

Using Protean Career Attitude to Facilitate a Positive Approach to Unemployment

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Abstract The rise in unemployment rates associated with the global financial crisis mean that a timely understanding is needed of the ways in which a person's career attitude influences their reactions to job loss. Much of the research into unemployment has focused on what people lose during unemployment rather than what people can potentially gain during unemployment. In this paper, we deliberately adopt a "positive deviance" approach (Marsh et al., *British Medical Journal*, 329:1177–1179, 2004) to unemployment and study the attitudes and behaviors that enable people to find successful solutions during job loss. Specifically, we suggest that protean career attitude is a positive factor that can be built upon during unemployment to enhance successful re-employment. The chapter outlines a 6-month longitudinal study that assesses the influence of protean career attitude on self esteem, job search, re-employment, career growth and job improvement. By studying the positive processes through which people positively deviate during unemployment, we can offer unemployed people new ways to create change for themselves.

Keywords Protean career attitude · Unemployment · Re-employment · Job search · Self-esteem · Positive approach · Career growth · Job improvement

1 Unemployment as a Career Event and the Negativity Bias in Unemployment Research

Rapid changes in employment conditions have brought about a marked restructuring of the contract between employees and their organisations from that of a permanent relational bond to one that is more temporary, performance-based, and

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transactional in nature (Hall and Mirvis 1996; Rousseau 1995). These insecure employment conditions have led to substantial career discontinuity, often in the form of underemployment and unemployment (Arthur et al. 1999; Parker and Arthur 2000). Unemployment is high in many countries due to the global financial crisis and is currently at 7.9 % in the United States of America (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2013), 7.7 % in the United Kingdom (Office for National Statistics 2013) and 11.7 % across the European Union (Eurostat 2013).

Following developmental, life-long notions of the career, we suggest that a person's career journey does not stop due to an absence of paid employment or an episode of unemployment. Indeed research shows that many unemployed people still plan their career and engage in behaviours that will enhance their career (e.g., re-training) during unemployment (Zikic 2005; Zikic and Klehe 2006). As such, we argue that unemployment can be incorporated into one's career journey as a 'career-event' rather than a 'career-break'.

However, in order for career counselors to help unemployed clients re-frame unemployment from a career-break to a career event, more research is required that explores the possibility for people to use the unemployment/time away from paid employment, to create positive career outcomes such as career growth and job improvement. To date, much of the research into unemployment has focused on what people lose during unemployment rather than what people can gain during unemployment. We conducted bibliometric research using 19 data bases (see Appendix A) to examine the negative to positive ratio of outcome measures assessed in unemployment studies. The database was built to include all journal articles that focused on the psychological impact of unemployment, incorporated a population study and were written after 1980. We finished with a total of 475 articles in the database. We reviewed these articles by looking at the outcome measures that were used in these studies and classifying these outcomes measures as negative (e.g. depression) or positive (e.g., career growth). The positive to negative ratio was 1:33. That is, for every one article studying positive outcomes there are 33 that focus on negative outcomes.

Negative outcome measures typically studied were stress, depression, distress, anxiety, suicidal ideation, grief, anger, fear, external locus of control, guilt, helplessness, and pessimism. Well-being was used as an outcome measure in 80 studies, but these studies were investigating the *negative* effects of unemployment upon well-being. Coping outcomes were studied in 74 studies. However, coping constructs were measured in relation to their ability to *mitigate* the negative effects of unemployment.

Unemployment is a stressful time and unemployed individuals are more likely to experience financial hardship, social isolation, physical illness and psychological distress (Paul and Moser 2009; McKee-Ryan et al. 2005). Psychological distress commonly manifests itself through high levels of anxiety, depression, and stress (McKee-Ryan et al. 2005) together with low levels of well-being, self-esteem, and life satisfaction (McKee-Ryan et al. 2005; Waters and Moore 2002a). Unemployment has also been associated with feelings of helplessness, anger, pessimism, fear, guilt, grief and suicidal ideation (Archer and Rhodes 1993; Hammarström and Janlert 1997; Noh 2009; Paul and Moser 2009).

While the emphasis upon negative outcomes of unemployment has received considerable research attention, the potential positive aspects of job loss have been relatively neglected. Little research attention has been given to the human strengths that can shine during this challenging time: courage, adaptability, perseverance, wisdom etc.

Yet, by studying the positive end of the spectrum and the positive processes by which people build resilience and wellness during unemployment, we can offer unemployed people new ways to create change for themselves. These positive elements may be in the minority, however a “positive deviance” approach (Marsh et al. 2004) allows successful, albeit uncommon, behaviors or strategies to be identified that enable people to find better solutions to their problems and enable them to build on what is going right.

In fact, one could go further and argue that a sole focus on ameliorating the negative effects of unemployment might actually be self-limiting. For example, following Keyes’ (2002) two-factor theory, the research shows that efforts to reduce ill-being during unemployment do not necessarily bring about a rise in well-being. Accordingly, we believe that unemployment interventions need to expand from a deficit-based orientation (i.e., to fix what is going wrong) to a strength-based orientation (i.e., to build upon what is going right).

2 Added Value from a Positive Lens on Unemployment

There is a small body of research studying the potential positive processes and outcomes of job loss. For instance, Zikic (2005) and Zikic and Klehe (2006) found that career exploration during unemployment was a positive process related to career growth upon re-employment when self-exploration and career exploration were utilized. Niessen (2006) found evidence that unemployment can be a time where people are motivated to learn and see that continuous learning can occur throughout the lifespan, despite the absence of employment. Of the four groups identified by Wanberg and Marchese (1994) two were deemed positive: (1) ‘coping and optimistic’ and (2) ‘confident but concerned’. The other two groups were labelled as: (1) distressed, and (2) indifferent. Jones (1989) also found that, for some people, unemployment was experienced as a positive opportunity to make a change of life direction.

Beyond this limited literature, there is little known about the ways in which to build well-being beyond ameliorating distress and/or just merely ‘coping’ with unemployment. We argue that it is time to add a new, more positive, direction of inquiry into the unemployment research. In the current study we adopted a positive psychology approach to the experience of unemployment and asked if there are certain attitudes and processes that will foster positive outcomes such as self-esteem, re-employment, job improvement and career growth. More specifically, we investigated the role of protean career attitude during unemployment in creating positive outcomes.

3 Protean Career Attitude and Self-Esteem During Unemployment

Hall and his colleagues contend that the ‘protean’ attitude is a particularly well-suited adaptation to the current career landscape (Hall et al. 1997; Hall and Moss 1998; Mirvis and Hall 1994). Hall (2004) defines a protean career attitude as “one in which the person, not the organization, is in charge” and where “the core values are freedom and growth” (p. 4).

The current longitudinal study explores the interrelationships between protean career attitude with self-esteem and job search activity during job loss in a large sample of unemployed adults. In addition, the study examines the relationship between protean career attitude with reemployment, job improvement and career growth in a sample of unemployed people who move to reemployment over a 6 month time frame.

The two most important features of a protean career attitude are being self-directed and being values-driven. Self-direction expresses the degree to which an individual takes control of his/her own career in a tactical fashion (Briscoe et al. 2006; Mirvis and Hall 1994). A values-driven approach to the career implies that the individual is heavily aware of their own personal priorities and uses them as standards by which to make and evaluate career decisions (Hall et al. 1997). People who adopt a protean career attitude are more likely to be independent of an organization, peer pressure, and/or other external “voices” when making their career choices and to consider intrinsic motivators such as whether the job allows for personal growth and whether the job is aligned to the person’s values and passions (Briscoe et al. 2006).

Whilst the role of being values-driven during unemployment has not been tested, indirect evidence for the link between being values-driven and self-esteem can be seen in the finding that the ability to hold on to one’s core identity during unemployment is positively associated with psychological health (Cassidy 2001). Katz and Kahn (1978) suggest that values are essential for building and clarifying identity. It is likely that expressing personal values during unemployment is one way to retain a strong sense of identity and this promotes a positive self-esteem during unemployment.

Hypothesis One: Protean career attitude¹ will be positively associated with self esteem during unemployment.

4 Protean Career Attitude and Job Search During Unemployment

Protean career attitude has not been explicitly tested in relation to job search. However, there is indirect evidence that self-direction may play a significant role in job search. For instance, similar constructs to self-direction such as mastery, self efficacy and autonomous motivation have been found to be important antecedents to job search during unemployment (Vansteenkiste et al. 2005; Wanberg et al. 2005).

¹In all the hypotheses presented in this paper, protean career attitude is comprised of self-direction and being values-driven.

As with self-direction, the second element of a protean attitude, that of being values-driven, has not been directly tested in relation to job search behavior. However, a positive relationship between being values-driven and job search is proposed. This is because values may act as a compass to aid job search. Certainly, Wanberg et al.'s (2002) research shows that one of the reasons people do *not* search for work is a feeling of uncertainty about what to do in the next job. Presumably, people who are values-driven can use their values as an anchor to develop clarity about the type of work they hope to find.

Hypothesis Two: Protean career attitude will be positively associated with job search activity during unemployment.

5 Protean Career Attitude, Self Esteem, Job Search and Re-employment

Protean career orientation may be related to one's success in gaining reemployment because it promotes an "internal psychological energy" (Leana and Feldman 1995, p. 1383). The protean/self-directed attitude can act as a psychologically energizing force through its link to a sense of autonomy and control over one's career. With this type of internal energy as a resource, or positive buffer, people are better able to deal with the strain and uncertainty of job loss without being drained which, therefore, allows them to energized and focused on gaining reemployment.

Further qualities associated with a protean attitude (e.g. proactivity, openness to change, optimism, self-awareness about values, and adaptability) may make these people more appealing and, therefore, more employable. Fugate et al. (2004) have suggested that the personal characteristics of adaptability and self-awareness, amongst others, would be an attractive quality for employers. Leana and Feldman (1995) found that optimism led to reemployment. The evidence above leads to Hypothesis Three.

Hypothesis Three: Protean career attitude will be positively associated with reemployment.

6 Protean Career Attitude, Job Improvement and Career Growth

Job improvement represents a favorable comparison of one's new job in comparison to the job held prior to unemployment (Burke 1986; Wanberg et al. 2002). Protean career attitude which is proactive in nature may give an individual the confidence and direction needed to consider only those new employment prospects that are an improvement on the old. A protean orientation may allow a person to base his/her acceptance of an offer of employment on whether the new job search gratifies intrinsic values rather than extrinsic drivers.

An emphasis upon reflection, and learning from experience may also foster a transition into improved employment for one with protean attitudes. Also, the protean career's focus on values of growth and freedom (Hall et al. 1997; Hall and Moss 1998) is likely to motivate a search for improved working arrangements.

Hypothesis Four: Protean career attitude will be positively associated with job improvement upon reemployment at the 6 month re-test.

Latack and Dozier (1986) examined unemployment as a career transition that leads to career growth when career gains of the job loss outweighed the career losses. They defined career growth as the situation where the transition from job loss to reemployment provides new, and sometimes more, opportunities for career success. People with a protean orientation may be able to separate their identity from recent employment contexts, and see unemployment in part as a chance to appraise their career goals, gain greater self-insight, and develop new competencies. While they did not assess protean career attitude per se, Zikic and Klehe (2006) showed that those people who used job loss as a time to examine self-identity and alternate career options obtained high quality reemployment. With this in mind, we present Hypothesis Five.

Hypothesis Five: Protean career attitude will be positively associated with career growth upon reemployment at the 6 month re-test.

7 Method

This study involved 455 unemployed people who were, clients with Centerlink, the Australian Government body that provides financial assistance to people requiring welfare and were receiving government unemployment benefits² (62 % male; mean age = 33.52 years \pm 11.17). The participants were recruited through 'Job Network', which is an Australian national service, made up of private, government, and community agencies that provide job referrals to job seekers.³ Respondents reported a variety of education levels: 39.9 % had finished high school, 21.5 % had completed

²The Australian Government provides welfare payments to unemployed people in the form of a 'basic living' allowance. As such, only people who do not have enough money to pay for the basic necessities of life (e.g. rent, food, bills) are eligible to receive Federal Assistance. The receipt and amount of Federal assistance given by the Australian Government to unemployed people is determined by their assets, savings, and debts. If the unemployed individual is married or in a de facto relationship, their partner's income, assets, savings, and debts are also taken into account. By only recruiting people who were receiving unemployment benefits we were able to ensure that the financial situation was similar amongst the study participants. Our aim was to reduce the noise associated with economic hardship as this variable has been shown to influence levels of job search intensity and psychological well being during unemployment (Leana and Feldman 1995; Wanberg et al. 2002).

³Job Network provides assistant to unemployed people to find work. These people may, or may not be, clients with Centrelink (the agency that provides welfare payments).

university, 13.6 % had obtained a TAFE (Technical and Further Education) qualification, 10.8 % had completed part of a university course, and 6.6 % had completed an apprenticeship.

At the 6-month follow up, 222, of the original 455 baseline participants completed the follow survey. Statistical checks for response bias were conducted between those people who continued on with the study and those who did not. The 6 month group was significantly older (35.15 ± 11.89) than the baseline non-responders (32.18 ± 10.37), $t(446) = -2.82$, $p = 0.005$. However, there were no associations between responders and non-responders on gender, education level, protean career attitude, job-search activity and self esteem.

Forty six people had gained full time reemployment (21 %), 73 people had gained part-time or casual reemployment (34 %), 71 people remained unemployed (33 %), 12 people had moved into further training (5 %), and 13 people were in the 'other' category (e.g., deciding to take time out of the labour market to have child) (6 %). The small sample sizes of the final two groupings meant that they were excluded from subsequent analysis. The sample consisted of 123 males (58 %) and 88 females (42 %) with a mean age of 35.15 years (± 11.89). Respondents reported a variety of education levels: 37.9 % had finished high school, 20 % had completed university, 20 % had completed part of a university course, 14.4 % had obtained a TAFE qualification, and 7.6 % had completed an apprenticeship

Protean career attitude was measured using Briscoe et al.'s (2006) 'Protean Career Attitude' survey (14 items; e.g., "It doesn't matter much to me how other people evaluate the choices I make in my career" Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.86$). Kinicki and Latack's (1990) 'Proactive Job-Search' scale was used (5 items; e.g., "Get together with job contacts and people who can find me a job"; Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.84$). The 'Global Self Worth' scale from Messer and Harter's (1986) Adult Self Perception Profile (ASPP) was used to assess self esteem (five items; e.g., 'I am very happy being the way I am'; Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.74$).

At the 6 month re-test, reemployment status was provided by each participant's Job Network Agency. Job improvement was measured using Wanberg et al.'s (2002) adaptation of Burke's (1986) scale that asked people to compare their new job with the job they had prior to unemployment. Participants made comparisons on 11 dimensions (e.g., learning opportunities, career opportunities; Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.88$). Career growth combined two items developed by Bedeian et al. (1991) (e.g. "I feel that my present job will lead to the attainment of my career goals"), and two items adapted from Eby and Buch (1995) (e.g., "I now consider the loss of my previous job to be a positive growth opportunity; Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.92$)

8 Results

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations and correlations for the study variables at baseline and 6 month re-test. Spearman Correlational analysis was used given the non-parametric nature of the employment status variable. Protean career

Table 1 Means, standard deviation and spearman correlation coefficients for study variables at baseline, 6 month re-test

Variables	Time point	N	Mean	St. Dev	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Protean career attitude	Baseline	455	3.67	0.53	1.00					
2. Self Esteem	Baseline	437	3.29	0.78	0.40**	1.00				
3. Job search activity	Baseline	453	3.77	0.78	0.19**	0.08	1.00			
4. Employment status	6 month re-test	190	–	–	0.19**	0.10	0.14	1.00		
5. Job improvement	6 month re-test	119	3.40	1.20	0.41**	0.28**	0.07	0.19*	1.00	
6. Career Growth	6 month re-test	118	3.22	1.03	0.27**	0.24*	0.04	0.24*	0.74*	1.00

Scale scores were computed to a total score of 5 for purposes of comparability across scales
Employment status is coded as 1 = unemployed, 2 = part time or casual re-employed, and 3 = full time re-employed

*significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed); **significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

attitude was significantly correlated with self-esteem and job search during unemployment. Protean career attitude was also significantly correlated with employment status together with job improvement and career growth upon reemployment.

Structural Equation Modelling was used to test hypotheses 1 and 2. The hypothesised model was tested next and the data provided an adequate fit to the model, $\chi^2(249) = 835.725$, $p < 0.001$, CFI = 0.822, IFI = 0.824, RMSEA = 0.073 (90 % CI: 0.068–0.079), and SRMR = 0.049⁴. As shown in Fig. 1, protean career attitude was significantly associated with self-esteem. Protean career attitude significantly predicted self-esteem (beta = 0.49, $p < 0.001$). Protean career attitude accounted for 24 % of variance in self-esteem, and thus, provides support for hypothesis one. Protean career attitude was also significantly associated with job search activity, thus supporting hypothesis two. Protean career attitude predicted job search with a standardised beta of 0.21 ($p < 0.003$). Together, protean career attitude and self-esteem accounted for 3 % of variance in job search behaviour. However, of the two hypothesised predictors of job search, only protean career attitude had a significant standardised beta.

In order to test hypotheses 3 a one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was run to examine the relationship between employment status at the 6 month re-test (1 =

⁴Given that CFA model and SEM models use the same items they are equivalent in terms of statistical fit. The only difference between the two models is that one is correlational between the latent traits and the other posits regression lines.

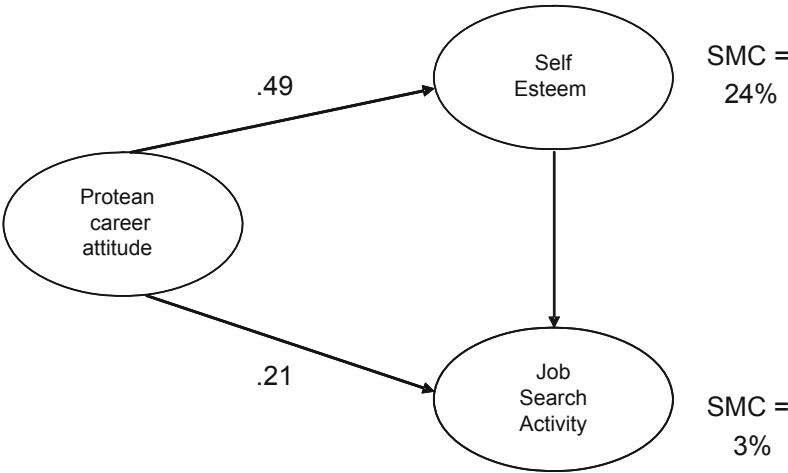


Fig. 1 Structural equation model depicting the interrelationships between protean career attitude, job search activity and self esteem

Table 2 Means, standard deviations, *F* statistic, *p* value and Eta squared for 6 month employment status groupings on baseline variables

		Unemployed	Part time/casual	Full time employed	<i>F</i> statistic	<i>p</i>	Eta squared
Protean career attitude	<i>N</i>	70	71	40			
	Mean	3.60	3.69	3.85	3.14	0.046	0.03
	Std. Dev.	0.44	0.57	0.49			

unemployed, 2 = part time or casual re-employed, and 3 = full time re-employed) on baseline levels of protean career attitude, self-esteem and job search. Table 2 presents the means for baseline levels of protean career attitude. The three groups showed significant differences on protean career attitude at baseline. As shown in Table 2, the study participants who went on to gain reemployment at the 6 month re-test had higher levels of protean career attitude than those who gained part time or causal reemployment and those who remained unemployed. More specifically, post hoc testing revealed that the full time re-employed group had significantly higher levels of protean career attitude than the unemployed group. There was no difference between the unemployed and part-time/casual re-employed group.

Hypotheses four and five were tested via Regression Analysis. Hypothesis four was supported as protean career attitude predicted job improvement in those study participants who had gained reemployment, $F(1,117) = 7.36$, $p = 0.008$. *R* square was 0.60 and the adjusted *R* square was 0.50. Hypothesis five was supported at the 6 month re-test where protean career attitude predicted career growth, $F(1,116) = 9.32$, $p = 0.003$. *R* square was 0.75 and the adjusted *R* square was 0.67.

9 Discussion

Today's career landscape is unpredictable and the current unemployment figures suggest that job loss may be a common, albeit unwanted, aspect of one's career. Following the developmental, life-stage, career models, unemployment is more aptly seen as an event *within* one's career rather than a break that puts one *outside* of a career, because people still seek to develop their career and still retain their career identity despite the absence of paid employment.

Given that many people still hold a traditional organizational career attitude, where their career identity is anchored in identification with their employer (Lips-Wiersma and Hall 2007; Granrose and Baccili 2006; Briscoe et al. 2006) unemployment is likely to be experienced as a very negative event. For people with this type of 'organizational career', a separation from the organization is likely to lead to the feelings of being separated from one's career. Career failure and identity loss are typically reported by people during unemployment (McKee-Ryan et al. 2005; Waters and Moore 2002b).

However, if unemployment is to be incorporated into the notion of one's ongoing career despite the absence of an employer we may find more positive career outcomes because people are able to remain confident and energized. In the current study we deliberately adopted a 'positive deviance' approach and studied positive outcome variables such as self-esteem, reemployment, job improvement and career growth. We were also interested in the role of protean career attitude and job search that fostered these positive outcomes.

Our results suggest that a protean attitude helps people to see their career as separate from an organization, to take control of their own career, and thus to be self-directed and values-driven in their job search. Protean career attitude was significantly associated with self-esteem and job search during unemployment. However, causality cannot be determined, as we do not know if those with a high self-esteem are more likely to adopt a protean career attitude or if a protean career attitude allows people to uphold a positive esteem during unemployment. Either way though, the findings do allow us to suggest that counselors working with unemployed people may find benefit in assisting unemployed people to reflect on and perhaps modify their attitude towards who is responsible for their own career—themselves or an employer.

At the 6 month re-test, those people who had gained full time reemployment were found to have significantly higher baseline scores on protean career attitude than those people who remained unemployed. This finding suggests that protean career attitude is a useful attitude to adopt when trying to obtain paid employment.

As this is the first study to empirically test the relationship between protean career attitude and reemployment, the mechanisms that underpin this relationship are not yet clear. However, the protean career attitude may increase a person's chance of moving from unemployment to reemployment by fostering 'internal psychological energy' which helps them to retain continued energy stores during unemployment. The personal learning orientation that is associated with a protean career attitude

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