



Work-related demands and life satisfaction: The effects of engagement and disengagement among employed and long-term unemployed people[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Social change has accentuated various demands in people's work lives including, for instance, fears of being laid off, anticipated or experienced difficulties in finding a new and/or appropriate job or a lack of security in career planning. The present study on $N = 1751$ employed, short-term unemployed, and long-term (> 12 months) unemployed German adults examined the associations between the perceived accumulation of such demands and individuals' life satisfaction. Further, main and moderating effects of individuals' modes of dealing with these demands, that is, engagement and disengagement preferences based on Heckhausen and Schulz's (1995) life-span theory of control, were investigated. A higher load of demands was expected to be linked to lower life satisfaction irrespective of employment status. Positive main effects as well as buffering effects of engagement and disengagement, in contrast, were expected to differ depending on the particular employment situation. Multiple linear regressions including main and interaction effects set up as three-group comparison models showed that a high demand load was linked to lower life satisfaction in each of the three groups. Engagement was positively linked to life satisfaction in the case of employment, whereas in the transient stage of short-term unemployment, disengagement strengthened the negative link between demand load and life satisfaction. In the case of long-term unemployment, both modes of dealing with demands were positively related to life satisfaction. The positive effect of engagement, however, diminished as perceived demands increased, indicating that "over-engagement" may be counterproductive when faced with a high demand load. Consequences of our findings for potential interventions among unemployed people are discussed.

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Introduction

Ongoing social, economic, political, and technological developments not only change the characteristics of societies, but also affect individuals' lives by altering their proximal living conditions (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Elder, 1974). Research on the psychological consequences of social change point to the fact that such macro-contextual changes affect people's everyday lives in the form of demands that represent new situational challenges they have to deal with (Pinquart & Silbereisen, 2004). One life domain that has undergone profound changes in this regard is that of work. Compared to the 1960s and 1970s, people have been increasingly confronted with unstable and unpredictable employment conditions (Kalleberg, 2009) that may cause uncertainty concerning current employment and career prospects (e.g., Sverke & Hellgren, 2002).

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This situation can be found in Germany where, although the job market has improved recently, an atmosphere of uncertainty prevails, for example, due to increases in so-called precarious jobs. Between 1998 and 2005, the rate of permanent full-time employment sank from 73 to 66%, while part-time work, fixed-term contracts, marginal employment, and temporary work increased from 16 to 22% in the same period (Statistisches Bundesamt [Federal Statistical Office], 2009). In addition, employment opportunities for unskilled workers have decreased steadily over recent decades (Schmid, 1998). It is not only the increase in precarious jobs, but also peoples' growing experience of unemployment that contributes to such uncertainty. Research has shown that of West Germans born in 1960/61, 48% of males and 54% of females have experienced at least one spell of unemployment between ages 25 to 43 (Möller & Schmillen, 2008). For their predecessors born in 1950/51 the rates were only 28% for both sexes. This increase in unemployment experience also means that most people know someone in their family or neighborhood that has been or still is looking for a job. This applies even more to the former East Germany where unemployment hit large parts of the population, even if only temporarily, in the course of economic restructuring following unification (Reitzle & Vondracek, 2000). However, it is not only the current labor force that is facing high levels of uncertainty, but also young people at the threshold of entering the labor market. They face more disrupted and uncertain entry into the world of work than earlier cohorts (Blossfeld, Buchholz, Bukodi, & Kurz, 2008).

Actual unemployment, as well as unemployment fears and feelings of uncertainty regarding career prospects, can have considerable psychological effects. The psychological impact of unemployment has been thoroughly studied since Marie Jahoda's seminal study on the residents of Marienthal, an Austrian village where the majority of the inhabitants became jobless after the closure of the town's textile industry in the early 1930s (Jahoda, Lazarsfeld, & Zeisel, 1971). A recent meta-analysis (Paul & Moser, 2009) found that rates of psychological problems were almost twice as high among unemployed compared to employed people. For example, unemployed persons show more psychosomatic symptoms and anxiety, higher rates of depression as well as lower levels of life satisfaction and self-esteem (McKee-Ryan, Song, Wanberg, & Kinicki, 2005). Likewise, perceived job insecurity is increasingly shown to have similar aversive psychological effects (e.g., De Witte, 2005; Sverke & Hellgren, 2002).

In sum, both unemployed and employed people may experience the effect of social change in terms of various subjectively perceived demands with regard to work. These demands include the fear of being laid off, anticipated or experienced difficulties in finding a new and/or an appropriate job, requirements to keep up with technological developments, and a lack of security in career planning. As already mentioned, various demands may apply similarly to those employed and unemployed; for the former in the shape of concerns, for the latter in the shape of experiences. The more pronounced the perceived demands, the more severe the psychological strain reducing individuals' psychological well-being. The first goal of the present study, therefore, was to relate perceived work-related demands among currently employed, short-term unemployed, and long-term unemployed people to their psychological well-being operationalized as general life satisfaction.

However, this connection is more complex. How severely these demands affect individual's well-being depends on how they deal with them. With regard to efforts in dealing with demands, we refer to the life-span theory of control (Heckhausen & Schulz, 1995; Heckhausen, Wrosch, & Schulz, 2010). Within this framework, processes of adaptation to external demands via different strategies to gain control over the environment are differentiated into engagement and disengagement strategies (Poulin, Haase, & Heckhausen, 2005). Engagement strategies are where demands are dealt with actively by mobilizing personal as well as external resources (e.g., putting effort into a task, seeking social support). Another aspect of engagement consists of cognitive strategies serving to maintain and expand motivational commitment (e.g., anticipation of positive consequences). Disengagement strategies aim at protecting one's self against the negative consequences of failure (e.g., distancing oneself from former goals, blaming failure on external circumstances). In its ultimate form, disengagement implies quitting commitment to a task and discarding apparently unattainable goals. Looking at the entire process of dealing with work-related demands, job loss and long lasting unemployment, however, engagement and disengagement are by no means mutually exclusive and may occur simultaneously in many instances (Latack, Kinicki, & Prussia, 1995; Lin & Leung, 2010). Depending on the particular situation or stage within the process of demand-solving, engagement or disengagement components may prevail. In frustrating situations, distancing from unattainable goals, looking for excuses, and refraining from self-blame may become imperative. If concrete activities are thought to lead to success, then expending effort, mobilizing resources, and utilizing cognitive strategies of self-encouragement, such as calculating the positive effects of one's efforts, will prevail.

Dealing actively with strains has been found largely to relate to better psychological well-being and mental health (e.g., Clarke, 2006; Duangdao & Roesch, 2008; Littleton, Horsley, John, & Nelson, 2007; Moskowitz, Hult, Bussolari, & Acree, 2009). Over and beyond this beneficial main effect of active dealing, there is also evidence for a buffering effect. This means that the propensity to approach the problem or stressor actively may attenuate or even neutralize the negative effects of stressors on well-being (e.g., Parkes, 1990; Wrosch, Schulz, & Heckhausen, 2002). This may work as long as people have some confidence that their active efforts will yield the desired results. If, however, experience persistently counteracts this confidence, resources for active modes of action may be exhausted over time (Greenwald, 1991) and leaving people feeling helpless (Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978). This line of reasoning has already been applied to the effects of enduring unemployment in Latack et al. (1995) integrative process model of coping with job loss.

In short, in extremely frustrating situations, focusing on one's emotional balance in terms of distracting oneself from the stressful events and disengaging from apparently fruitless activities may be as healthy as engaging in an active search for a solution (e.g., Brandtstädter & Renner, 1990; Carver & Scheier, 1990; Wrosch, Scheier, Miller, Schulz, & Carver, 2003). Following this notion of situation-specific effects of different strategies of dealing with demands (Tomasik, Silbereisen, & Heckhausen, 2010), the second goal of the study was to test the connection between such strategies and psychological well-being separately for employed, short-term unemployed, and long-term-unemployed people. With regard to these differential effects, we were first interested in the

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