



## Goal engagement in coping with occupational uncertainty predicts favorable career-related outcomes



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### ABSTRACT

We investigated whether goal engagement and disengagement in coping with occupational uncertainty (e.g., perceptions of growing difficulties in career planning and lacking job opportunities) predicts three objective career-related outcomes: job loss, job finding, and income change. We also tested for the buffering effects of these coping strategies on the association between objectively unfavorable labor market conditions (as indicated by regional unemployment rates) and these outcomes. We used four-wave survey data from a longitudinal sample of 620 German adults aged 16–43 years at the first wave and analyzed changes in the three career-related outcomes across 1294 pairs of successive annual waves. Analyses revealed that goal engagement predicted a higher chance of job finding over one year. Moreover, goal engagement buffered the association between higher regional unemployment rates and a higher likelihood of job loss, as well as a lower income, over one year. Goal disengagement predicted a lower income but had no other statistically significant effects. Thus, even in a relatively highly regulated labor market like the German one, goal engagement in coping with occupational uncertainty can contribute to objective career success.

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Uncertain employment conditions and career prospects are widespread in today's societies. Unstable and increasingly deregulated labor markets increase workers' risks of job loss, underemployment, and financial difficulties (Hofäcker, Buchholz, & Blossfeld, 2010; Kalleberg, 2011). In Germany, where we conducted this study, strong employment and unemployment protection used to be standard. Over the past decades, however, policy makers have fostered the creation of part-time, fixed-term, and low-paid jobs. Moreover, labor flexibility (e.g., in wages and working hours) has increased in the core labor force (Buchholz & Kurz, 2008). Despite improvements since 2005, problematic labor market conditions persist in some regions (Bundesagentur für Arbeit, 2014).

Perceived uncertainty in employment conditions and career prospects is typically stressful and elicits coping responses. Evidence from research on constructs such as occupational uncertainty (Silbereisen, Pinguart, & Tomasik, 2010), employment uncertainty (Mantler, Matejcek, Matheson, & Anisman, 2005), and job insecurity (Sverke & Hellgren, 2002) suggests that individual strategies of coping influence subjective well-being and may buffer or exacerbate the negative impact of such stressors thereon. However, coping strategies that enhance subjective well-being do not necessarily improve one's objective situation (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). An important question is, thus, whether coping efforts also matter for objective career-related outcomes. In the present study, using a follow-up design with two measurement points, we investigated whether strategies of coping with occupational uncertainty (e.g., perceptions of growing difficulties in career planning and lacking job opportunities; Tomasik & Silbereisen, 2009) predict

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three such outcomes: job loss, job finding, and income change. Moreover, we investigated whether coping strategies buffer the adverse effects of objectively unfavorable labor market conditions, as measured by regional unemployment rates, on these outcomes.

## 1. Coping with occupational uncertainty and psychosocial adjustment

One's ability to cope effectively with a variety of work-related challenges lies at the core of career adaptability (Savickas, 1997). Coping comprises conscious and voluntary responses to avoid threats, harm, or loss and to reduce distress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Researchers commonly distinguish between problem- and emotion-focused coping (dealing with the stressor vs. attempting to reduce distress; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) and between engagement and disengagement coping (approaching vs. avoiding the stressor and related emotions; Roth & Cohen, 1986). A concept closely related to coping is developmental regulation, which describes striving for important developmental goals, such as career-related goals, in the face of societal or biological constraints (Brandtstädter & Rothermund, 2002; Heckhausen, Wrosch, & Schulz, 2010). For example, the motivational theory of life-span development (Heckhausen et al., 2010) distinguishes between goal engagement (i.e., investing resources in goal attainment) and goal disengagement (i.e., abandoning unattainable goals and shifting priorities) modes of developmental regulation.

Coping efforts may influence psychosocial adjustment in different ways. Coping strategies can be universally beneficial to adjustment regardless of the severity or kind of a stressor (i.e., main effects), or their effectiveness can depend on the controllability of the stressor and on the available resources (i.e., interactive effects; Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004; Zeidner & Saklofske, 1996). Problem-focused coping, for example, is more appropriate when the stressors are controllable, whereas emotion-focused coping works better with uncontrollable stressors (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Similarly, the motivational theory of life-span development posits that the adaptiveness of goal engagement and disengagement depends on the opportunities for goal attainment (Heckhausen et al., 2010). Another way that coping strategies may interact with stressors is to buffer (or exacerbate) the unfavorable effects of stressors on outcomes (Zeidner & Saklofske, 1996).

Previous research on coping with occupational uncertainty conducted in Germany that used subjective well-being as an outcome has found support for both main and buffering effects of coping strategies (Silbereisen et al., 2010). Specifically, goal engagement generally had positive associations with subjective well-being or buffered the negative effects of occupational uncertainty, whereas the opposite was true for goal disengagement (Grüner, Silbereisen, & Heckhausen, 2013; Körner, Reitzle, & Silbereisen, 2012; Pinguart, Silbereisen, & Körner, 2009). However, in economically disadvantaged regions (Pinguart et al., 2009) and when perceived control was low (Grüner et al., 2013), goal engagement had less positive effects. In contrast, disengagement had more favorable associations with subjective well-being under disadvantaged circumstances (Grüner et al., 2013; Körner et al., 2012; Pinguart et al., 2009; Tomasik, Silbereisen, & Heckhausen, 2010).

Research on coping with job insecurity (i.e., perceived risk of losing a job among the employed; Sverke & Hellgren, 2002) and employment uncertainty (i.e., perceived lack of employment opportunities; Mantler et al., 2005) has used predominantly employed samples from various countries (e.g., Canada, Sweden, and Finland) and found both main and interactive effects of coping. The preponderance of evidence has linked problem-focused and engagement strategies to higher subjective well-being (Cheng, Mauno, & Lee, 2014; Mantler et al., 2005; Richter et al., 2013). In contrast, research on coping with job loss using samples of unemployed persons has shown that both problem- and emotion-focused strategies relate to better mental health (for a meta-analysis, see McKee-Ryan, Song, Wanberg, & Kinicki, 2005). Again, these findings indicate that emotion-focused or disengagement coping can be beneficial for subjective well-being when career opportunities are limited.

## 2. Coping with occupational uncertainty and objective career-related outcomes

Although coping research has traditionally focused on distress reduction as the major outcome of coping efforts, distress reduction is not the sole criterion of coping effectiveness (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). Coping efforts often aim at resolving the source of the distress itself (Zeidner & Saklofske, 1996). Another important criterion is, accordingly, whether coping helps people attain salient goals that are being thwarted by the stressor (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004; Heckhausen et al., 2010). Some coping strategies may not serve both criteria equally well (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004; Shane & Heckhausen, 2012). For example, active attempts to change the objective situation may achieve better career-related outcomes, but they also may be stressful. In contrast, distancing from the stressor and employing self-protective cognitions may enhance subjective well-being under unfavorable conditions for career goal pursuit (Tomasik, Silbereisen, & Heckhausen, 2010), but such strategies are unlikely to improve objective career-related outcomes (Cheng et al., 2014).

Research on developmental regulation in the work domain has found that goal engagement predicted more hours of gainful employment among American high school graduates (Shane, Heckhausen, Lessard, Chen, & Greenberger, 2012), higher chances of obtaining an apprenticeship in German middle school graduates (Haase, Heckhausen, & Köller, 2008), and better course grades among American university students (Hamm et al., 2013). Moreover, findings from one study supported the idea that some coping strategies may facilitate one outcome but have undesirable effects on another (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). Specifically, Shane and Heckhausen (2012) reported that, among U.S. middle-aged adults who scored low on perceived work-related control, goal engagement predicted marginally higher occupational attainment over eight years. However, in the same group, goal engagement had negative effects on more subjective outcomes, such as the perceived impact of work on health.

In turn, research on coping with job loss has found that active, problem-focused strategies are usually associated with a higher likelihood of reemployment (Gowan, 2014). Problem-focused coping also predicted intensity of job search in displaced workers (Chen & Lim, 2012). Further, in a study of layoff survivors who experienced job insecurity, control coping (akin to engagement) was associated

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