse causation hypothesis

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Abstract

The present study examined a longitudinal model of state and trait negative affect as predictors of job-search success. Job-search self-efficacy and job-search intensity were also examined as mediators of the negative affect—job-search success relation. Overall the model offered mixed support for Kasl's (1982) Reverse Causation Hypothesis. Results suggested that trait negative affectivity had a direct negative relationship with subsequent job-search success (i.e., number of offers and job status). Results also suggested that trait negative affectivity related indirectly to interview success through job-search self-efficacy and job search intensity. Contrary to the Reverse Causation Hypothesis, positive relationships were found between distress (state negative affect) and job search outcomes.
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1. Negative affect and job search: Further examination of the reverse causation hypothesis

Conflicting theoretical perspectives exist regarding the direction of relations between psychological well-being and job-search success. Whereas the *traditional* perspective argues that unsuccessful search leads to decreased physical and mental

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health (Murphy & Athanasou, 1999), the *Reverse Causation Hypothesis* (RCH; Kasl, 1982) posits that poor psychological well-being negatively influences employment outcomes. Empirical evidence for the RCH is mixed. Although longitudinal research has provided evidence that well-being is an antecedent of job-search success (Hamilton, Hoffman, Broman, & Rauma, 1993; Taris, 2002), other studies have not supported this. For example, Schaufeli and Vanyperen (1993) found that low self-esteem, but not psychological distress, related negatively to subsequent employment status.

The inconclusive findings regarding well-being and job-search success may be partly due to a lack of clear specification of key constructs. Research examining these different perspectives has somewhat indiscriminately used state-like (e.g., depression, anxiety) and trait-like (e.g., pessimism, self-esteem) forms of negative affect to predict unsuccessful search. Furthermore, researchers examining the RCH have typically surveyed chronically unemployed, or recently laid off job seekers, raising concerns of sampling bias (Feather, 1993). Finally, research on the RCH often implies, yet has failed to test important psychological and behavioral mediators that link negative affect to search success. This study integrates the RCH perspective into Kanfer, Wanberg, and Kantrowitz's (2001) self-regulatory model of the job search process. Using Kanfer et al.'s theoretical model, this study examined the role of *job-search self-efficacy*, the belief that one can engage in behaviors that will lead to successfully finding a job, and *job-search intensity*, the frequency that job seekers engage in various search behaviors, as mediators of the negative affect—successful search relationship.

1.1. Trait and state negative affect

Important distinctions exist between trait and state forms of negative affect. In general, traits are expressed as consistent patterns of functioning across a range of situations, whereas states are short-term, continuous, and concrete ways of thinking, acting, and feeling. Watson and Clark (1984) suggested that trait *Negative Affectivity* (hereafter NA) is marked by pervasive feelings of discomfort, a tendency to dwell on negative aspects of self and world, and a general disposition to experience aversive emotional states. NA and the personality trait Neuroticism have been conceptually and empirically equated constructs (see Watson & Clark, 1984; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). In contrast, state forms of negative affect such as depression, anxiety and stress (hereafter *distress*; see Schaufeli & Vanyperen, 1993) are more task or situation specific, and tend to be more malleable over time (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). Unfortunately, researchers examining the RHC have used state and trait forms of negative affect somewhat indiscriminately, rarely examining both forms together (cf. Schaufeli & Vanyperen, 1993). Furthermore, whereas research on affective states suggest more immediate effects on behavior (see Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996), studies that have examined distress as an antecedent of employment status have typically assessed search outcomes between six- and twenty-four-months later, leading to some concern about the validity of claims that distress does not influence employment status over and above NA. Thus, one aim of the present study was to examine

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