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Are affect and perceived stress detrimental or beneficial to job seekers? The role of learning goal orientation in job search self-regulation

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ABSTRACT

Although job seekers have variability in affect and perceived stress during their job search, little is known about whether and how such within-person variability is related to job search intensity. We integrated learning goal orientation (LGO) with control theory to theorize that affect and perceived stress provide signals about job search progress that are interpreted differently depending on job seekers' LGO. Specifically, higher LGO would lead to more adaptive responses to increased affect and perceived stress. Results from job seekers with 4 waves of panel data supported our hypotheses. For job seekers higher in LGO, perceived stress was more strongly positively related to subsequent job search intensity than for job seekers lower in LGO. Additionally, job seekers higher in LGO maintained their job search intensity following increased positive affect, whereas those lower in LGO decreased it. Such results suggest control theory can be extended by including between-subjects differences in LGO.

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As job seekers attempt to find a job, they experience variability in their emotions, stress, and job search intensity. As such, the job search is a self-regulated learning process during which individuals need to manage their emotions and stress to maintain or even increase their job search intensity in order to find a job (Creed, King, Good, & McKenzie, 2009; Kanfer, Wanberg, & Kantrowitz, 2001; Turban, Stevens, & Lee, 2009). Because job search intensity is an important predictor of job search success, understanding influences on job search intensity is a critical research area (Kanfer et al., 2001). To date, however, there is still little understanding of whether or how changes in affect and stress are related to job search intensity. We attempt to provide insight into the relationships of affect and stress with job search intensity by examining whether and how between-subjects differences in learning goal orientation (LGO) moderate how affect and perceived stress are related to job search intensity. We theorize that job seekers higher in LGO, who have a focus on learning the skills associated with a job search, have a more adaptive response to changes in affect and stress than do job seekers lower in LGO (Cron, Slocum, VandeWalle, & Fu, 2005; Dweck, 1986; Dweck and Leggett, 1998).

Because the job search is an unstructured, goal-oriented process, scholars have utilized self-regulation theories to understand

it (Kanfer et al., 2001; Wanberg, Zhu, & Van Hooft, 2010). Although there are differences across theories, in general, they propose that how individuals regulate their emotions and effort during a goal-directed activity, such as a job search, influences their success (Bandura, 1986, 1991; Carver & Scheier, 1981, 1990; Kanfer et al., 2001). Because affect and stress vary within individuals across time, to understand how such variability is related to outcomes, researchers need to collect data from respondents at multiple points in time (Beal, Weiss, Barros, & McDermid, 2005; Lord, Diefendorff, Schmidt, & Hall, 2010; Sun, Song, & Kim, 2013). We examine whether intra-individual variability in affect and perceived stress is related to job search intensity. However, individual differences can influence how job seekers react to changes in affect and perceived stress during the job search (Carver & Scheier, 2012; Wanberg et al., 2010). For example, given the same variability in affect and perceived stress, some individuals increase whereas others maintain or decrease their intensity, although little is known about whether or how such between-subjects differences moderate these intra-individual relationships (Carver & Scheier, 2012). We extend prior research by theorizing that individual differences in learning goal orientation, which influences how individuals experience and react to situations (Dweck, 1986; Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Payne, Youngcourt, & Beaubien, 2007), moderate the relationships of affect and perceived stress with job search intensity.

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Our study makes the following contributions to the literature. Although scholars have proposed that changes in affect and perceived stress should be related to job search intensity, results to date have been inconclusive (Song, Uy, Zhang, & Shi, 2009; Wanberg et al., 2010). Our study addresses calls to investigate why some people increase their effort whereas others decrease their effort, given the same level of changes in affect or perceived stress (Carver & Scheier, 2012). Specifically, we theorize that between-subjects differences in learning goal orientation moderate the within-subject relationships of affect and stress with job search intensity. To the best of our knowledge, our study is the first to examine how LGO influences within-subject self-regulation processes, and thus we provide insight into why learning goal orientation is beneficial during the job search (Noordzij, Van Hooft, Mierlo, Van Dam, & Born, 2013). In terms of practical implications, given our focus on job search intensity, we expect our results will provide recommendations for job seekers and career counselors. More broadly, we expect our results will inform self-regulated, goal-directed behaviors in other settings in which individuals need to learn how to accomplish tasks in an autonomous and unstructured manner.

Job search as a self-regulated learning process

There are at least three types of job seekers: new labor market entrants, job losers, and employed job seekers (Boswell, Zimmerman, & Swider, 2012). Although the job search is a learning process for all job seekers, learning may be particularly important for new labor market entrants, the focus of our study, who are looking for their first full-time job and thus need to learn how to navigate an unstructured process such as job seeking (Barber, Daly, Giannantonio, & Phillips, 1994; Noordzij et al., 2013; Turban et al., 2009; Van Hooft & Noordzij, 2009). In particular, new labor market entrants need to learn how to maintain (or increase) job search intensity as they navigate the emotional ups and downs of the job search (Wanberg et al., 2010).

We examine influences on job search intensity (sometimes called job search behavior as the measure captures the intensity of job search behaviors), which is perhaps the most important predictor of job search success and thus an outcome of interest to job search scholars (Crossley & Stanton, 2005; Côté, Saks, & Zikic, 2006; Kanfer et al., 2001; Wanberg, Zhu, Kanfer, & Zhang, 2012). Studies that tracked job seekers over time found that job search intensity varies within-individuals during the job search process (Song et al., 2009; Sun et al., 2013; Wanberg, Glomb, Song, & Sorensen, 2005; Wanberg et al., 2012). Conceptually, at any one point in time, job search intensity is influenced by both stable and transient factors (Beal et al., 2005). Over time, however, changes in job search intensity will be influenced only by changes in transient factors, such as affect and perceived stress, which are the focus of our study. Thus, to understand the relationship of changes in affect and stress with job search intensity, the researcher must understand the time period during which these relationships occur (Beal et al., 2005). More broadly, choosing an appropriate time frame between measures is important for all longitudinal research that tracks individuals over time.

To understand how changes in affective experiences can influence performance, Beal et al. (2005) described *performance episodes*, which are behavioral segments organized around a relevant goal or objective. As noted by Beal et al. (2005), understanding performance episodes can help researchers determine the appropriate time frame for longitudinal research. Although all performance episodes are time-bound, if the goal is still relevant and active, the performance episode will remain active even when it is not a continuous focus of attention. Additionally, because individuals concurrently have multiple goals, attention

can shift from one goal to another during an extended time period. In our context, finding an acceptable job is the goal and job search intensity is the performance episode. We examined new labor market entrants, who were full-time students, during a three-month period by collecting data every two weeks. Although finding a job is a relevant goal for the participants, consistent with prior research (Sun et al., 2013), we did not expect they would engage in job search activities daily, given their other goals and contextual constraints (such as recruitment schedules).

Affect, perceived stress, and job search intensity

As noted by scholars, the link between affect and effort is not clear (Foo, Uy, & Baron, 2009). Although self-regulatory theories predict that affect and perceived stress are related to effort, social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1991) and control theory (Carver & Scheier, 1981; Carver & Scheier, 1990) make opposite predictions (Wanberg et al., 2010). In general, social cognitive theory proposes that positive affect is a signal of success which is reinforcing and leads to increased effort, whereas negative affect is demotivating and leads to less effort (Bandura, 1986; Bandura, 1991). In contrast, the affect-as-information model of control theory (Carver & Scheier, 1990; Schwarz & Clore, 1983; Schwarz & Clore, 2003) proposes that affect provides an internal signal about progress toward goal accomplishment that influences subsequent effort. Similarly, the mood-as-input model theorizes that moods provide people with information (e.g., George & Zhou, 2002; Martin, Ward, Achee, & Wyer, 1993). In particular, negative affect and perceived stress are seen as signals that one is not making sufficient progress toward goal accomplishment and thus indicates a need for more intensity. Positive affect indicates that one is making sufficient progress toward the goal and that effort can be either maintained or reduced, depending upon the importance of other goals.

The few studies that collected data from job seekers multiple times during the job search provided mixed support for control theory predictions about whether affect and stress are related to job search intensity. In a daily diary study, Wanberg et al. (2010) indicated that their results were more supportive of control theory predictions than of social cognitive theory predictions, as increased perceived progress was negatively related to subsequent effort. Notably, however, neither positive nor negative affect was related to job search effort the following day. Nonetheless, in another daily diary study, Song et al. (2009) found that when job seekers experienced increased distress they exerted more job search effort the following day, in support of control theory predictions. More broadly, in a study examining entrepreneurs, increased negative affect was positively related to subsequent effort on tasks that required immediate attention (Foo et al., 2009). Thus, although there is some support for control theory predictions, evidence is mixed concerning whether and how within-subject differences in affect and perceived stress are related to job search intensity; Wanberg et al. (2010) found no relationship between affect and subsequent job search effort, whereas Song et al. (2009) found a positive relationship between distress and subsequent effort.

Carver and Scheier (2012) argued that individual differences influence how individuals react to affect or perceived stress, and we believe such between-subjects differences may explain the mixed findings from prior research. Indeed, Wanberg et al. (2010) found that job seekers' self-regulatory approach (action vs. state orientation) moderated the relationship of positive affect with subsequent effort. Specifically, when job seekers experienced lower positive affect, individuals who were higher in the ability to detach from thoughts that might interfere with goal persistence (high ACS disengagement) exerted more effort compared to those lower in disengagement. We extend their study by examining the moderating role of learning goal orientation and by using a

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