



# Protean career attitudes during unemployment and reemployment: A longitudinal perspective

Lea Waters<sup>a,\*</sup>, Jon P. Briscoe<sup>b</sup>, Douglas T. Hall<sup>c</sup>, Lan Wang<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Melbourne Graduate School of Education, The University of Melbourne, 100 Leicester street, Parkville, Victoria 3101, Australia

<sup>b</sup> Department of Management, Barsema Hall, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, IL 60115-2897, USA

<sup>c</sup> Boston University School of Management, Boston University, Boston, MA 02215, USA

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## ABSTRACT

This 3-wave, 12-month longitudinal study investigated how protean career orientation (PCO) influences unemployed people's self-esteem, job search activity, employment perceived job improvement and perceived career growth over time. Panel data analysis with a sample of 186 people revealed that PCO was significantly associated with increased self-esteem, job search activity and reemployment. The effect of self-esteem on job search activity was mediated by PCO. PCO was significantly associated with job improvement and career growth once reemployed and the relationship between PCO and career growth was mediated by job improvement. PCO declined once participants become reemployed. Implications for how career counselors can develop career transitions programs that facilitate a PCO are presented.

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## 1. Introduction

The global financial crisis caused a rise in unemployment in many countries across the world (International Labour Organization, 2013). According to Wanberg, Basbug, Van Hooff, and Samtani (2012) "Unemployment rates are at the highest levels observed since the Great Depression, creating a competitive and challenging situation for unemployed job seekers" (p. 887). In the face of tumultuous employment conditions, the stance that people take towards their career and the ways that this influences job search and career outcomes during unemployment is highly salient.

The last two decades of career research have shown that contemporary careers require approaches that are adaptive, proactive and self-managed in order to cope with the increased uncertainty, mobility and boundarylessness of work (Blustein, 2006; Gubler, Arnold, & Coombs, 2013). This agentic approach is typified in the protean career orientation (PCO) which is defined as the extent to which an individual manages his or her career in a proactive, self-directed way driven by personal values and subjective success criteria (DiRenzo & Greenhaus, 2011; Hall, 1996). According to Hall (2002) a protean career orientation motivates people to adapt to changing environments and to assign responsibility for a career to oneself rather than an employing organization.

Hall (2004) suggests that a protean career orientation is associated with personal qualities such as pro-activity, openness to change, optimism, and adaptability. Briscoe, Hall, and Frautschy DeMuth (2006) argue that the two most important features of a protean career orientation are being self-directed and being values-driven. Self-direction expresses the degree to which an individual takes control of, and is in charge of, his/her own career (Mirvis & Hall, 1994). The protean notion of self-direction is highly salient during the experience of unemployment, given that people can no longer rely on the organization to guide their careers, thus making the need for self-direction essential. The second key characteristic of a protean career orientation is that of being values-driven. Being values-driven makes career decisions closely aligned with one's own personal values, rather than

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [lwaters@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:lwaters@unimelb.edu.au) (L. Waters).

being driven by objective rewards or the values of others (Briscoe et al., 2006). Although values themselves are seen as enduring beliefs (Rokeach, 1973) research has shown that the degree to which we choose to express our values through our words, actions and behaviors can alter over time and situation (Katz & Kahn, 1978). According to Briscoe et al. (2006), people who hold a protean career orientation are highly values-driven and, thus, choose to actively reveal and express their values through their actions and career choices.

Briscoe and Hall (2006) submit that one who is *both* self-directed and values-driven is most fully protean. This contention is also supported by empirical research which shows that the combined factors correlate more strongly with coping and career change/adaptability than either self-direction or values-driven attitudes alone (Briscoe, Hoobler, & Byle, 2010; Judge, Thoresen, Pucik, & Welbourne, 1999). Given the relevance of both facets of the protean career orientation to unemployment/career change, we adopt PCO as the combination of being both self-directed and values driven with respect to one's career.

Empirical research has shown that PCO is significantly related to subjective career outcomes such as perceptions of career success, career satisfaction and job satisfaction (Baruch & Quick, 2007; Gasteiger, 2007; Jung & Takeuchi, 2011; Volmer & Spurk, 2010). PCO is also significantly related to objective career outcomes such as hierarchical position, number of promotions, budget responsibility, number of subordinates and salary, although the later finding has been inconsistent (Baruch, Wordsworth, Wright, & Mills, 2012; Gasteiger, 2007; Jung & Takeuchi, 2011; Volmer & Spurk, 2010).

The evidence above shows that managing one's career via a protean orientation can reap numerous benefits. However, to date the majority of the samples tested have either been employed (typically in professional roles) or studying at university (Baruch & Quick, 2007; Baruch et al., 2012; De Vos & Soens, 2008; Enache, González, Castillo, & Lordan, 2012) with Bridgstock's (2007) study using a sample of artists as a notable exception. As such, these samples still operate within the support structures of an organization, and even for people who hold a strong protean orientation, they have institutional resources, norms and networks which provide the foundation within which to be self-directed and values-driven. The employed samples also have an income stream to use as a resource for their autonomous choices.

We wondered if the benefits of PCO still operate for people who are not employed and not earning an income. Gubler et al. (2013) state that PCO supports individuals in dealing with career transitions. Unemployment is arguably one of the most extreme career transitions that an individual can go through (Waters & Moore, 2001). By studying PCO in an unemployed sample we can ask new questions about the construct of PCO such as: Do the effects of being protean have a weaker or stronger impact when organizational forms of assistance and resources are no longer available and people must rely more on their inner resources and meta-competencies to navigate their career? Does the capacity to be protean become more or less necessary when one is 'between jobs'? Do people need money, education, privilege, professional power and so forth to reap the benefits of having a protean orientation? Can people still aim to be self-directed and values-driven even when the environment deprives them of such opportunities and if so, how does this help them?

Whilst the role of protean career orientation has not yet been studied by unemployment researchers, a protean career orientation may be extremely useful during job loss. This is because a protean career orientation may encourage one to view joblessness as a time to re-appraise notions of self and career and, thus, help people to approach unemployment as a career growth opportunity (Eby & Buch, 1995), rather than the more typical experience of seeing unemployment as a career loss (Feather, 2005; Vansteenkiste, Lens, Witte, & Feather, 2005). Furthermore, given the claim by Hall and Mirvis (1996), that an individual must be able and willing to adapt to environments where autonomy, self-direction, and proactive behavior are important, we contend that PCO is particularly salient role during unemployment.

To explore these issues, we created the current longitudinal study, which explores the interrelationships between PCO, self-esteem and job search activity during unemployment, as well as examining the relationship between PCO, reemployment, job improvement and career growth over six month and twelve-month time frames.

### 1.1. The relationship between PCO and self-esteem during unemployment

Self-esteem is the extent to which one values and approves of oneself (Blascovich & Tomaka, 1991). One of the most commonly reported psychological consequences of unemployment is a loss of self-esteem (Kanfer, Wanberg, & Kantrowitz, 2001). PCO may be positively related to self-esteem during unemployment. People who manage their careers from a protean orientation do not tie their career identity to the organization and, thus, a disconnection with the organization via unemployment may be less likely to lead to the identity loss that is typically reported by people during unemployment (Waters & Moore, 2002). Moreover, the need for self-direction becomes essential given that the individual can no longer rely on the organization to guide their career. As such, a protean attitude may help unemployed people to maintain a positive self-esteem. Furthermore, self-direction is likely to be positively associated with self-esteem during unemployment. This argument extends from Fryer (1992) where high levels of agency (or in the protean vernacular, high levels of self-direction) during unemployment will be those who also display positive self-evaluations.

Unemployment research also provides evidence for the link between the values-driven aspect of PCO and self-esteem in that the ability to hold on to one's core identity during unemployment is associated with psychological health (Cassidy, 2001). Katz and Kahn (1978) suggest that expression of values is essential for building and clarifying identity. Hence, expressing personal values during unemployment may be one way to retain a self-identity and self-esteem during unemployment and the protean person is able to express values in non-employment domains.

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