

**Job search behaviour amongst the unemployed:  
What incremental value do psychosocial factors have over structural factors?**

***Abstract***

Most research investigating why the unemployed - especially those in societies without state provided unemployment support - give up on finding work is conducted by economists and considers structural barriers, such as distance to economic hubs, quality of education and limited financial means. The removal of such structural barriers is costly and requires long-term and often policy level interventions, such as the provision of government grants. We argue that such research is limited as it cannot account for why some individuals persist in searching for work, despite unfavourable external conditions. Our study thus explored to what extent psychological resources play a role in the structural barrier - job search intensity relationship among unemployed individuals from poor economic backgrounds in South Africa. Two types of job search behaviour were assessed: the intensity with which traditional approaches, such as submitting a CV, were employed, and the intensity with which non-traditional approaches, such as asking potential employers for vacancies, were employed. If it is possible to identify relevant psychological factors, interventions for the unemployed could include the strengthening of such resources, which in turn would be a quicker and more cost-effective way to keep the unemployed engaged in searching for work. To assess the role of psychological variables in the structural barrier-job search intensity relationship, unemployed men and women (N= 141) who resided in low-income communities in Cape Town, South Africa, responded to paper and pencil questionnaires. Regression analysis revealed that of the structural barriers, only (perceived) employability predicts job search intensity. Self-efficacy was found to mediate the relationship between employability and job search intensity, particularly in relation to traditional job search behaviours. Resilience moderates the relationship between job search barriers and job search intensity, particularly for non-traditional job search behaviours. That is, the relationship between job search barriers and non-traditional job search behaviours is negative for individuals with low resilience, whereas the relationship is positive for individuals with high resilience. Social support, however, did not moderate the relationship between search barriers and search intensity. The study thus supported the assumption that psychological variables, i.e. resilience and self-efficacy, should be considered in addition to structural factors in training interventions for the unemployed.

## Introduction

Unemployment is often considered an economic concern due to the ramifications it has for a country's economic performance (Hodge, 2009). Within the field of economics unemployment research is approached from three angles: Its role for the labour market, its relation to poverty and development, and macroeconomic reasons for unemployment (Fourie, 2011). The labour market discourse explores the constraints that prevent people from entering the labour market, while the poverty and development discourse focuses on how impoverishment leads to and sustains unemployment. The macro-economic discourse considers the influence of the broader socio-economic policy environment.

Within the poverty and development framework unemployment is studied in relation to an individual's level of impoverishment and social marginalisation. Bhorat and Cassim (2004) see this approach as crucial: Not only, but *especially* in societies in which the state provides no or inadequate support to the unemployed, unemployment is seen as an intricate sociological phenomenon which largely arises from and in turn reinforces socio-economic deprivation. In South Africa, for example, more than half of the population experienced absolute poverty between 2006 and 2011 (Statistics South Africa, 2014), and poverty impedes access to employment. The high poverty rate is thus paired with a high level of unemployment: In the 4<sup>th</sup> quarter of 2015 the unemployment rate was 24.5% and 58.5% of the overall population participated in the labour force (Statistics South Africa, 2016). The link between poverty and unemployment has to do with structural barriers, such as low employability among the poor who often only have access to low quality education. Other barriers are a lack of social capital, i.e. a limited social network within which employment opportunities could be shared, a lack of financial capital, and geographical distance of the poor from economic hubs, and a lack of internet access (Seekings, 2003). The interaction of these factors gives rise to discouraged workers, i.e. individuals who have resigned to the fact that they will be unable to find employment. Fourie (2011) describes these individuals as the non-searching unemployed.

Characterising groups of unemployed individuals relates to the labour market perspective on employment. Here, access to work is seen as including an element of choice, a choice which is based on the individual's preference for working or not working. The choice not to seek employment could owe to the inclination for leisure, negative employment attitudes, having too high reservation wages, or being on a welfare scheme (Banerjee, Galiani, Levinsohn, McLaren, & Woolard, 2008). In societies in which there is no state support for the unemployed and in which unemployment is more likely caused by and reinforced through poverty it is less likely that individuals would choose unemployment. Kingdon and Knight (2007) argue that if individuals were unemployed by choice, then those who are unemployed, and not searching for

a job, should be just as satisfied as those who are employed. This is not the case. Non-searching unemployed participants in Kingdon and Knight's South African study were more deprived and in a lower state of well-being than even the searching unemployed. The non-searching unemployed were also considerably poorer, had access to even fewer resources, lived in remote communities, and had lower levels of education. This supports the argument that choice may be less relevant than structural barriers in explaining why some unemployed individuals stop their work search.

Yet, structural barriers alone are likely not sufficient to explain the onset of worker discouragement, and resulting low job search intensity. As people differ in their experience of stressors, due to differences in their psychological make-up, not everyone would experience and handle job search constraints in the same way. It may thus be useful to include a psychological lens to gain a more thorough understanding as to why some unemployed individuals become discouraged from searching for work. If it is possible to identify relevant psychological factors, an additional approach to unemployment interventions could be taken; one which seeks to strengthen individuals' psychological resources. This would be more cost effective than the removal of structural barriers as the primary intervention, which would require policy level and thus longterm changes. The research question guiding this research is thus: *What incremental value do psychological factors have over structural barriers in explaining job search behaviour among the unemployed?*

## **Literature Review**

### **Job Search Behaviour**

Job search behaviour is conceptualised as a volitional, self-regulatory process (Van Hooft & Noordzij, 2009). It starts with an intentional phase which consists of identifying a goal (i.e. the kind of job being sought and the search activities needed to execute it) and deciding how much effort it will receive. This is followed by a behavioural phase, which is characterised by the execution of search behaviours, such as finding potential employers, career networking, asking friends and family, developing a CV, conducting internet searches and filling out application forms. The success of one's job search (i.e. finding employment) is determined by a number of factors, including the labour market need, a person's human capital (i.e. job-related knowledge, skills and abilities), their social capital, but also the intensity with which a job is sought (Wanberg, 2012). The likelihood of finding a job exponentially increases when the individual's level of job search intensity is high (Wanberg, Glomg, Song & Sorenson, 2005; Wanberg, Kanfer & Rotundo, 1999).

Structural barriers have been shown to limit a job seeker's search efforts. Franklin (2015), for example, found that providing a transport subsidy significantly improved job search intensity and subsequent employment success within a group of unemployed youths, while job search efforts declined in a control group. This leads to the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 1: There is a negative relationship between job search barriers and job search intensity.*

However, research also indicates that self-efficacy beliefs, resilience and social support may be equally important for individuals to maintain job search behaviours. Their relationship to job search behaviours is outlined in the following sections.

### **Indicators of discouragement: Self-efficacy**

Psychological literature can assist in explaining the psychological processes which create discouraged workers. In psychological literature discouragement is seen to arise out of negative attitudes (such as low self-efficacy) and to cause certain behaviours (such as lower job-search intensity). Authors who have conducted research in the field of discouragement, such as Bowman (1984, 1990), have described the phenomenon as a tripartite attitudinal concept, involving affective, cognitive and behavioural components. A person stops searching for employment (behaviour), due to certain cognitions, or beliefs, such as not having the ability to find a job, i.e. lacking job-search self-efficacy. According to Bandura self-efficacy is the most central component in the exercise of volitional behaviours. He argues that "people's beliefs in their efficacy influence the choices they make, their aspirations, how much effort they mobilise in a given endeavour, how long they persevere in the face of difficulties and setbacks, whether their thought patterns are self-hindering or self-aiding, the amount of stress they experience with taxing environmental demands, and their vulnerability to depression" (Bandura, 1991, p. 257). If individuals have experienced a low success rate in their ability to search for a job and seen that others in their community also failed, job search self-efficacy is likely to be low (Bowman, 1990). This is because individuals need to believe that they are capable of finding work in order to persevere (Saks & Ashforth, 1999; Wanberg, et al 1999, Wanberg, et al, 2005, Zikic & Saks, 2009). Low self-efficacy then results in specific feelings towards the self, such as hopelessness, which further affects individuals' attitudes, i.e. their job search self-efficacy (Heslin, Bell & Fletcher, 2012, Wanberg et al., 1999). Discouragement is thus related to learned helplessness, which develops when a person experiences continuous adversity that seems unchangeable despite all their effort, such as the incessant exposure to employment barriers (Bowman, 1990). A discouraged individual can thus be described as a person who withdraws

from job search behaviours because he or she has lost confidence in the own ability to search for a job (low job search self-efficacy). The second hypothesis was thus postulated as:

*Hypothesis 2: Job search self-efficacy mediates the relationship between job search barriers and job search intensity.*

### **Protective Factors: Resilience and Social Support**

Dass-Brailsford (2005) defines resilience as an adaptive process in situations in which an individual is exposed to chronic stressors. It becomes visible in the presence of two critical conditions: adversity and positive adaptation (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000; Masten, 2011; Ong, et al., 2009). Adversity refers to risks or negative life circumstances that have the potential to disrupt adaptive functioning, while positive adaptation encompasses positive outcomes despite adversity, such as being able to sustain competence under stress or rapid recovery from trauma (Ong et al., 2009). In order for individuals to successfully adapt, they make use of assets, known as protective factors, which include human capital (i.e. internal resources, e.g. temperament or self-regulation skills) and social capital (i.e. the utilisation of social relationships) (Ong et al., 2009; Yates & Masten, 2004).

Resilience in response to poverty as the adverse situation has been shown in a number of studies. Buckner, Mezzacappa, and Beardslee (2003), for example, found that poverty stricken youths who were able to make use of internal resources by enacting attentional control (i.e. shifting their focus away from adversity), and engaging in planning and problem solving were able to adapt positively to stressors. Equally so, Dass-Brailsford (2005) showed that despite poverty-related barriers to education (lack of school resources, transport money, food insecurity, and chronic exposure to violence) South African school pupils were able to excel academically if they showed resilient capabilities as the persistent exposure to stressors had allowed them to develop effective ways of overcoming the adverse experience (Dass-Brailsford, 2005; Luthans, Vogelgesang, & Lester, 2006). Moorhouse and Caltabiano (2007) explored the role of resilience specifically in relation to job search behaviours. They found lower incidences of depression and higher levels of job search behaviour among individuals who had resilient qualities. The authors believe that resilient coping mechanisms, such as self-reliance, perseverance, determination, and resourcefulness result in proactivity amongst the unemployed. This demonstrates that some individuals have the capacity to use psychological strengths to overcome adversity related to enduring forms of stress, such as the exposure to socio-economic barriers. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that resilient qualities could lower the negative relationship between barriers and job search intensity. A third hypothesis has just been formulated as:

*Hypothesis 3: Resilience moderates the relationship between job search barriers and job search intensity, in that the relationship is more negative when resilience is low.*

A meta-analysis by Ong, et al (2009) showed the importance of social capital in building resilience. Ong and Allaire (2005 as cited in Ong, et al, 2009) found that social connectedness, defined as “having quality social ties to others” (p. 1786), moderated the relationship between blood pressure levels and negative emotional arousal following a stressful experience. Individuals with high levels of social connectedness displayed lower blood pressure reactivity on days characterised by high negative emotional arousal than those with low social connectedness. The latter group of individuals found it difficult to control the intensity of negative emotions when they were experienced. Bisconti, Bergeman, and Boker (2006) found that emotional-support-seeking behaviours predicted the emotional recovery of individuals with high levels of social support following bereavement. In another meta-analysis McKee-Ryan, Song, Wanberg, and Kinicki (2005) found that social support predicted the psychological well-being of unemployed individuals. This is because it allowed the individuals to successfully cope with the adversity associated with unemployment. According to Cohen and Wills (1985), social support, as a predictor of psychological well-being, can be conceptualised using two different models. The first model is a main effect model, which characterises social support as having a generalised positive effect on people. This owes to wide social networks being a source of regular positive experiences and interactions, which subsequently provides the individual with consistent positive emotions, predictability and stability in life, as well as the recognition of one’s self-worth. The second social support model is known as the buffering model, where social support is believed to protect individuals from the negative consequences of stressors. Social support is specifically viewed as a source of positive adjustment when adversity has been experienced. The buffering model of social support is being used as the conceptual basis for this study since the research is concerned with whether or not social support facilitates positive coping following the experience of employment barriers. Social support is believed to buffer the negative effects of stress in two ways (Alloway & Bebbington, 1987; Baqutayan, 2011; Cohen & Wills, 1985). First, social support is assumed to influence the appraisal process, in that it may alter the interpretation of stress because the individual believes that others are available to provide the necessary resources in times of need. In Brewin, MacCarthy, and Funham’s (1989) research higher perceived support was indeed related to less negative appraisals, for example. Second, social support may assist after a stressor has already been negatively interpreted, by facilitating the reappraisal of the stressor and subsequently reducing the likelihood of maladaptive behaviours, or improving the likelihood of bouncing

back. The ability of the individual to recover more quickly has been shown by Bisconti et al (2006), for example: Higher social support, particularly emotional support, predicted the potential to readjust after a stressful experience. Therefore, social support could be instrumental in reducing the negative interpretation of employment barriers, as well as facilitating quicker recovery from an adverse experience (resulting from exposure to employment barriers) if it were to occur.

The common resources provided through meaningful social support have been characterised as

1. Esteem/valuable support, namely reinforcing the individual's self-worth
2. Companionship, namely spending valuable or leisurely time with others
3. Informational support, namely the provision of relevant information to help redefine the problem at hand
4. Instrumental/tangible support, namely the provision of financial or other material resources to overcome the stressful event (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Russel, Holmstrom, & Clare, 2015).

In the field of unemployment research, all four types of social support resources are believed to be relevant as they promote self-efficacy beliefs (Russel et al., 2015). Social support as a source of self-efficacy has also been identified by Bandura (1997), who believed that verbal persuasion, or encouragement, can facilitate the development of generalised self-efficacy.

Indeed, research demonstrates empirical support for social support being a predictor of both, generalised efficacy and job search self-efficacy. Emotional support and companionship were identified as the strongest predictors of job search self-efficacy in Russel et al.'s (2015) study. Additionally, social support has also been found to improve self-esteem during unemployment (Maddy, Canon & Lichtenberger, 2015; Waters & Moore, 2002), which is an instrumental component of one's core self-evaluations, which, in turn, has been identified as an antecedent to job search intensity amongst the unemployed (Wanberg et al, 2005). This illustrates an additional path through which social support might indirectly affect job search behaviours. However, there is also evidence that suggests a direct path between social support and job search intensity (Russel, et al., 2015; Schaffer & Taylor, 2012).

Whether directly or indirectly social support is likely to buffer the negative effects of stress. Thus it is likely that social support has a moderating influence upon the relationship between job search barriers and job search intensity. This led to the following hypotheses:

*Hypothesis 4a : Emotional support moderates the relationship between job search barriers and job search intensity, in that the relationship is more negative when emotional support is low.*

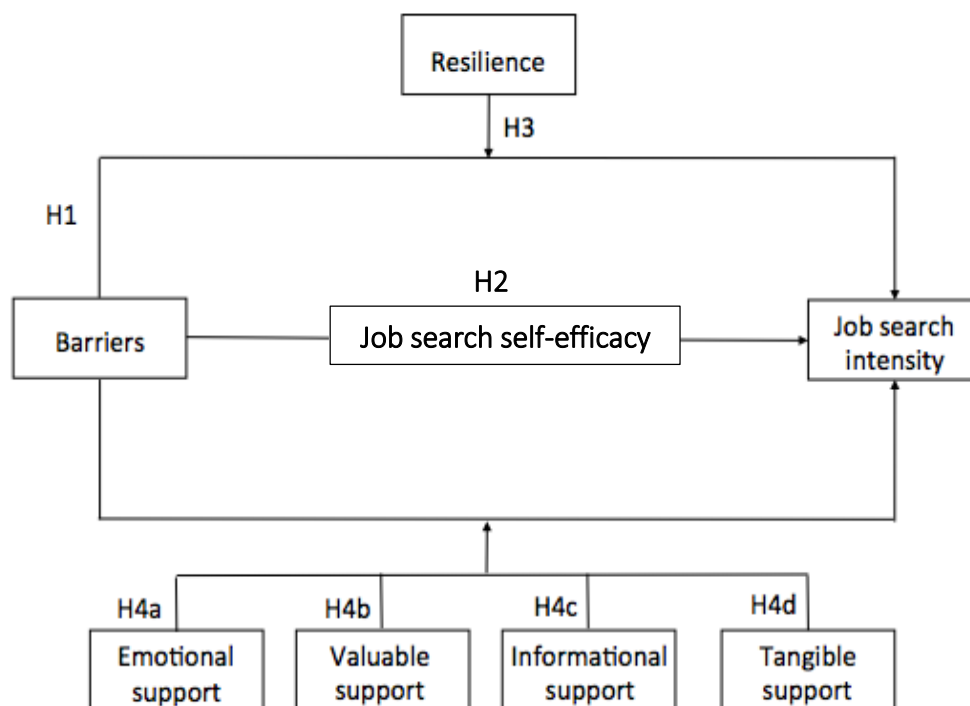
*Hypothesis 4b: Valuable support moderates the relationship between job search barriers and job search intensity, in that the relationship is more negative when valuable support is low.*

*Hypothesis 4c: Informational support moderates the relationship between job search barriers and job search intensity, in that the relationship is more negative when informational support is low.*

*Hypothesis 4d: Tangible support moderates the relationship between job search barriers and job search intensity, in that the relationship is more negative when tangible support is low.*

Figure 1 provides an overview of all four hypotheses.

**Figure 1.** A conceptual framework of the hypothesised relationships.





## **Methods**

### **Research Design**

A descriptive, cross sectional design was employed. Quantitative data was collected through the use of pen-and-paper questionnaires.

### **Participants**

A total of 141 respondents participated in this study. Participants' ages ranged from 16 to 73 ( $M = 46.03$ ,  $SD = 29.29$ ). Even though the typical retirement age in South Africa is 65, it was decided to keep the responses of those aged above 65, since those participants indicated that they were still active in the labour market, i.e. still looking for work. They were relatively comparable in terms of gender, which is represented by 70 males (50.3%), and 67 females (49.3%) ( $n$  missing = 4). The majority of the sample ( $N = 96$ ) identified as being from mixed racial descent, whereas 37 people identified as black African, three as white, and five preferred to omit their racial identity. A disproportionate number (86%,  $n = 121$ ), had not completed secondary education, 5.8% ( $n = 8$ ) had completed their school leaving certificate, and 7.9% ( $n = 11$ ) obtained a tertiary qualification, indicating that the sample overall had low education levels. A total of 125 participants (89%) indicated that they had not had a job two weeks prior to their participation in the study, and 66% ( $n = 93$ ) had indicated that they had been without work for more than six months prior to the study.

### **Procedure**

Permission for the study was granted by the Commerce Faculty Ethics in Research Committee at the University of Cape Town, South Africa. The sample was obtained with the assistance of three non-profit organisations operating in Cape Town and working with unemployed individuals. Data was collected via convenience sampling. A representative from each organisation introduced one of the researchers to the target group. Participants completed the questionnaire in groups of 10 to 15 in private rooms provided by the respective organisation. Prior to responding to the questionnaire participants were informed about the research, including that participation was voluntary, confidential and anonymous, and that a R50 shopping voucher would be provided upon completion. While the receipt of a voucher might have compromised the study's voluntary nature as the majority of participants were in need of financial resources, it was considered more ethical to provide a financial reward, since participation in the study took individuals away from searching for work.

Once participants had provided informed consent, the researcher explained the format of the questions, as well as the answering procedure. The session began once each participant had

indicated to have understood what was required of him or her. The researcher read out each item. All items were clarified or illustrated if someone was unsure about the meaning. This was achieved with the aid of a research assistant, as well as a translator. Translation was required for isiXhosa-speaking individuals. Once all items had been read out participants were asked to check whether they had missed any answers.

## **Measures**

The response format for all measures was a 5-point Likert scale. Participants had to choose one of five faces which best represented their opinion (ranging from a very sad (indicating complete disagreement) to a very happy face (indicating complete agreement) with a neutral face in the middle). Each face represented one number ranging from 1 (very sad face) to 5 (very happy face).

### **Structural barriers.**

Based on Seekings (2003), low employability, lack of social and financial capital, lack of access to the internet, and participants' geographic location were considered barriers to finding employment. To assess these, the following measures were used:

- 1.) Low Employability: This was assessed using Wanberg, Hough and Song's (2002) Self-Reported Qualifications Scale (SRQS). Respondents were required to indicate if they agreed or disagreed with seven statements provided. An example statement is "An employer would be interested in my qualifications". Even though Wanberg et al. had reported a low internal consistency ( $\alpha = .66$ ), the scale was used as the items are aligned with the variables of interest (education, skills, and employment history).
- 2.) Lack of social and financial capital, lack of access, geographic location: The variables were assessed through an adaptation of Wanberg et al's (1999) seven item job constraints measure. For example, the item "how much has your physical health interfered with your ability to look for a job", was omitted as physical health was not a job search barrier of interest. An example item includes: "not having enough money for transport. Participants were required to indicate the amount of influence each item had on their job search endeavours. Each item measures a different employment barrier. The scale was chosen because it assesses an individual's subjective evaluation of job search barriers.

### **Job search self-efficacy.**

Wanberg et al's scale (1999) was used to assess this variable. It measures individuals' perceptions of their ability to conduct a successful job search, as well as the perception of their ability to compile successful job applications. An example item includes "completing a good CV". Wanberg et al reported a high internal consistency for the scale ( $\alpha = .91$ ).

### **Job Search Intensity.**

A ten-item scale by Wanberg et al. (2002) was used to assess participants' job search intensity. On a scale from 1 (0 times) to 5 (10+times) respondents were required to rate the number of times that they had performed certain job search behaviours in the past two weeks. An example of the behaviours includes: "Sent a CV or job application to a potential employer". The authors reported a high internal consistency ( $\alpha = .81$ ) for the scale. Given that the sample of interest was likely to employ less traditional job search techniques, we decided to design additional items assessing those. These items included: 1.) "Waited in a popular area where employers pick up workers", 2.) "Asked around about where I can find areas that employers go to pick up workers", 3.) "Going to a place of business and asking if any jobs were available", and 4.) "Taking some form of equipment (like a paint brush or level) with to find a job". These items were established in consultation with a subject matter expert.

### **Resilience.**

To assess resilience, 22-items of Wagnild and Young (1993)'s resilience scale (RS) were used. The scale requires individuals to rate their level of agreement with various statements along a five-point Likert scale. An example item includes: "I usually take things in stride". The authors reported a high internal consistency ( $\alpha = .91$ ) for the original 25-item scale. Moorhouse and Caltabiano (2007) had used the same scale to measure resilience amongst a group of unemployed individuals (Cronbach  $\alpha = .91$ ).

### **Social Support.**

To assess social support, Slebarska, Moser & Gunnesch-Luca's (2009) 8-item social support scale was used. The scale assesses both, received and needed, social support on four dimensions (emotional, valuable, informational and tangible). In this study only used the items that related to received support were used. Slebarska et al (2009) found this scale reliable ( $\alpha = .87$ ). An example item includes: "To what extent during the last two weeks did these persons show you positive feelings, were with you in difficult moments, listened to you and understood you?" A high score indicates that the participant perceives their support to be adequate.

## **Results**

The study's results have been analysed and revealed the findings reported on in the appendix. They are currently being written up.

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