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By Ingusci, Manuti, Callea

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Employability as mediator in the relationship between the meaning of working and job search behaviours during unemployment

Emanuela Ingusci^{*a}, Amelia Manuti^b, and Antonino Callea^c

^a*University of Salento, History, Society and Human Studies Department Via Stampacchia 45, 73100 Lecce*

^b*University of Bari "A. Moro", Department of education, psychology and communication*

^c*University LUMSA - Roma, Human Sciences Department*

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Most of past research on job search has focused on the relationship between individual strategies and perceived quality of re-employment, focusing mostly on effort and intensity of job search behavior during unemployment. Few studies have investigated the role played by individual beliefs, values and representations of work in determining job search behavior during unemployment, while poor empirical evidences have been produced on the role of employability as a mediator in the relationship between the meaning of working and job search behavior. The aim of this paper was to explore if and to what extent employability activities could mediate the relation between the meaning attached to work, and job search behaviors in a group of unemployed. Data were gathered through public Employment Agencies. Participants (N = 385) were unemployed people living in the Southern Italy. Results showed that the relationship between the meaning of work and job search behavior was mediated by employability activities. Implications of the study are discussed in light with the development of social inclusion practices.

keywords: job search behavior, meaning of work, employability, unemployment.

*Corresponding author: emanuela.ingusci@unisalento.it

1 Introduction

Unemployment is a pervasive and ongoing societal issue which has well-documented and demonstrable negative consequences. When compared with employed people, unemployed ones manifest higher levels of depressive affect (Feather and Davenport, 1981; Feather and O'Brien, 1986), lower levels of self-esteem (Muller et al., 1993), and higher rates of psychological distress (Banks and Jackson, 1982; Henwood and Miles, 1987). Unemployment also contributes to the deterioration of family and spouse well-being and role functioning (Atkinson et al., 1986; Dew et al., 1987; Liem and Liem, 1988) and to lower subjective perceived competence (Warr et al., 1988), as well as to higher suicide and suicide attempt rates (Moser et al., 1984; Platt, 1986). Winefield et al. (2002) suggested that many negative psychological outcomes of unemployment could be related to the influence of the Western work ethic that promotes the perception of a person being a failure if unemployed. While the experience of unemployment is generally aversive, the impact on individuals psychological well-being is not uniform, neither universal (Callea et al., 2012).

In view of the above, the meaning people attach to their work could represent a crucial variable in the interpretation of such condition. Indeed, the meaning of working accounts for personal values, expectations, beliefs and attitudes toward work experience (Cortini and Manuti, 2008). From a societal point of view, the meaning of working is conceived as a set of shared interpretations of what people want and expect from work (Ruiz-Quintanilla and Claes, 2000: 335), responsible of both individuals actions and group processes. In other words, people not only develop work meanings as a result of their experience with work, but also use work meanings as a filter in their interaction with social structures and organizations. Thus, the meaning of working is a personal work ethic (England and Whitely, 1990), determined by the choices and experiences of individuals as well as the organizational and environmental context in which they work and live.

With reference to the special condition of unemployed people, the meaning of working could be an important antecedent of job search behaviour. Indeed, unemployed people generally try to deal with their stressful and often depressing condition of loss, by searching for a job (McKee-Ryan et al., 2005). According to Blau (1993;1994) job search behavior is conceived as a double-step process that could be analysed according to a preparatory behavior and an active job search behavior. During the preparatory phase, people tend to identify a set of initial job alternatives to consider through various (formal and informal) sources. In the active phase, people gather information, plan their action and concretely apply for the job position they have identified during the preparatory phase. According to the author, job search behaviour should take into account, at least two dimensions, which are inter-correlated. On the one hand, the whole of personal and social beliefs, values meanings and expectations about work that are individually developed by people in the course of life and that actually influence the attitude toward job search. On the other hand, the degree of passivity versus proactivity in searching for a job that an individual shows is a function of both personal, family and social features. In this vein, the meaning of working could be considered a manifestation of such

features. With reference to unemployed people, empirical evidences showed that the meaning of work could be responsible for the development of proactive job search behaviours (Van Hooft et al., 2005). Furthermore, employability was showed to be sitively related to the job search behaviours of unemployed people (Ingusci, 2015).

In light with the studies presented above, and moving from previous research focusing on the antecedents of effective job search (Vinokur and Caplan, 1987; Caska, 1998; Wrzesniewski, 1999), the meaning of work and employability were supposed to be significant predictors of job search behavior of unemployed. Hence, the theoretical model assumed that some indicators of the meaning of work (societal norms - work entitlements and obligation norm - and work centrality) could be significant predictors of job search behaviors. Further, the relationship between meaning of working and job search behavior could be mediated by employability activities, as showed in the following (Figure 1).

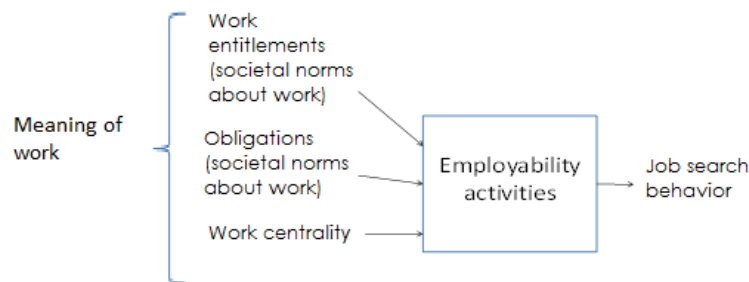


Figure 1: The theoretical model

2 The Meaning of Work (MOW)

As explained in the previous section, the meaning of working was supposed to be related to both employability and job search behaviour. According to the Meaning of Working team (Team, 1987) the construct encompasses different individual dimensions (work centrality, societal norms, work goals and valued working outcomes), that are in turn influenced by three distinct sets of variables (personal and family situation, present job and career history, and the macro socio-economic environment). Consequently, the interaction between these variables generates outcomes of working and subjective expectations about future working situations. This model is still a cornerstone in the field, although a number of studies showed that not all variables in the model had the same relevance across cultures and time. Hence, work centrality and societal norms were proved to be most persistent and thus to be significant components of the meaning of working construct (Ruiz-Quintanilla and Claes, 2000). Hence, work centrality was considered a crucial variable in the study of career starters work socialization (Peiró et al., 2002), of work motivation (Harpaz et al., 2003) as well as in the study of organizational adjustment (Ucanok, 2009). On the other hand, the contribution given by societal norms was examined in the investigation of organizational citizenship behaviours (Brummel and

Parker, 2015). However, few studies, as far as we know, investigated the relationship between meaning of working and job search behaviour. Yet, especially for young people taking their first steps in the labour market and/or for those looking for a job, the meaning of working constitutes an important component. It appeared to explain their attitudes, feelings and behaviour in the labour market. As such, the meaning of working may determine the experience of career starters and/or career seekers (Scholarios et al., 2003) as well as of those who are temporarily experiencing job loss. Accordingly, it could be argued that the meaning people attach to work, mostly meant as work centrality and societal norms about work could be considered as a guideline in the development of proactive job search behavior. More specifically, this could be mostly evident among unemployed people, as long as higher work centrality and higher orientations toward the obligation norm could be predictive of more proactive job search behavior.

3 Employability

In this frame, employability is a crucial variable since it represents an individual strategy toward a continuous updating of relevant skills for reemployment. Van Dam (2004) investigated employability orientation, understood as a set of attitudes and activities aimed at strengthening, developing and maintaining individual employability. This is thus a crucial variable in the understanding of active job search behaviour since it could allow people to enhance each personal and professional experience in view of professional improvement and attainment (Button et al., 1996). However, studies by Van Dam (2004) revealed that an employability orientation could be an important but not sufficient factor to produce individual employability. Yet, the construct of employability becomes more concrete as long as it catches the continuous strive and involvement in initiatives addressed to enhance learning and development. This is what is generally referred to as employability activities, namely a series of proactive and adaptive behaviours that allow a better fit between individual and organization (Crant, 1995). In view of this, for the sake of the study, employability was assessed through employability activities (Van Dam, 2004), conceived as the individual participation to training and development activities aimed at empowering ones skills and job opportunities.

4 Designing a study to test mediation

According to the method developed by Baron and Kenny (1986) (the most common method for testing mediation in psychological research), the mediating effects can be measured through four steps performed with three regression equations, establishing a variable mediates the relation between a predictor variable and an outcome variable. In the first step, the significant relation between a predictor variable and the outcome is showed (path c in Figure 2 A). In the second step, the predictor variable is related to the mediator (Path a in Figure 2 B), In the third step we can see that the mediator variable is related to the outcome variable (Path b in Figure 2 B), this relation is estimated controlling for the effects of the predictor variable on the outcome. Finally, in the last

step, the intensity of the relation between the predictor and the outcome is showed to be significantly reduced when the mediator is added to the model (see Figure 2 A Path c in comparison with Path c' in Figure 2 B) (Frazier et al., 2004).

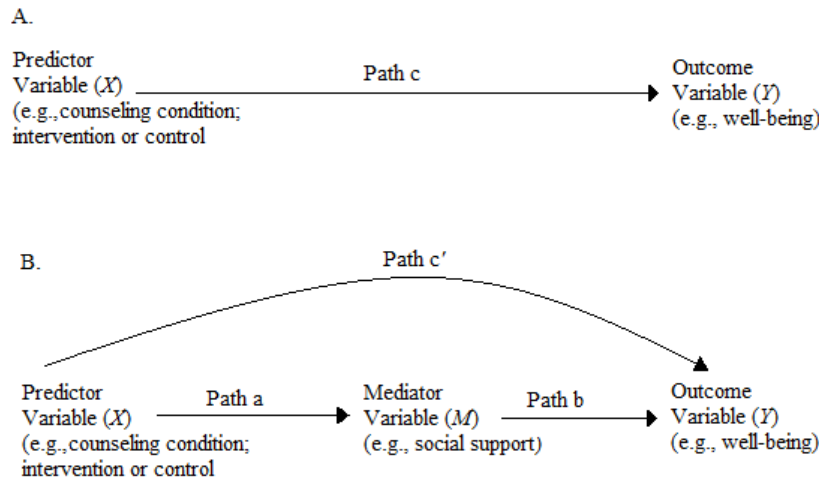


Figure 2: Adaptation of diagram of path in mediation models (Frazier et al., 2004)

Mediation analyses could be performed through two main methods: Multiple Regression and Structural Equations Models (SEM). Both methods follow the same logic same. Several authors (Baron and Kenny, 1986; Hoyle and Smith, 1994; Kenny et al., 1998) prefer to use SEM because it allows a better control for measurement error, furthermore it provides good information about the fit of the model and in many cases, it is more flexible than multiple regression. However, in some research areas when a sufficiently large sample is difficult to be recruited (such as in the case of unemployed people), multiple regression could be used as a valid alternative option (Holmbeck, 1997; Frazier et al., 2004).

4.1 Hierarchical Regression

Multiple Regression was used to test the hypotheses. Within applied research in social sciences, multiple regression is used as a data-analytic strategy to explain a relationship between variables, especially when the aim is to assess a prediction relationship between independent variables and a criterion variable (Petrocelli, 2003). In their review, Wampold and Freund (1987) distinguished between stepwise and hierarchical regression. Stepwise regression concerns choosing predictors that have to be analyzed moving from the statistics. Hierarchical regression, on the other hand, is guided by theoretically-based decisions, namely predictors are chosen basing on the theoretical model assumed. Yet, stepwise regression is often used to explore prediction, whereas researches typically use the hierarchical regression when the aim is to examine specific theoretically based hypotheses (Aaron and Aaron, 1999; Cohen, 2001). Hierarchical regression aims to ex-

amine how much the additional contribution that an independent variable X_2 , inserted after the X_1 , provides the explanation of the dependent variable. The researcher decides the order of the input variables, depending of theoretical hypotheses. The researcher needs hypotheses that directly come from the theory. The input sequence is important to understand how the new inserted variables modify the dependent variable, so it possible to test whether independent variables change their predictive power. In this procedure, the independent variables enter into the equation, in an order defined by the researcher, based on logical or theoretical considerations. Each independent variable is taken into account carefully as it could add new meanings to the explanation of the dependent variable, as compared with the variables previously entered. “[...] In hierarchical regression, the focus is on the change in predictability associated with predictor variables entered later in the analysis over and above that contributed by predictor variables entered earlier in the analysis . Change in R^2 (ΔR^2) statistics are computed by entering predictor variables into the analysis at different steps. Statistics associated with predictor variables entered in later steps are computed with respect to predictor variables entered in earlier steps. Thus, ΔR^2 and its corresponding change in F (ΔF) and p values are the statistics of greatest interest when using hierarchical regression [...]” (Petrocelli, 2003: p. 11). Hierarchical regression could be performed for several aims; in the present study, this method was carried out to test mediating hypotheses.

4.2 *The role of the mediator variable*

According to Baron and Kenny (1986), a variable functions as a mediator to the extent that it accounts for the relation between the predictor and the criterion. Mediators explain how external physical events take on internal psychological significance. Moderator variables specify when certain effects will hold, while mediators accounts for the intensity of the effects and for the reasons why such effects are registered. Baron and Kenny (1986) introduce a path diagram as a model for depicting this causal chain (2). “[...] This model assumes a three-variable system such that there are two causal paths feeding into the outcome variable: the direct impact of the independent variable (Path c) and the impact of the mediator (Path b). There is also a path from the independent variable to the mediator (Path a). According this approach, a variable functions as a mediator when it meets the different conditions. The first one is variations in levels of the independent variable significantly account for variations in the presumed mediator (i.e., Path c). The second one is related to variations in the mediator significantly account for variations in the dependent variable (i.e., Path b). Finally, the third one is observed when Paths a and b are controlled, a previously significant relation between the independent and dependent variables is no longer significant, with the strongest demonstration of mediation occurring when Path c is zero. Concerning the last condition, a continuum could be observed. When Path c is reduced to zero, a strong evidence for a single, dominant mediator was showed. If the residual Path c is not zero, this indicates the operation of multiple mediating factors. Because most areas of psychology, including social and work and organizational psychology, treat phenomena that have multiple causes, a more realistic goal may be to seek mediators that significantly decrease Path c

rather than eliminating the relation between the independent and dependent variables altogether[...]" (Baron and Kenny, 1986: 1176). From a theoretical perspective, a significant reduction demonstrates that a given mediator is indeed powerful, even if it is not a necessary and a sufficient condition for an effect to occur (Callea et al., 2014).

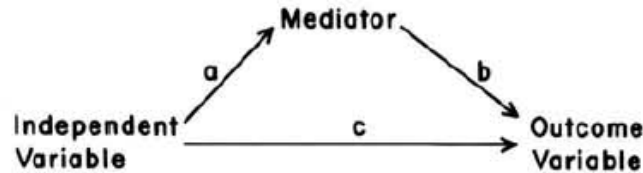


Figure 3: The path diagram (adapted from Baron and Kenny, 1986)

Mediation analyses with multiple regression can be assessed by estimating the following equations (Preacher and Hayes, 2004):

$$\hat{Y} = i_1 + cX \quad (1)$$

$$\hat{M} = i_2 + aX \quad (2)$$

$$\hat{Y} = i_3 + c'X + bM \quad (3)$$

In the figure above presented, “ i ” is an intercept coefficient. A perfect mediation is called when the effect of X on Y decreases to zero with the inclusion of M , (James and Brett, 1984, define this situation complete mediation). When the effect of X on Y decreases by an inappreciable amount, but not comparable to zero, partial mediation is said to have occurred. In addition to satisfying these conditions, two further assumptions must be occurred in order to assert that mediation happened, according to Baron and Kenny (1986); there should be no measurement error in M , and Y should not cause M . Finally, is possible to calculate the percentage of the indirect, or mediated, effect, dividing aXb/c .

5 Aims and Hypotheses

The overall purpose of this study is to identify the relationships between dimensions of the meaning of work, employability and job search behaviours in a sample of unemployed workers enrolled in different employment agencies. In the present study, we assume that employability could be a mediator of the relationship between the meaning of working and job search behaviour, leading to the following hypotheses:

- H1: Work entitlements (H1a), Obligation (H1b) and Work centrality (H1c) will be positively related to job search behavior;

- H2: Work entitlements (H2a), Obligation (H2b) and Work centrality (H2c) will be positively related to employability;
- H3: Employability will be positively related to job search behavior;
- H4: Employability will mediate the effect of Work entitlements (H4a), Obligation (H4b) and Work centrality (H4c) on job search behavior.

6 Sample and procedure

Participants were 385 unemployed people enrolled in different employment agencies in the Southern Italy. They filled in a questionnaire individually while they were waiting to be received by operators. The informed consent was requested and privacy was guaranteed. Participants were invited to think about what working meant to them both in the present situation and in the future. Similarly, their job search behaviour were questioned. The distributed questionnaires were introduced by a short text explaining that the study dealt with the meaning of work and with career planning strategies during this difficult moment of transition. Participants were told that the information provided were strictly confidential, that they would be combined, and analysed with those of other participants who took part to the survey. Finally, they were told that there were no right or wrong answers, the study being concerned with personal experience of working. Participants were both males (27.3%) and females (72.7%); Mean age was 25.89 (SD= 8.301). With reference to their last occupation, participants had worked in primary sectors (2.6%), in secondary sector (16.8%), and most of them (80.6%) had worked in tertiary sector (global services, tourism sector).

7 Variables and Measures

The questionnaire used as research tool encompassed both a socio-biographical section and the scales used to measure the constructs investigated. For the purpose of the present study, the meaning of working was defined conceptually in terms of two major domains (work centrality and societal norms). These domains as well as their measurement scales were developed in the original Meaning of Working study (Team, 1987).

1. Work centrality. Work centrality refers to the degree of general importance that working has in the life of individuals at any given time. Two measures of work centrality were used. The first is an absolute measure, which assessed the overall importance of work in the individual life (ranging from 1 “lowest importance” to 7 “highest importance”). The second is a relative measure of the meaning attributed to work, which was assessed by requesting participants to distribute 100 scores within some areas of their life, such as family, community, work, religion, and leisure.
2. Societal norms about work. Respondents evaluated a set of 10 normative statements about work in terms of what people should expect from working entitlements

(e.g. five statements such as “if a workers skills become outdated, his or her employer should be responsible for retraining”) and obligations (e.g. five statements such as “it is the duty of every able-bodied citizen to contribute to society by working”). Respondents rated these normative statements on a 4-point scale (1 “strongly disagree” to 4 “strongly agree”).

3. Job Search Behaviour Scale (Blau, 1994). It consists of 12 items explaining the original two factors (Preparatory Job Search Behaviour - 6 items - and Active Job Search Behavior - 6 items). The subjects were asked to indicate how often they performed each of the job search behaviours presented within the past six months. Answers were assessed using a five-point Likert scale where 1 corresponded respectively to Never (0 times); 2 = rarely (once or twice); 3 = some time (three to five times); 4 = often (six to nine times); 5 = very often (more than ten times). Example items about preparatory job search behavior are: item 3 “Prepared/revised your resume”, item 1: “Read the help wanted/classified ads in a newspaper, journal or professional association”. About active job search behaviour, example items are: item 5: “Filled out a job application”, item 4: “Sent our resumes to potential employers”.
4. Employability Activities Employability activities were measured using a scale adapted from Van Dam (2004). It consists of 6 items concerning individual actions aimed at employment opportunities. The activities carried out to develop and improve own employability are essential for employees and in general for individual who are seeking a job (Sutton, 1998; Van Dam and Menting, 2012). Example items are: item 5 “In the past, I have engaged in development activities that were not directly necessary for my job”; or item 3: “I make sure to be informed about internal job vacancies”. Respondents rated these items on a 4-point scale (1 “strongly disagree” to 4 “strongly agree”).

8 Data analysis

Means, correlations and Cronbachs alpha were performed. Furthermore, hierarchical regression analyses were run, in order to test the mediating role of employability in the relationship between the meaning of work and job search behaviour, we followed recommendations by Baron and Kenny (1986) for testing mediation. Conditional for mediation was that meaning of working was related to job search behaviour (H1), that meaning of working was related to employability (H2), and that employability was related to job search behaviour (H3). To test hypotheses H1a-c, independent variables were entered in the first step. To test hypotheses H2a-c, we regressed independent variables on mediator (Step 2). To test hypotheses H3, we regressed mediator on dependent variable (Step 3). Finally, to test mediation hypotheses, we regressed independent variables and mediator on dependent variable (Step 4). Evidence for mediation was found when meaning of work had a smaller or non-significant relationship with job search behavior when introducing employability.

9 Results

In the Table 1 means, standard deviations, correlation coefficients, and Cronbachs alpha coefficients for job search behavior, employability activities, work centrality, work outcomes and work entitlements are showed.

Table 1: Means, standard deviations, correlations and Cronbachs alpha coefficients

<i>Variables</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>6</i>
1. Employability activities	3.81	0.80	.88					
2. Preparatory job search behavior	2.76	0.98	.51**	.81				
3. Active job search behavior	3.03	0.94	.42**	.58**	.82			
4. Work outcomes	4.22	0.54	.31**	.25**	.22**	.76		
5. Work centrality	3.79	1.19	.30**	.35**	.30**	.23**	–	
6. Work entitlements	4.31	0.55	.21**	.19**	.24**	.45**	.26**	.72

N = 385; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$. Values along main diagonal are coefficient alphas for scaled variables. Gender: 0 = female, 1 = male.

Firstly, scaled variables reached good reliability, with Cronbachs alpha coefficients between .72 and .88. Moreover, work centrality was positively correlated to job search behavior and employability activities; employability activities was positively correlated to job search behavior. In order to test mediation hypotheses, regression analysis were performed (Table 2). In the Step I, work entitlements ($\beta = .144$, $p < .001$) and work centrality ($\beta = .279$, $p < .001$), were positively related to job search behavior, but work obligations had not a significant relation with the latter. In the Step II, work entitlements ($\beta = .155$, $p < .001$) and work centrality ($\beta = .212$, $p < .001$) were positively related to mediator variable (employability activities), but work obligations had not a significant relation with the latter. In the Step III the mediator variable (employability activities) was positively related ($\beta = .503$, $p < .001$) to job search behavior. Finally, in the Step IV, employability activities ($\beta = .468$, $p < .001$) and work centrality, with smaller relationship ($\beta = .176$, $p < .001$), were still related to job search behavior, but work entitlements and work obligations had not a significant relation with the dependent variable; confirming partially the hypothesis of mediation (H4).

Table 2: Summary of hierarchical regression analysis: predicting job search behavior

Job search behavior (N= 385)				
	Step I	Step II	Step III	Step IV
Work entitlements	.144**	.155**		.072
Work obligations	.118	.036		.105
Work centrality	.279**	.212**		.176**
Employability activities			.503**	.468**
<i>R</i>	.424	.548	.503	.577
<i>R</i> ²	.179	.300	.253	.332
<i>F</i>	20.717**	40.433**	128.817**	37.450**

* $p > .005$; ** $p > .001$.

Step 1: regression of JSB on independent variables

Step 2: regression of employability on independent variables

Step 3: regression of JSB on mediator variable (employability)

Step 4: regression of JSB on independent variables and on mediator variable (employability)

10 Discussion

The aim of the present study was to advance understanding about psychological correlates of meaning of work. Multiple regression partially confirmed the hypotheses. Centrality of work was proved to be related significantly to job search behavior as mediated by employability activities. This result has many interesting implications both for theory and for practice.

From a theoretical point of view, this study contributed to the understanding of the role played by individual beliefs about work, such as the centrality, to the development of proactive strategies to improve ones one skills. Hence, as far as we know, very few studies investigated the meaning of work as antecedent of both employability and job search behavior at least during unemployment. Previous studies in the field, as the one by McArdle et al. (2007), concentrated on employability and found it positively related to re-employment, while job search was proved a non-significant predictor of re-employment. On the other hand, the literature on employability was very productive in the last few years but mostly concentrated on its relationship with job insecurity and career success (De Witte and De Cuyper, 2015; Lo Presti and Pluviano, 2015). Therefore, a gap in the literature as for the investigation of important predictors of these kind of behaviors such as meaning of working was found. As for the distinctive features of the sample involved, namely unemployed, empirical evidences (see for instance, Brief et al., 1995) focused on the importance of the economic functions of works and showed that length of the unemployment experience was associated with increasing economic and experiential deprivation. Economic deprivation was associated with both more experi-

ential deprivation and lower levels of subjective well-being in unemployed individuals. However, even with respect to this aspect very few studies have concentrated on the meaning of working as a driver for job search behaviors in unemployed workers.

The paper has several limitations that must be cited. First, the cross-sectional data limited the possibility to establish causal relationships between the meaning of working and job search behaviour and, in particular, employability as mediator, because all variables were measured at the same time. Although the limit of cross-sectional study, the causal relationship may be justified from theoretical and logical point of view; as a matter of fact, is not possible hypothesize that the relationship may also occur in the opposite direction, because in several previous studies job search behaviour was always considered as a consequence of meaning of working and employability. In further research can be controlled the goodness of these assumptions through longitudinal studies. Another limitation concerns common method variance problems that may affect the real relationships between measures due to measurement errors. Therefore in further research is preferable consider at the same time the relationships between observed and latent variables and the relationships between latent variables (Podsakoff et al., 2003), through Structural Equation Modeling that also allows to test mediation hypotheses using advanced techniques as bootstrapping.

Finally, the number of variables included in the present study was limited; further research may tested the relationships the meaning of working and job search behaviour also considering more variables, for example self-esteem, self-efficacy or optimism, that may have positive effects on job search behaviour.

With respect to the practical implications of the study, results could be very useful to plan and design interventions and social policies for unemployed people (Benevene and Cortini, 2010; Manuti et al., 2015). At the level of private organizations, results could help developing outplacement activities aimed at enhancing the employability skills of unemployed workers. On the other hand, in public institutions, namely employment agencies, results could support unemployed in overcoming the social and psychological deprivation that follows to the experience of job loss. Accordingly, results could be precious for public health services to control and cope with the increasing of mental health problems, such as anxiety or depression due to job loss, with extreme consequences for the family and for physical and psychological health of family components.

Moreover, future studies should further consider the role played by the sociodemographic variables, such as age and educational level, as mediators in the relationship between meaning of working, employability and job search behavior. Yet, the perception of job loss and consequently job search intensity could be differently characterized in young, middle age and mature unemployed workers as well as in people with a high or a low social capital (Mannetti and Tanucci, 1993). Therefore, the suggestions coming out from the present study suggest that future research could concentrate on the relationship between the MOW and job search behavior mediated by employability, comparing different group age generations, as for instance Baby boom generation, X generation and Millennium Generation, as showed by research in the field (?).

Finally, research could investigate whether the replication of the study in different geographical areas (for example, in the Northern Italy) may provide different results. Future

research may replicate the study in other countries with different labour markets and different economic and social contexts, specifying past work experiences of unemployed workers too, in order to increase the chance of generalizing the results.

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