



Stuck in the job: Does helplessness precede being locked-in at the workplace or vice versa? An analysis of cross-lagged effects



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ABSTRACT

In today's rapidly changing and increasingly competitive labour market individuals need to take control over their own career more actively. However, some employees feel that they lack psychological suppositions to get another job, even though they wish to, and as a result feel stuck in a non-preferred workplace (being locked-in). The aim of this study was to investigate how helplessness are related to being locked-in at the workplace over time, since it can be argued that helplessness precedes, is reciprocally related to, or a consequence of being locked-in at the workplace. The sample consisted of 978 Swedish employees with permanent contracts and the data were collected at two time points (2012 and 2016). Results from a cross-lagged SEM analysis showed best fit statistics for a model of reciprocal relationships over time; helplessness associated with subsequent perceptions of being locked-in at the workplace and an association, although less substantial, was found in the reversed direction from locked-in status to helplessness. Results remained unchanged when job change, reorganization, gender, age and education were controlled for, which lends further credibility to the finding. Implications for future research and theory development are outlined in the discussion.

1. Introduction

The labour market is increasingly competitive both for organizations and individuals (Sarchielli, 2017). For many workers, this means more uncertainty and flexible work arrangements, as well as careers consisting of several job changes, implying that individuals more actively need to take control over their own careers (Briscoe, Henagan, Burton, & Murphy, 2012; Kuijpers, Schyns, & Scheerens, 2006; Ng, Eby, Sorensen, & Feldman, 2005). Underlying this change is a fundamental alteration of the psychological contract; organizations no longer offer life-time careers, but opportunities for development (Rousseau, 1995), and gradually more individualized arrangements (Rousseau, 2005). This also develops new norms on the individual side: rather than lifelong commitment (Thijssen, Van der Heijden, & Rocco, 2008), the new deal means commitment until better or more satisfying job opportunities unfold elsewhere. Individuals thus have to (successfully) manage their own career, and this requires considerably different qualities than before (Baruch, 2004). For example, individuals need to be able to discover opportunities, and they need to know how and when it is best to change their situation (Eby, Butts, & Lockwood, 2003; Jones & DeFillippi, 1996; Parker, Bindl, & Strauss, 2010). Whereas many employees seem to navigate such a context successfully, some may feel disoriented and overburdened when more active career choices and strategies are required of them. Also, they may feel there are rarely any

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opportunities out there. In consequence, these individuals may accept or remain in a non-preferred job. Being in a situation characterized by non-preference for one's workplace together with a perception of a scarcity of other job opportunities on the labour market has been referred to as *being locked-in* (Stengård, Bernhard-Oettel, Berntson, Leineweber, & Aronsson, 2016). As such, the concept has two dimensions: non-preference for the current workplace and a feeling that there are few if any other available alternatives.

Several studies have investigated the consequences of being locked-in at the workplace, and have reported associations with impaired well-being (Aronsson, Dallner, & Gustafsson, 2000; Bernhard-Oettel et al., 2013; Furåker, 2010; Stengård et al., 2016) and increased sickness absence (Fahlén et al., 2009). When it comes to determinants of being locked-in at the workplace, however, evidence is scarce. Scholars have discussed some possible reasons for becoming locked-in, for instance situational factors like bad economic climate, both global and local, and working in specific sectors (Furåker, 2010; Furåker, Nergaard, & Saloniemi, 2014). Attention has also been paid to workplace-specific factors like receiving low social support from managers, having high job demands and low control, as well as few possibilities for learning and development at work (Aronsson & Göransson, 1999; Aronsson et al., 2000; Bernhard-Oettel, Stengård, Leineweber, Peristera, & Östergren, 2016). Whether locked-in situations are related to demographic factors, like gender, age, and education level has also been studied, but with inconsistent results (Furåker, 2010; Furåker et al., 2014).

In sum, possible predictors of becoming locked-in at a workplace have been discussed in terms of demographics, the labour market and workplace situation. An important question is whether there are also psychological factors that make some individuals feel that they have ample of career choices, while others in comparable situations feel they lack choices and therefore remain in a non-preferred work situation. One such factor, which is the focus of the present study, is helplessness that we propose may affect people's perception of being stuck in their workplace/organization. As helplessness may be learnt through perceived lack of control over aversive experiences in life (Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978; Maier & Seligman, 1976), a reversed mechanism is also possible, in other words work life experiences (such as becoming locked-in) may shape or add to perceptions of helplessness over time (King, 2004). Thus, it is possible that both links exist over time meaning that the relationship between helplessness and being locked-in might be reciprocal.

Accordingly, the aim of this study is to investigate if there are lagged and reciprocal effects between helplessness and being locked-in employing a cross-lagged panel data design.

1.1. *Being locked-in: feeling low preference for one's workplace*

In the end of 1990s, Aronsson and Göransson (1999) acknowledged that a substantial share of the Swedish workforce was not working in their preferred job. Aronsson and colleagues developed the concepts of *being locked-in*, which referred to individuals who are either not in a workplace/organization (*workplace locked-in*), or in an occupation (*occupation locked-in*), or in neither of them (*double locked-in*) that they preferred (Aronsson et al., 2000). In this regard, being locked-in could be viewed in the light of the person-environment-fit theory (Edwards, 2008), and being locked-in may thus reflect a misfit between the employee and the job, as being locked-in means being in a non-preferred job. For some individuals such a misfit might already be present from start, e.g., taking on a job offer simply because other opportunities are lacking. For others, a preferred workplace might over time turn into a non-preferred one due to changes in the workplace, e.g., re-organizations. A misfit could also emerge due to modified career aspirations, changing life circumstances that influence career goals (e.g., changed family situation) or altered physical and/or psychological capabilities limiting an individual's ability to perform their usual work tasks.

In this study we will devote our attention to the workplace locked-in phenomenon. According to Aronsson and colleagues' conceptualization of being locked-in, approximately every sixth gainfully employed person in Sweden could be categorized as being locked-in at their workplace (Furåker, 2010). However, since this conceptualization only captures a non-preference for one's current workplace and not really the lack of career prospects that should be inherited in the concept of being locked-in, we will follow the example of more recent studies (Fahlén et al., 2009; Stengård et al., 2016) that have developed the construct further to include the dimension of perceived employability.

1.2. *Being locked-in: adding perceptions of low employability*

Employability reflects individuals' possibilities of getting new employment if needed. While the actual employability of an individual, that is his/her objective chances of attaining an employment on the labour market, is put to the test when the person is searching for a new job, perceived employability is ever present regardless of whether the individual is looking for a job or not (Berntson, Sverke, & Marklund, 2006). In this regard, perceived employability pertains to the individual's felt prospects of attaining an at least equally good job elsewhere (Berntson & Marklund, 2007; Forrier & Sels, 2003).

Perceived employability has in previous research been shown to relate to well-being (Berntson & Marklund, 2007; De Cuyper, Mäkikangas, Kinnunen, Mauno, & De Witte, 2012; Kirves, Kinnunen, De Cuyper & Makikangas, 2014). A potential explanation for this link could be that perceived employability gives a feeling of control over the work situation, meaning that the individual is better equipped to cope with workplace-related adversity and strain (Berntson & Marklund, 2007) as well as being the key to be able to leave a job situation that unfolds in a dissatisfying way. Situational factors, like economic climate and local labour market situation (Berntson et al., 2006; Kirschenbaum & Mano-Negrin, 1999), as well as personal resources, like occupation, education level (Berntson, Näswall and Sverke, 2008; Berntson et al., 2006; Wittekind, Raeder, & Grote, 2010), and social networks (Eby et al., 2003), have been investigated and found to affect perceived employability.

Perceived employability should be a vital part of the locked-in concept, since workplace non-preference does not take into

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