

Perceived barriers to employment for older displaced workers

Abstract

This study attempted to determine if age was perceived as a barrier to employment for unemployed individuals above 40 years of age. The social cognitive career theory formed the foundation of this study. Job search self-efficacy was measured in 116 unemployed individuals in three states. An independent samples *t* test was calculated to compare the mean job search self-efficacy scores of the participants above the age of 40 to the scores of the younger participants. No significant difference was found ($t(114) = 1.05, p > .05$). Linear regression analysis computed a regression equation that was not significant ($F(1,114) = 1.47, p > .05$) with a R^2 of .012. For the participants of this study, age and job search self-efficacy were not correlated.

Keywords: unemployment, job search self-efficacy, age, barriers to employment

Introduction

The Great Recession that began in 2008 affected workers of all ages. Both younger and older workers had difficulty finding re-employment after a layoff. For 2012, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statics reported an overall unemployment rate or 5% for older workers, those between 40 and 64 years of age. This compared to a rate of 6.6% for workers between 18 and 39 years of age. While the labor participation rate decreased for most age categories, the labor participation rate for persons aged 55 or older increased by 6% from 2002 to 2012 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013a). Still, the unemployment rate for older workers increased by nearly 200% from 2008 to 2011 (Fogg, Harrington & McMahon, 2012).

Despite the seemingly encouraging unemployment and labor participation rates, both popular and scholarly literature are replete with references to older workers often having difficulty becoming re-employed after a layoff. Some researchers have reported workers over the age of 50 have lower re-employment rates than their younger counterparts and are unlikely to ever find re-employment in a position with pay equitable to their previous job (Rodriguez & Zavadony, 2000). Even under good economic conditions, older workers have difficulty becoming re-employed after a job loss (Mendenhall, Kalil, Spindel & Hart, 2008).

Unemployment is a traumatic life event at any age (Guindon, 2002). Guindon concluded unemployment can have ill effects on the overall psychological health of the individual. In addition, Bandura (1997) argued: “The inability to influence events and social conditions that significantly affect one’s life can give rise to feelings of futility and despondency as well as anxiety” (p. 153).

The concept of self-efficacy, a person’s judgments of his or her own capabilities, was popularized by Bandura’s (1986) *Social-Cognitive Theory*. Self-efficacy is an assessment of what an individual believes he or she is capable of accomplishing (Creed, Lehmann, & Hood, 2009). An individual’s self-efficacy determines resiliency in times of adversity and failure (Bandura, 1997).

Numerous studies have reported a negative correlation between unemployment and self-efficacy (Albion, M. J., Fernie, K. M., & Burton, L. J., 2005; Creed, Bloxsome, & Johnston, 2001; Eden & Aviram, 1993; Epel, Bandura, & Zimbardo, 1999; Zikick & Saks, 2009). Eden and Aviram (1993) for example, reported a strong correlation between unemployment and lowered levels of self-efficacy. This study also concluded self-efficacy was a major motivating factor in seeking new employment. Lowered levels of self-efficacy trapped some of the participants in a “vicious cycle of job loss, which causes a loss of self-esteem and self-efficacy, which in turn causes a lack of effort to find a job” (p. 353). Garrett-Peters (2009) also concluded losing a job damaged the displaced worker’s self-efficacy by eliminating the identity that comes from an occupation.

The social cognitive career theory (SCCT) developed by Lent, Brown, and Hackett (2002) postulated individual career behaviors and choices are regulated by three primary variables self-efficacy, expected outcomes, and personal goals. These primary constructs of SCCT build on Bandura’s (1997) triadic reciprocal model of causality. According to Bandura’s (1997) model, a person’s actions and efficacy beliefs are influenced by, “cognitive and other personal factors, behavior, and other environmental

events” (p. 154). Each of these three factors influence human agency and are each influenced by the other two factors (Bandura, 1997).

The social cognitive career theory posited that self-efficacy is dynamic, rather than fixed, and agreed that self-efficacy beliefs are derived from the four sources identified by Bandura (1997):

1. Personal accomplishments or mastery experiences
2. Vicarious learning
3. Social persuasion
4. Physiological and affective states.

Mastery experiences develop from an individual’s past successes and are the strongest source of beliefs about one’s abilities (Bandura, 1997). Bandura also clarified that mastery experiences can occur even after initial failure as long as the individual eventually succeeds. Successes contribute to higher levels of self-efficacy, and failures can diminish it (Bandura, 1997).

Vicarious experiences occur when an individual watches someone else perform a task (Bandura, 1997). Individuals assess their own abilities by watching and comparing themselves to others and these vicarious experiences form another source of information people use in constructing their own self-efficacy beliefs. Vicarious experiences can also occur from social comparison and the belief that an individual can perform a task better than those in the comparison group will result in higher efficacy values (Bandura, 1997).

Social and verbal persuasion can occur by receiving encouragement from others when struggling with a difficult task (Bandura, 1997). An example could be a coach, trainer, or supervisor encouraging an individual to complete a task. Social and verbal persuasion can bolster self-efficacy beliefs and have an important role in changing those beliefs (Bandura, 1997).

Stress and depression can lead to despondency which can negatively affect self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). Conversely, elation can positively influence an individual’s sense of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997).

Outcome expectations

Lent et al. (2002) identified outcome expectations as the second controlling factor for career choice and behavior within the social cognitive career framework. Unlike self-efficacy, which centers on the beliefs one has about his or her capabilities, outcome expectations are perceptions about the expected consequences of a specific behavior (Dahling, Jason J. & Melloy, Robert, 2013). Outcome expectation beliefs have an instrumental role in the formation of personal agency (Chen, 2006). Lent et al. (2002) also argued that outcome expectations may include considerations of external rewards received for performing a task or behavior or could also include feelings of internal pride resulting from successful task completion. Also, individuals are less likely to pursue activities in which they perceive the outcome to be less than satisfactory (Lent et al., 2002). Like self-efficacy, outcome expectations are developed from a variety of sources including past performance, and the observations and reactions of others in similar situations (Lent et al., 2002).

Personal goals

In discussing the third variable in the social cognitive career theory, Lent et al. (2002) cited Bandura and defined personal goals as “the determination to engage in a particular activity or to effect a particular outcome” (p. 263). Personal goals allow

individuals to organize and direct their career related activities. Personal goals provide a sense of control and in turn influence both self-efficacy and outcome expectations (Lent et al., 2002). Lent et al. (2002) clarified the relationship between self-efficacy, individual outcome expectations and personal goals with the following:

Ability...is seen as affecting performance, directly and indirectly, through its impact on self-efficacy and outcome expectations. Self-efficacy and outcome expectations, in turn affect the level of performance goals that people set for themselves. Stronger self-efficacy beliefs and more favorable outcome expectations promote more ambitious goals, which help people mobilize and sustain their performance behavior (Lent et al., 2002, p. 277).

The social cognitive career theory is grounded in constructivism (Lent et al., 2002). Constructivism posits that an individual's reality is actually constructed by the individual as he or she interprets and attempts to make meaning of reality as they perceive it (Crotty, 1998). In this theoretical framework, each individual's unique experiences help them construct their reality and "each one's way of making sense of the world is as valid and worth of respect as any other" (Crotty, 1998, p. 58). With constructivist epistemological underpinnings, the social cognitive career theory recognizes an individual's actual efficacy may be quite different from his or her perceived efficacy. An individual may be quite capable of performing a specific task, but that individual's perceived efficacy may have suffered damage from a traumatic event like becoming unemployed. As a result, he or she may not even attempt a task that could easily be mastered. Perceived self-efficacy within SCCT is comprised of all three variables: self-efficacy, expected outcomes, and personal goals (Lent et al., 2002).

In reviewing existing scholarly literature concerning age and unemployment, the majority of studies reported a negative relationship between age and self-efficacy in unemployed older adults. One exception was a study by Albion, M. J., Fernie, K. M., and Burton, L. J. (2005). Warr and Jackson (as cited by Albion, et. al, 2006) found age had a moderating effect on the psychological effects of unemployment for younger and older adults, but not middle aged adults. Albion et al. (2005) did not find a significant correlation between age and general self-efficacy, but did identify a relationship between age and proactive attitude. According to Albion, et al. (2005), proactive attitude "facilitates motivation and action, and is expressed through resources, responsibility, values, and vision" (p. 12).

Many older workers perceive that society is biased against them (Shafer & Choppa, 1993). Several myths are pervasive pertaining to older workers which include the belief that older adults are slower learning and performing tasks than their younger co-workers, the assumption that older workers are unable to endure physically exerting tasks, assuming older workers miss work due to illness more often, and the belief older workers have more difficulty embracing change. Although numerous studies have debunked these myths, they still plague older displaced workers (Shafer & Choppa, 1993).

Other researchers have concluded negative self-perceptions and low self-efficacy may lead older workers to self-discrimination as they embrace common societal myths about age (Porcellato, L., Carmichael, F., Hulme, C., Ingham, B., & Prashar, A. 2010). Societal constraints, coupled with fear of failure, have been found to prevent many older

displaced workers from entering re-training programs or even seeking new employment (Porcellato et al., 2010).

The social cognitive career theory has strong implications for the unemployed and its threefold model of career behavior forms the foundation of this study. Perhaps already plagued by lower values of self-efficacy due to their unemployment, older displaced workers may perceive their age as a barrier to re-employment. During difficult economic times especially, unemployed persons may have lower outcome expectations which could negatively affect their setting and achieving personal goals which, in turn, may affect their willingness to participate in job searches and other activities that lead to re-employment.

Researchers have identified a specific self-efficacy related to re-employment, which they have termed job search self-efficacy (Wanberg, C. R., Kanfer, R., & Rotundo, M., 1999). Job search self-efficacy reflects one's feelings toward performing tasks that may lead to re-employment, and it is an "individual's confidence in his or her ability to successfully perform a variety of job-search activities" (Wanberg et al., p. 899). Some of the tasks related to job search self-efficacy included: creating and submitting resumes, inquiring about potential job openings through networking, and participating in job interviews (Wanberg et al., 1999). Lower levels of job search self-efficacy have been shown to prolong unemployment and decrease job search activities and re-employment chances (Caplan, Vinokur, Price, & Van Ryn, 1989; Moynihan, L. M., Roehling, M. V., LePine, M. A., & Boswell, W. R., 2003; Zikic & Saks, 2009). Conversely, higher levels of job search self-efficacy have been shown to increase job search activities and re-employment chances (Zikic & Saks, 2009).

As a component of the social cognitive career theory, outcome expectations may be lower for older displaced workers, individuals above the age of 40, as they perceive, perhaps incorrectly, that re-employment is more difficult for older workers. They may even buy into the commonly held societal myths about older workers. These perceptions may affect their outcome expectations and may cause some to leave the workforce entirely or lower their job search self-efficacy. Older workers may perceive their age as a barrier to employment and, therefore, may have lower levels of job search self-efficacy.

The study conducted by Porcellato et al. (2010) seems to support the social cognitive career theory's stance that outcome expectations control career choice and career behavior. For example, one study participant in this study reported:

I feel very able to do a lot of things, and my husband... We both go out cycling. We both do lots of things and we also know people that are a lot younger than us that are not physically fit...But, an employer won't see that at all (p. 92).

Using SCCT as a theoretical foundation, this study sought to determine if an unemployed individual's age negatively impacted his or her job search self-efficacy. The hypotheses tested in this study were as follows:

H₀ - Unemployed individuals older than 40 do not have lower levels of job search self-efficacy than younger unemployed persons.

H₁ - Unemployed individuals older than 40 have lower levels of job search self-efficacy than younger unemployed persons.

Material and Methods

This quantitative study used a written survey instrument and gathered information from unemployed individuals in State 1, State 2, and State 3. Permission was granted to approach clients at State 3 and State 2 department of labor offices. In State 1, participants were located at a vocational retraining school. The participants of this study ($N = 116$) resided in County, State 3 ($n = 63$), County, State 2 ($n = 30$), and County 1 and County 2 in State 1 ($n = 23$). This study used convenience sampling because it provided easy access to the population, persons receiving unemployment or those unemployed individuals whose benefits had expired. While this method of sampling affected generalizability for the entire population of unemployed persons in the United States, it provided significant information about the researched population (Swanson, 2005). Generalizability is limited to only those unemployed persons in County, State 3, County, State 2, and County 1 and County 2 in State 1.

In State 3, potential participants were approached as they entered the lobby of a State 3 Job Connect office and asked to participate in a survey. In State 2, potential participants were approached on the sidewalk as they entered a State 2 Department of Labor office. In State 1, participants were recruited from students at a vocational training school.

Participants who consented to participate signed an informed consent and acknowledged they were receiving unemployment benefits or had been until they expired. To encourage participation and survey completion, a small incentive of five dollars was given to the participants as they began the survey. This research was self-funded by the primary author.

Qualified and willing participants completed a survey that included demographic information such as age and length of unemployment. The instrument also measured job search self-efficacy. Job search self-efficacy was measured using a six item instrument developed by Caplan et al. (1989) specifically to measure this construct in unemployed individuals. This instrument uses a 5-point Likert response scale with the options not at all, a little, some, pretty much, a great deal. Participants self-reported their perceptions on several job search behaviors including their confidence in their ability to complete a resume or handle themselves in a job interview. The specific statements included in this instrument were:

1. Making a list of all the skills that you have and can be used to find a job.
2. Talking to friends and other contacts to discover potential employers who need your skills.
3. Talking to friends and other contacts to discover promising job openings that are suitable for you.
4. Completing a job application and resume.
5. Contacting and persuading potential employers to consider you for a job.
6. Making the best impression and getting your points across in a job interview.

The maximum possible score on job search self-efficacy was 30. The measure has been reported to have a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .93 (Lee & Vinokur, 2007).

Results

The gender and age distribution of the study participants are displayed in Table 1. A majority (67.24%) of the participants were over 40 years of age ($M = 45.83$). The length of time survey participants had been unemployed ranged from one week to over five years ($M = 11.14$ months). Participants reported holding their most recent position

from one month to 20 years ($M = 40.15$ months). Table 2 displays descriptive statistics computed for job search self-efficacy.

Table 1

Gender and Age Distribution of the Sample (N = 116)

	<i>N</i>	<i>f</i>
Gender		
Male	58	50.00%
Female	58	50.00%
Age		
≤ 30	21	18.10%
31 – 40	17	14.66%
41 – 50	26	22.41%
51 – 65	48	41.38%
≥ 65	4	3.45%

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics: Job Search Efficacy (N = 116)

	Minimum	Maximum	M	Std. Error	Mode	SD
JSSE	12	30	24.33	.410	30	4.402

To test the hypotheses, an independent samples *t* test was calculated comparing the mean job search self-efficacy scores of the participants aged 40 or over to the mean score of participants less than 40 years of age. No significant difference was found ($t(114) = 1.05, p > .05$). The mean job search self-efficacy of older unemployed persons ($m = 24.62, sd = 4.12$) was not significantly different from the mean of the younger unemployed participants ($m = 23.71, sd = 4.97$).

To further test the hypothesis, a simple linear regression was calculated to predict participants job search self-efficacy scores based on their age. The regression computed equation was not significant ($F(1,114) = 1.47, p > .05$) with a R^2 of .012. With this sample, age is not a predictor of job search self-efficacy values.

Discussion

Many previous studies (Porcellato et al., 2010; Rodriguez & Zavadony, 2000; Shafer & Choppa, 1993; Smallen, 1995) seemed to show a strong negative relationship between age and self-efficacy. Some of the cited studies included narratives of older displaced workers who lamented their seeming inability to become re-employed. Some of the individuals stated that searching for jobs seemed futile because of their age (Porcellato et al., 2010). Even Bandura (1997) posited the mid-life years can be affect self-efficacy as individuals see their career opportunities becoming limited.

After analyzing the data from the surveys collected for this study, no significant correlations between age and job search self-efficacy were found. The findings of this analysis contradicted the expected findings. From the data collected in this study, it

would appear that for the participants in this study above the age of forty, age alone does not have a significant effect on their job search self-efficacy.

Many previous studies of older displaced workers have been qualitative. In these studies, the stories and perceptions of individuals, rather than groups, were highlighted. It is certainly likely that age is negatively correlated to self-perceptions in some individuals, but the results of this study do not support the hypothesis that older displaced workers see their age as a barrier to re-employment, at least as reflected in their job search self-efficacy. As many qualitative studies have discussed, some older displaced individuals may indeed perceive their age as a barrier to re-employment, but at least for this sample, those individuals do not appear to be representative of the group overall.

This study highlights the need for additional research in this area. A study with a larger, randomly selected sample could provide additional insight into the attitudes of older displaced workers concerning their ability to become re-employed. This study only surveyed workers still in the workforce. Research into the reasons why older displaced workers chose to withdraw from the workforce would also be very beneficial.

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