

Type of contribution

Paper

Title of proposal

Too old for work? Associations between perceived age discrimination and job search behaviour among older unemployed people in a mediational model

Information on how the contribution is related to the conference theme

This study focuses on a relevant activity for career development throughout individuals' working lives – job search – among older unemployed people. In labour markets characterized by increasing precariousness, frequent career transitions and widespread age discrimination, older unemployed are a particularly vulnerable group to social marginalization and exclusion.

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General description on research questions, objectives and theoretical framework

While in most developed economies the need of longer working lives has been acknowledged, due to accelerate demographic ageing, it is not less true that many older workers face particular challenges in the labour market, both in keeping their employment and becoming reemployed after redundancy. As official statistics show, long-term unemployment rates are substantially higher for older unemployed individuals when compared to their younger counterparts. Moreover, there is a high probability that official unemployment figures do not represent all older unemployed individuals who actually are without a job, but who in the absence of job opportunities have given up and not actively seek a job anymore, eventually withdrawing from the labour market earlier than they would like (McNair, 2011). Despite being a particularly vulnerable group in the workforce, older unemployed seem however to be an understudied population in unemployment research.

As job-changes and transitions in and out of work are increasingly frequent (Barham & Hawthorn, 2010; Moraal & Schönfeld, 2011), the paradigm of lifetime employment, which was prevalent until not long ago, has shifted into two other paradigms – lifetime employability (Carbery & Garavan, 2005) and lifelong career development (Ohsako & Suzuki, 2008). Job search is more than ever a central activity for an individual's career development throughout working life (Van Hooft & Crossley, 2008) and there is extensive research evidence for the positive and significant impact job search has on the likelihood of reemployment (e.g., Wanberg et al., 2005). While job search is a highly relevant research topic (Côté et al., 2006), and, after well-being, represents the second most extensively researched construct in the unemployment literature (Creed et al., 2011), the group of older unemployed people has rarely been the focus of studies on job search behaviours.

Due to the high prevalence of negative age-related stereotypes, a central factor that may hinder the employment prospects of older adults is the discrimination on the grounds of age (e.g., Schalk et al., 2010), which may occur as early as age 40. Age discrimination consists of decisions made by an employer for a particular individual, at any stage of an employment contract (from the selection process until the end of the contract), that are only based on his/her chronological

age (Sargeant, 2001). While it is plausible that perceived age discrimination plays a significant role in older unemployed people's job search processes, to date this has rarely been investigated.

The present study aims therefore to contribute to a better comprehension of factors and processes that are associated with job search among older unemployed people (aged 40+), which may facilitate the development of more specific and effective intervention strategies directed towards the promotion of job search activity and, ultimately, the increase of older unemployed individuals' reemployment chances. Building on propositions from social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1997), as well as prior research on job search behaviour, we propose and investigate a parallel mediator model of three job search indicators (job search intensity, job search effort and job search intentions). Specifically, the model suggests: (a) a negative association between perceived age discrimination and job search self-efficacy, reemployment expectations and perceived control over reemployment; (b) a positive association between job search self-efficacy, reemployment expectations and perceived control over reemployment and the three job search indicators; (c) a negative relationship between perceived age discrimination and the three job search indicators that is mediated by lower levels of job search self-efficacy, reemployment expectations and control over reemployment. Furthermore, we also investigate differences in the model's components in terms of age, gender, educational level and length of unemployment, which are included as covariates in the model.

Methodology

Sample and procedure. The study had a cross-sectional design. Participants were part of a convenience sample of 176 Portuguese unemployed individuals (age range 40–64, $M = 51$, $SD = 6$; 67% had elementary education; 43% were women; the mean length of unemployment was 20 months; $SD = 14$). The data collection took place at the end of 2006 in five job centers run by the Institute of Employment and Vocational Training (IEFP) that were located in the Porto district in northern Portugal. Participants were personally invited by the first author to take part in this study at the end of general informative sessions and questionnaires were completed on-site.

Measures. All measures used a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 to 5, and higher scores indicated higher levels of each measured variable. *Perceived age discrimination* was measured with a five-item modified version of the scale of age-related risks to job or career changes (Bailey & Hansson, 1995). *Job search self-efficacy* was measured with a six-item scale that was

developed for this study after consulting other scales (e.g., Van Ryn & Vinokur, 1992). *Reemployment expectations* and *perceived control over reemployment* were both assessed by single items. *Job search intensity* (during the previous two months) was measured with a 13-item modified version of Blau's (1993) job search intensity scale. *Job search effort* (during the previous two months) was assessed with the four-item general effort job search scale (Blau, 1993). *Job search intentions* (within the next two months) were assessed by a single item.

Analyses. We first conducted a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) to examine differences in the model's predictors and outcomes in terms of age, gender, educational level and length of unemployment. To investigate the proposed model, ordinary least squares path analyses were calculated using the SPSS macro PROCESS (Model 4; Hayes, 2013). This macro allows for multiple mediators and covariates and investigates both direct and indirect effects using a bootstrapping approach to obtain estimates of confidence intervals (CIs). We run three parallel multiple mediator models (one for each outcome), in which the mediators operated in parallel, i.e., were simply allowed to correlate but were not specified to influence another mediator in the model. We used a 95% bias-corrected bootstrap to estimate CIs and calculated 10,000 bootstrap samples. Age, gender, educational level and length of unemployment were included in the models as covariates.

Results

Younger participants (aged 40-54) reported lower levels of perceived age discrimination and higher levels of job search self-efficacy, reemployment expectations, and job search intensity, effort and intentions than did participants aged 55+. Women reported higher levels of perceived age discrimination, and lower levels of job search intensity, effort and intentions than men. Participants with higher education (11+ years) reported higher levels of job search self-efficacy and job search intensity than those participants with up to 10 years of education. Participants who were unemployed for 12+ months reported higher levels of perceived age discrimination and lower levels of perceived control over reemployment than those who were unemployed for up to 11 months. These results suggest that among the unemployed aged 40+, women, those who have lower education levels and those aged 55+ are at higher risk of becoming discouraged in their job search. In times when demographic ageing has led to tightened

conditions qualifying for early retirement and increased statutory retirement ages, special attention should be paid to these groups to prevent social exclusion.

Job search self-efficacy and reemployment expectations were positively associated with the three job search indicators. When targeted at unemployed people, career counselling and guidance interventions should include, but surely not be limited to, job search training and focus on job search self-efficacy, which may promote perseverance in the face of setbacks. Perceived age discrimination was negatively associated with reemployment expectations and perceived control over reemployment, and the study found a significant indirect negative effect of perceived age discrimination on job search intensity, job search effort and job search intentions via lower reemployment expectations. These findings show the pervasive effects of age discrimination, which by decreasing job search activity through lowered levels of reemployment expectations, may lead to premature and involuntary labour market exits.

Intent of publication

We intend to prepare a manuscript and submit it for publication at Career Development International.

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