

Resilience and unemployment: exploring risk and protective influences for the outcome variables of depression and assertive job searching

Anne Moorhouse
Marie L. Caltabiano

This study examined adult resilience in the context of the adversity of unemployment. Seventy-seven unemployed job seekers completed a self-report survey containing the Resilience Scale (G. M. Wagnild & H. M. Young, 1993), Centre for Epidemiologic Studies–Depressed Mood Scale (L. S. Radloff, 1977), and the Assertive Job Hunting Survey (H. A. Becker, 1980). Product–term regression indicated that for those unemployed persons who had resilient qualities, less depression resulted even though they had been job searching for a long time ($\beta = -.359, p < .001$). Length of time job searching was positively associated with depression ($\beta = .41, p < .01$). When the outcome variable was job search assertiveness, only the main effect of resilience ($\beta = .492, p < .001$) was significant, accounting for 25.8% of the variance. The inclusion of psychological interventions to foster resilience, along with standard job search training provided by job network services, is advocated.

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Resilience is the ability to bounce back in the face of adversity. Masten, Best, and Garmezy (1990) defined resilience as “the process of, capacity for, or outcome of successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances” (p. 426). Rutter (1993) argued that resilience is not a fixed characteristic of individuals, but rather it changes with developmental life experiences and is dependent on risk factors, adversity, and the social environment. Dyer and McGuinness (1996) also viewed resilience as a dynamic process that is highly influenced by protective factors, such as internal resources, skills, and abilities.

Although research to date has provided a strong understanding of resilience and protective factors that foster resilience in children, adolescents, and older adults (Abrams, 2001; Bauman, Adams, & Waldo, 2001; Wagnild & Young, 1993), there is a noticeable lack of research on resilience in adulthood, which limits the development of appropriate protective interventions for adults in crisis.

Unemployment has been shown to have a profound effect on the life of the unemployed individual and his or her family. As a significant life event, job loss ranks in the upper quartile of life events that generate stress and is one of the top 10 traumatic

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Anne Moorhouse and Marie L. Caltabiano, School of Psychology, James Cook University, Cairns, Australia. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Marie L. Caltabiano, School of Psychology, James Cook University, PO Box 6811, Cairns, Qld 4870, Australia (e-mail: Marie.Caltabiano@jcu.edu.au).

life experiences (Hanisch, 1999). With 533,900 unemployed persons in Australia in March 2006 (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2006), it is also a major social concern. Unemployment can thus be considered one of the potential sources of adversity in adulthood, denying the unemployed person the advantages of a job: economic resources, social contact with coworkers, personal growth, and identification.

Resilience theory (Masten et al., 1990; Rutter, 1993) posits that three sets of factors, namely risk factors, protective factors, and outcome variables, are important to understanding adjustment and competence in the face of adversity. Risk factors are variables most likely to lead to pathology or maladjustment (Garmzey, 1991). These risk factors can be located within the individual, the family, or the environmental/social system. Accumulated adversities generate a greater risk situation. For instance, poor job search skills, protracted periods of unemployment, financial hardship, and low job availability would have additive risk effects. A range of resilient outcomes such as social skills, absence of behavioral problems, and emotional adjustment have been researched, although these have not been studied in relation to unemployment (Glantz & Sloboda, 1999). Wagnild and Young (1993) identified two components of resilience: personal competence (self-reliance, independence, determination, mastery, resourcefulness, perseverance) and acceptance of self and life (adaptability, flexibility, a balanced life perspective). Protective factors mediate the individual's response to adversity. There is some evidence for the protective influence of personal resources, such as hardiness (Farber, Schwartz, Schaper, Moonen, & McDaniel, 2000), coping mechanisms (Folkman & Tedlie Moskowitz, 2000), and social support (Neill & Dias, 2001), in mitigating the effects of adversity.

PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT OF UNEMPLOYMENT

One of the consequences of long-term unemployment is depression (McKee-Ryan, Song, Wanberg, & Kinicki, 2005). Dooley, Prause, and Ham-Rowbottom (2000) analyzed the American National Longitudinal Survey (NLS) data gathered between 1992 and 1994 from 5,113 respondents who were adequately employed in 1992. Unemployment resulted in significant increases in depression in this group. Prior depression was found to predict increased risk of unemployment, particularly for those with less education. Dooley, Catalano, and Wilson (1994) found that respondents who became unemployed during the time of their study had twice the risk of increased depressive symptoms. Not only is depression associated with increased risk of unemployment, but job-search persistence has also been found to depend on the emotional stability of the unemployed person (Wanberg, Glomb, Song, & Sorenson, 2005). In a major Australian study, the 1993 National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing, 22% of unemployed people reported depressive symptoms as compared with 5% in the general population (Andrews, Hall, Teesson, & Henderson, 1999). The Australian Longitudinal Survey of Youth found evidence that unemployment was linked to a 50% increase in psychological disturbance (Morrell, Taylor, & Kerr, 1998).

JOB SEARCH BEHAVIORS

Assertive job search behaviors are necessary for reemployment (Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, 1999). In order to obtain work, unemployed job seekers have

to engage in specific behaviors including making contact with potential employers; seeking information about job vacancies; and presenting knowledge, experience, and skills to potential employers. The majority of successful job seekers (ABS, 2001) approached employers after hearing of a job vacancy through family, friends, or company contacts or had replied to a newspaper advertisement. A smaller number of these successful job seekers had approached employers with no knowledge of a job being available. Although much of the unemployment research has focused on job search intensity (McKee-Ryan et al., 2005; Wanberg et al., 2005), the present study assessed job search assertiveness in order to further understanding of this important aspect of job searching (Becker, 1980). As Kanfer, Wanberg, and Kantrowitz (2001) have argued, specific effort measures that assess behaviors and cognitions (e.g., planning what information should go in a résumé, strategizing or having a follow-up plan if job application is not successful) are central to job searching and may not be captured in an intensity measure of time spent looking for work.

THE MEDIATING ROLE OF RESILIENCE

Coping theory has emphasized the role of personal qualities (Antonovsky, 1979; Kobasa, 1979) and cognitive appraisal (Lazarus, 2000; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) in coping with adversity. Evaluation of one's personal coping resources is part of secondary appraisal (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) in this general model of coping with stress. Models of coping with job loss (Latack, Kinicki, & Prussia, 1995; McKee-Ryan & Kinicki, 2002) present the argument that appraisals mediate between work role centrality, coping resources, and psychological well-being. Meta-analytic findings indicate that negative appraisals of job loss are associated with diminished well-being in the unemployed (McKee-Ryan et al., 2005). Core self-evaluation beliefs have been related to job-search persistence in Wanberg et al.'s (2005) 10-wave longitudinal study of unemployed persons. These core beliefs comprise high self-esteem, perceived control, and job-search self-efficacy, or the person's confidence in her or his ability to conduct a job search well. Cognitive factors, such as the thought patterns the unemployed person has regarding her or his long-term adversity, ongoing financial hardship, and self-worth, appear to be important in understanding emotional outcomes like depression. In addition, personal resources in the form of resilient qualities such as self-reliance, resourcefulness, determination, and perseverance, along with a positive general orientation to life adversity (Wagnild & Young, 1993), appear to have predictive value in understanding why depression may occur in the absence of these qualities and result in lessened job search assertiveness.

The purpose of this research was to increase understanding of resilience throughout adulthood, while increasing understanding of the adversity of unemployment. In the context of unemployment, the present research defines resilience as the capability of the individual to cope successfully with the adversity of unemployment as demonstrated by assertive job search behaviors and positive mood state. Because resilience is a process (Glantz & Sloboda, 1999), it is assumed that positive outcomes are the result of resilient qualities (personal competence, attitudes) that moderate the adverse effects of unemployment. For instance, the negative impact of long-term unemployment on job search assertiveness would be lessened for those with resilient attitudes, making them more assertive in their behavior. Similarly, in

regard to emotional outcomes, those persons possessing resilient qualities are less likely to experience depression after numerous setbacks.

The hypotheses for this research were as follows:

Hypothesis 1: Resilience will be correlated with positive outcomes, such as lower depression and higher self-reported likelihood of job search assertiveness.

Hypothesis 2: Job search assertiveness in the face of adversity (more months job searching) will be higher for those unemployed persons who score higher on the psychological resilience scale.

Hypothesis 3: Depression in the face of adversity (more months job searching) will be less for those unemployed with resilient qualities.

METHOD

Participants

There was a total of 88 participants in the study, with 77 participants providing complete response sets (31 men and 46 women). Of the 77 participants, 28 were recruited from Martin Employment, 22 from Far North Queensland Volunteer Resource Agency (FNQVRA), 14 from Centacare, and 13 through unemployed contacts. Participants ranged in age from 16 to 58 years (mean age = 31.73 years), with 39% being under 24 years. Of the participants, 54 were single or no longer married or living with a partner, and 23 participants were married or living with a partner. Education levels ranged from less than Grade 10 to a university degree; 9 participants had less than Grade 10 education, 14 had Grade 10 education, 6 had Grade 11 education, 25 had Grade 12 education, 16 had completed a trade qualification, and 7 had a university degree. Seventy percent of the participants had less than Grade 12 education. Most participants received a Centrelink unemployment benefit, but 23 participants received no payment. While they are receiving these benefits, unemployed people must engage in job search activities. The amount of activity required depends on length of time unemployed. Months unemployed ranged from 1 to 24+ months (mean months unemployed = 9.55 months). Those unemployed for more than 12 months accounted for 31.2% of the participants. Months spent job searching also ranged from 1 to 24+ months (mean months job searching = 7.56 months). Twenty-six participants (33.8%) had been unemployed for 3 months or less, and 15 participants (19.5%) had been unemployed for 24 months or more.

Participant Recruitment

The two employment agencies that participated in the research were Martin Employment and Centacare. Centacare is the welfare arm of the Catholic Church and offers job network services along with other welfare and community support services. Martin Employment offers both job network and fee-for-service employment services, for which the agency is contracted to provide recruitment services to businesses.

Martin Employment operates in cooperation with Martin College, which provides accredited business training courses. FNQVRA matches volunteers with member not-for-profit community service organizations. Unemployed job seekers are able to access volunteer work through the agency as part of their obligation to participate in approved activities or may participate in volunteer work of their own volition.

FNQVRA, Martin Employment, and Centacare staff asked unemployed people to respond to the pen-and-paper, self-report questionnaire. The participants were told that the questionnaire would take them less than 30 minutes to complete. Questionnaires were not given to unemployed job seekers to take away to a different location and complete. The participants were waiting in reception areas, attending intensive assistance case management meetings, participating in job search training, or registering as volunteers. Staff were asked to invite all unemployed people attending their offices to participate. Participants were instructed to place completed questionnaires in the envelope provided and to return it to the box marked "University Research Project," which had been provided to each participating organization. Participants were advised that there would be no way to identify individuals from the information given in the questionnaire and that organizational staff would not see any completed questionnaires. Ethical clearance for the project was obtained from the Human Ethics subcommittee of James Cook University.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire was made up of three published measures: the Resilience Scale (RS; Wagnild & Young, 1993), the Assertiveness Job-Hunt Survey (AJHS; Becker, 1980), and the Centre for Epidemiologic Studies–Depressed Mood Scale (CES-D; Radloff, 1977). Questions designed to capture recent job search activity were also included. Furthermore, questions requested participants to provide demographic information, such as gender and type of work sought.

RS. Resilience was measured using Wagnild and Young's (1993) RS, a 25-item scale that assesses resilient qualities. The scale was designed for use in the general population. The RS makes no reference to work activities and therefore was appropriate for this study. All items are positively worded and scored on a 7-point scale, 1 = *disagree* and 7 = *agree*. Examples of items are "My belief in myself is what gets me through hard times" and "I am able to depend on myself more than anyone else." Possible scores range from 25 to 175, with higher scores indicating higher levels of resilience. The RS has demonstrated concurrent validity with established measures of adaptation. The scale has high reliability with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .91 (Wagnild & Young, 1993). In the current study, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient was .94.

AJHS. Becker's (1980) AJHS is a 25-item scale that was designed to measure self-reported job search assertiveness. The AJHS was normed on 190 college students who had applied for career planning or job assistance. It has subsequently been used in studies of unemployment and job search (Schmit, Amel, & Ryan, 1993; Vuori & Vesalainen, 1999). Examples of items include "I am reluctant to contact

an organization about employment unless I know there is a job opening” and “If I didn’t get a job, I would call the employer and ask how I could improve my chances for a similar position.” Responses were scored using a 6-point scale from 1 (*very unlikely*) to 6 (*very likely*). There are both positively and negatively worded items, and possible scores range from 25 to 146. The AJHS has good internal consistency and stability, with a Cronbach’s alpha coefficient of .82 in the original study (Becker, 1980) and .75 in the current study.

CES-D. Radloff’s (1977) CES-D is a 20-item scale designed for epidemiological research and has excellent reliability and validity. The Cronbach’s alpha coefficient was .85 in the general population and .90 in a patient sample. The Cronbach’s alpha in the current study was .88, demonstrating high internal consistency. This scale was used as part of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 1992–1994, and provided the data for Dooley et al.’s (2000) analysis of depression in inadequate employment and unemployment. Responses were scored using a 4-point scale from 0 (*rarely or some of the time; less than 1 day*) to 3 (*most or all of the time; 5–7 days*). This scale also has both positively and negatively worded items. Possible scores range from 0 to 60, with higher scores indicating greater depression.

RESULTS

Resilience and Positive Outcomes in the Unemployed

The results show support for Hypothesis 1 that resilience is related to positive outcomes in the unemployed. Low scores on the CES-D were significantly correlated with high resilience scores ($r = -.448, p < .01$). Resilience was positively correlated with self-reported likelihood of job search assertiveness ($r = .432, p < .01$).

The Moderating Role of Resilient Qualities

To test Hypotheses 2 and 3, product-term regression was used. For the first regression, the dependent variable was depression. The predictor variables were months job searching, resilience, and the interaction term. The variable months job searching was chosen over length of time unemployed because this variable was more specific in its assessment and, therefore, more relevant to the analysis. The overall model was significant, $F(3, 81) = 7.29, p < .001$, with 21.3% of the variance explained (see Table 1).

The interaction between months job searching and resilience was significant (beta = $-.359, p < .01$). That is, for those unemployed persons who had resilient qualities (personal competence, acceptance of self and life), less depression resulted even though they had been job searching for a long time. The plot of this interaction appears in Figure 1. The longer the person had been job searching, the more likely they were to experience depression (beta = $.410, p < .001$).

When the dependent variable was job search assertiveness, the overall model was also found to be significant, $F(3, 75), = 8.67, p < .001$. This model explained

TABLE 1

Interaction of Months Job Searching and Resilience on Depression

Predictor Variable	Step 1 β	Step 2 β	Step 3 β
Months job searching	.189	.210*	.410***
Resilience		-.330**	-.199
Interaction term			-.359**
ΔR^2	.036	.144	.213

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

25.8% of the variance in job search assertiveness (see Table 2). However, only the main effect of resilience (beta = .492, $p < .001$) was significant, indicating that those unemployed persons who were self-reliant, independent, determined, resourceful, and persevering, and who possessed resilient attitudes, were more likely to be assertive in their job search.

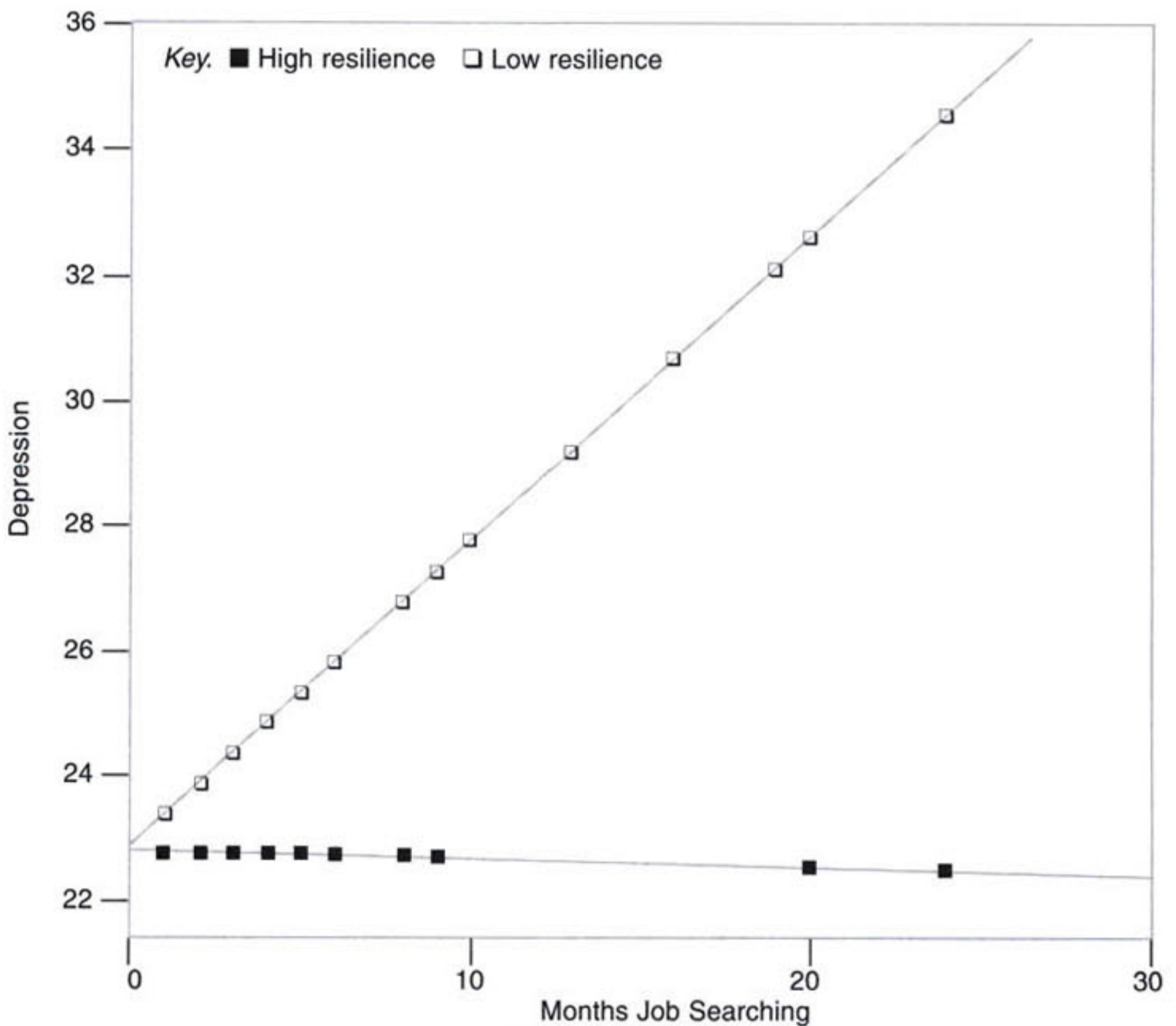


FIGURE 1

Interaction of Months Job Searching by Resilience on Depression

TABLE 2

**Interaction of Months Job Searching and Resilience
on Job Search Assertiveness**

Predictor Variable	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
Months job searching	-.010	-.040	-.066
Resilience		.508***	.492***
Interaction term			.046
ΔR^2	.000	.256	.258

*** $p < .001$.

DISCUSSION

This research has increased knowledge of resilience in adults and extended understanding of the adversity of unemployment. Resilience can protect the unemployed person from the adverse effects of unemployment (in this case long-term job searching with little result). It appears that the effects are more pronounced for the outcome variable of depression. The longer the person had been job searching, the more likely he or she was to experience depression, a finding that has been reported by McKee-Ryan et al. (2005) in a meta-analysis of 104 empirical studies. The results of the present research add to the literature base by indicating that resilience helps the person to cope with the adversity of unemployment and lessens the likelihood of depression with repeated failure in job searching. This finding is consistent with models of coping with job loss (Latack et al., 1995; McKee-Ryan & Kinicki, 2002), which posit that cognitive appraisals mediate between unemployment and psychological well-being. A different picture emerged for job search assertiveness; resilient attitudes and personal competence exert their effects independent of length of time job searching. Those unemployed with resilient qualities (self-reliance, independence, determination, resourcefulness, perseverance) and positive attitudes are more likely to be aggressive and assertive in their job searching. This is consistent with research that has found that core self-evaluation beliefs in the unemployed are linked to job-search persistence (Wanberg et al., 2005).

Resilience in unemployment continues to be an important area for investigation. Substantial funds are spent in supporting job seekers, and yet the psychosocial damage of unemployment continues and the unemployment rate remains unchanged. In this study alone, an alarming 38% of participants had high levels of depressive symptoms, a finding substantially higher than the reported 22% of unemployed respondents with depressive symptoms in the National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing in Australia (Andrews et al., 1999). This indicates that current strategies to address the adversity of unemployment are either not working or are having limited impact.

Most unemployed job seekers are recipients of Centrelink payments, and they are obliged to participate in job search activity or programs offered by job network service providers. If service providers can be encouraged to participate in research, then programs can be assessed for not only their major goals of job commencements and reduction of long-term unemployment but also whether there are psychosocial benefits to these programs, such as the maintenance and development of resilience.

In addition to assisting unemployed job seekers to find work, job network service providers also have a responsibility to do no harm, but there is no indication that this is currently being assessed.

The findings from the present study have implications for career counselors and job network services. Possessing resilient qualities acted as a protective mechanism to mitigate the effects of long-term unemployment on depression and directly affected job search assertiveness. As such, job network services should consider incorporating psychological interventions to enhance coping skills and foster resilience. The focus of such interventions and of career counseling could be (a) combating negative thoughts, (b) substituting realistic appraisals for self-defeating appraisals of negative events (e.g., an unsuccessful job interview does not mean the applicant has “no skills” and “will never get a job”), (c) building on individual strengths to increase self-esteem, (d) using problem-focused coping efforts to enhance reemployment (information seeking, brainstorming action alternatives, role-playing interview scenarios, feedback provision), (e) using relaxation training to help applicants cope with anxiety during a job interview, and (f) using emotion-focused coping strategies to prevent negative mood. Psychological resilience lessens negative affect and gives the unemployed personal agency and self-determination to find employment. Inclusion of psychological interventions to foster resilience, along with standard job search training, may facilitate the achievement of job placement goals of current job network providers.

Future research in this area needs to be first qualitative and then longitudinal. This research assumed some understanding of resilience from studies of children, adolescents, and older adults. However, the adversity of unemployment in adulthood is quite different from the adversities found at either end of the life span. Qualitative research would gain insight from unemployed job seekers as to what fosters resilience and what constitutes adversity. Unemployed job seekers, particularly those who seem to be highly resilient, need to be asked what helps them to retain their sense of well-being. Such research could be used to inform longitudinal studies to identify the protective factors associated with resilience and unemployment.

Currently, unemployed job seekers often receive intensive assistance and job search training in group settings. This experience may, in fact, be counterproductive to maintaining resilience if other group members are not supportive. Participants may not necessarily see obligatory attendance at such programs as supportive. Feelings of hopelessness, futility, and depression may be reinforced through interaction with other unsuccessful job seekers. Research that includes pre- and posttesting needs to be undertaken to determine whether such programs, which may well be developing skills, could also be having a deleterious psychosocial effect. Qualitative and longitudinal research would give direction to evidence-based interventions aimed at reducing the psychosocial damage of unemployment.

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