



The role of approach and avoidance motives for unemployed job search behavior

Karen van Dam ^{a,b,*}, Lotte Menting ^{b,1}

^a Open University, Faculty of Psychology, Chiba Building, Room 3.29, PO Box 2960, 6401 DL HEERLEN, The Netherlands

^b Tilburg University, Department of Social Psychology, PO Box 90153, 5000 LE Tilburg, The Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

The current study investigated the role of approach and avoidance motives for unemployed job search behavior. Two approach motives (employment and PJ-fit) and two avoidance motives (low-expectation and low-interest) were distinguished. Antecedents and consequences of these motives were examined using a sample of 303 unemployed clients of reemployment agencies, and obtaining motive ratings from both the unemployed and their counselors. The findings showed that three motives (employment, low-expectation and low-interest) improved the prediction of job search behavior in addition to a set of antecedents that have been widely studied in the literature. In turn, the motives were predicted by different antecedents. The findings suggest that it is important to identify and address unemployed approach and avoidance motives since they might affect reemployment success.

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1. Introduction

Because prolonged unemployment can have serious consequences for individuals and their families, and for society at large, gaining insight into unemployed job search is of great importance. In the past decades, a growing literature has focused on the processes through which individuals seek employment, and the factors affecting job search. Findings indicate a number of characteristics of individuals and their social environment that are related to job search activities (e.g., Kanfer, Wanberg, & Kantrowitz, 2001). Despite this expanding research domain, little attention has been devoted to the approach–avoidance motives unemployed individuals may have concerning reemployment (Zimmerman, Boswell, Shipp, Dunford, & Boudreau, *in press*). The concept of approach–avoidance motivation has been implicated in a wide range of psychological processes and refers to the forces that energize and direct behavior (Elliot, 2008).

Research suggests that individuals show variability in their reactions to unemployment and their orientation toward reemployment (Fryer & Payne, 1984; Vansteenkiste, Lens, De Witte, & Deci, 2004). Some individuals might be confident and eager to find a job, and have an approach motivation, while others might be less positive about obtaining employment, and have an avoidance motivation. These different motives will have consequences for the intensity and effort unemployed invest in seeking and obtaining reemployment. Studying employed individuals' job search behavior, Zimmerman et al. (*in press*) noticed how several indicators of approach–avoidance motivation, such as ambition values, job search self-efficacy, and perceived financial inadequacy, were related to job search behavior.

The purpose of the present study was twofold: (i) to investigate how approach–avoidance reemployment motives are related to unemployed individuals' job search behavior, and (ii) to establish which individual and situational antecedents are associated to these approach–avoidance motives. As such, the present study aimed to increase understanding of the processes involved in

* Corresponding author at: Open University, Faculty of Psychology, Chiba Building, Room 3.29, PO Box 2960, 6401 DL HEERLEN, The Netherlands.

E-mail addresses: karen.vandam@ou.nl, k.vandam@uvt.nl (K. van Dam), l.w.m.menting@uvt.nl (L. Menting).

¹ Fax: +31 13 466 2067.

seeking reemployment. The findings might also be helpful for unemployed job-seekers and reemployment counselors to identify motives that are (in)effective for successful reemployment, and contribute to possible interventions for increasing job search success.

1.1. Job search behavior and approach–avoidance motivation

Job search has been defined as a purposive, volitional and self-managed pattern of action with the goal of achieving reemployment (Kanfer et al., 2001). In the job-search literature, there is an increased tendency to view job search as a self-regulating process (e.g., Zimmerman et al., in press). Self-regulation refers to the ways in which people control and direct their own actions (Bandura, 1989). Individuals are considered to set goals, compare their progress against their goals, and make modifications to their behaviors or cognitions if there is a discrepancy between a goal and the current state (Lord, Dieffendorff, Schmidt, & Hall, 2010). Like other self-regulated behaviors, individual differences in job search activities are largely self-organized and self-managed; the accomplishment or abandonment of an employment goal is expected to change the self-regulatory process and subsequent job search activities (Kanfer et al., 2001).

Being essentially a goal-directed behavior, job search behavior is likely to be affected by approach–avoidance motivation (Zimmerman et al., in press). As Elliot (2008) argues, goal-directed behaviors are driven by motivational tendencies to approach and/or avoid goals. Approach motivation refers to the energization of behavior by, or the direction of behavior toward, positive stimuli; similarly, avoidance motivation is the energization of behavior by, or the direction of behavior away from, negative stimuli. Individuals with an approach motivation are more concerned with eagerness to begin behavior that may lead to positive outcomes and focus on accomplishments or advancements, whereas individuals with an avoidance motivation are more concerned with vigilance to avoid behavior that may lead to negative outcomes. Evidence indicates that approach and avoidance motives have differential effects on emotion, cognition, and behavior (Elliot, 2008). Because any specific outcome can at the same time possess positively and negatively valued aspects, approach and avoidance motives can occur simultaneously (Zimmerman et al., in press).

In the present study, two approach motives (employment and person–job fit) and two avoidance motives (low-expectation and low-interest) were distinguished. These motives were based on an extensive literature review as well as in-depth interviews with experienced reemployment counselors. The *employment motive* refers to the goal of finding employment urgently. Individuals with an employment motive consider being unemployed a negative state that should be terminated as soon as possible, and are determined to find a job. Financial need (e.g., Wanberg, Kanfer, & Rotundo, 1999) might be a reason for unemployed to develop an employment motive. In order to obtain employment, individuals will be proactive in their job search process, and not too selective in their search. Research (e.g., Feather & O'Brien, 1987) suggests that individuals with negative feelings about being unemployed are most likely to engage in job search behavior.

Unemployed with a *person–job fit (PJ-fit) motive* aim to find work that fits their competencies, interests and values (cf. Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005). Compared to those holding an employment motive, they will be more selective in their job search, take more time to search for that specific job, and not apply for just any job. In the literature, the relevance of PJ-fit has been described in theories of need-fulfillment (e.g., Rice, McFarlin, Hunt, & Near, 1985) and congruence models, such as Holland's (1997) RIASEC theory. Research indicates that pre-entry PJ-fit perceptions play an important role in linking job search to employment quality (Saks & Ashforth, 2002). Extant evidence indicates that PJ-fit is related to positive work outcomes (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005).

Unemployed with a *low-expectation motive* are negative about seeking work owing to a low expectation of their chances for work. This motive may derive from a variety of factors including a series of rejections, a shortage of jobs in their locality or line of work, or a lack of necessary training or experience (Anderson, 2010). Owing to a negative outcome expectation, these unemployed will not invest much time and effort in job search (Vansteenkiste et al., 2004), and might give up looking for work altogether, thus becoming “discouraged” workers (Anderson, 2010; Chu, 2011).

Finally, unemployed with a *low-interest motive* prefer being unemployed over holding a job. Evidence (e.g., Fryer & Payne, 1984) suggests that unemployment actually can have a liberating effect for some people, freeing them from stressful job demands, and allowing them to spend their time to alternative activities they find interesting. Several factors, such as a proactive stance, an activity as a means of achieving personal goals, and having more resources at one's disposal, have been related to a constructive adaptation to unemployment (e.g., Fryer & Payne, 1984; Walsh & Jackson, 1995). Accordingly, it was expected that unemployed with a low-interest motive are less likely to engage in job search behavior.

Hypothesis 1. Approach motives (i.e., employment and PJ-fit) are positively related to job search behavior; avoidance motives (i.e., low-expectation and low-interest) are negatively related to job search behavior.

1.2. Predictors of approach and avoidance motives

The predictor set of this study was based on the meta-analysis and conceptual framework of Kanfer et al. (2001). Building on motivation and self-regulation theories, these authors distinguished four general categories of nonability, individual-difference variables likely to influence individuals' job search: personality, generalized expectancies, situational characteristics, and demographic characteristics. Accordingly, the present study included the following predictors: personality traits (extraversion,

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