Effects of meaning in life and of work on health in unemployment

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Abstract

In line with the meaning making theory, people experience a discrepancy when their appraised meaning of a situation is in conflict with their general meaning framework. We wanted to replicate this result in the context of unemployment. Heren the meaning of work and meaning in life influenced the perception of unemployment and consequently had an impact on mental health. This study points to new ways of thinking about unemployment and career transitions. Whereas the COVID-19-induced economic crisis will see millions of people losing their jobs, these results could assist counselors in helping unemployed people better understand the experiences they are going through.

Keywords

cognition, emotions, meaning, mental health, unemployment

Introduction

Work is known to play a significant role in supporting mental health. This has been demonstrated with various theories such as Jahoda's Deprivation Model (1982) or Warr's Vitamin Model (1987). Latent functions, similar to the vitamins in Warr's model, show that these features cover basic human needs that are necessary for developing and maintaining mental health. More specifically, in Jahoda's Deprivation Model (1982), the manifest function of work is to gain money and buy material goods, but work also provides a person with the latent functions of work, such as collective goals, time structure, social contacts, status, and activity (Jahoda, 1982). The loss of these functions causes a latent deprivation, which is the origin of psychological distress in unemployment (Creed and Evans, 2002; De Witte et al., 2012; Paul et al., 2009; Paul and Batinic, 2010; Selenko et al., 2011). McKee-Ryan et al. (2005) and Paul and Moser (2009) showed the difference in this regard between employed and unemployed people, so that the unemployed indeed had lower levels of mental health. Furthermore, they highlighted the effect of job loss on mental health using a longitudinal study, following individuals as they move from employment to unemployment and back to employment. Not only did these studies show a decline in participants' physical health after they lost a job, but there was an increase in

participants' mental health after they found a new job, suggesting a causal effect.

Scholars identified one of the latent factors, "collective purpose," as a measure of meaning (Paul and Zechmann, 2018; Steger and Dik, 2009). This would be in line with Frankl (2006), who classified work as a main source of meaning in life. Therefore, in the context of unemployment, it is possible that people not only lose their job but also experience a loss of meaning. This loss can be recognized as a cause of distress, as presented in the meaning-making process (Park, 2010). This model suggests that people experience distress if their appraisal of the meaning of an event is discrepant with their global meaning. In the context of unemployment, Paul and Moser (2006) proposed the idea of incongruence as an explanation for the psychological distress that people experience after losing a

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job. They showed that unemployed people with a high level of work commitment tend to find themselves in an incongruent state. The results confirmed that people in this state exhibit a stronger relationship between employment commitment and distress symptoms.

Congruence or comprehension is considered to be one of three main components of meaning of work (Morin, 2008). The tripartite model of the meaning of work (Morin, 2008) is similar to the tripartite model of meaning in life (George and Park, 2016) and consists of three components: (a) mattering/personal significance, (b) purpose, and (c) comprehension/coherence (George and Park, 2016; Heintzelman and King, 2014; Martela and Steger, 2016; Morin, 2008; Reker, 2000; Steger, 2012). *Mattering* means that the life of a person has significance and holds value. It means that a person's actions have consequences and make a difference in the world. *Purpose* is a person's motivation or drive to achieve valued life goals. It is important to emphasize that in the literature, *purpose* and *meaning* are often used as synonyms, but according to the tripartite model of meaning in life, purpose is an element of meaning (Steger et al., 2011). Frankl (2006) already identified the *will to meaning* as a propulsive force, and therefore, mattering and purpose are considered to be motivational components of meaning, whereas the last element of meaning, *comprehension*, is considered to be a cognitive element. *Comprehension* means understanding and perceiving coherence in one's life and life experiences (George and Park, 2016; Proulx and Inzlicht, 2012). People try to make sense of their experiences and aim to perceive their lives as a coherent whole (Antonovsky, 1993). An event is meaningful if a person perceives it as coherent with his or her beliefs or ideologies (Baumeister, 1991; Heine et al., 2006).

Whereas people can be in an incongruent state during unemployment, they are still able to know the purpose and meaning in their life because meaning in life comes from different sources (Baumeister, 1991; Frankl, 2006). We therefore view the presence of meaning in life as a general concept that should have a positive effect on the unemployed. The knowledge of one's meaning in life is considered to be an important aspect of health (Heintzelman and King, 2014; Steger, 2009) and coping (Park, 2010). Taking this into account for stressful life events means that people who perceive their lives as meaningful can better manage such situations. Frankl (2006) had already claimed that "there is nothing in the world. . . that would so effectively help one survive even the worst conditions as the knowledge that there is meaning in one's life" (p. 126). To know one's meaning in life is therefore considered a key element for enduring meaningless situations. In a clinical context, Thompson et al. (2003) showed that logotherapy helps to strengthen a person's purpose in life, which again has a positive influence on coping and quality of life.

In previous studies, the concept of *unemployment normalization* has shown promising results as a coping strategy, and as a strategy for emotional regulation in the unemployment context. Unemployment normalization is based on the idea of normalization (Ashforth and Kreiner, 2002) and has been adapted to the unemployment context (Pignault and Houssemand, 2017; Houssemand and Pignault, 2017). Unemployment normalization is constructed of four dimensions (Pignault and Houssemand, 2017; Pignault and Houssemand, 2018). The first two explain the affective component of unemployment normalization. *Negative perception of unemployment* explains the negative experience of unemployment, and *positive perception of unemployment* shows the positive attributes or benefits of unemployment. The other two describe cognitive aspects of unemployment normalization. *External justification of unemployment* focuses on explaining one's situation due to factors related to conditions that are not under the control of the individual. The last dimension, *unemployment norm*, measures the social perception of unemployment as an inevitable life event. Unemployment normalization showed two opposite effects on mental health in a previous study (Pignault and Houssemand, 2017). It can have detrimental effects such as when a person blames the situation on external factors, and therefore experiences the situation as being negative. It can also have positive effects on mental health, such as when a person considers unemployment to be normal or ordinary and therefore reappraises the positive sides of the situation (Houssemand and Pignault, 2017; Pignault and Houssemand, 2017, 2018; Thill et al., 2019).

The present study

Given that unemployment normalization is considered a coping strategy during unemployment with a balance of positive and negative impacts on health, we first expected to confirm this dual relationship between unemployment normalization and health in this study. Moreover, we wanted to expand our knowledge of coping by exploring how meaning in life and meaning of work influence unemployment normalization. As we mentioned above, *meaning* is comprised of three components. *Congruence* or *comprehension* has been considered an important factor of meaning, especially regarding stressful life events. If a situation is incompatible with one's global beliefs, the individual perceives a discrepancy, which is thought to be the cause of distress experienced during such an event (Park, 2010). *Purpose* and *mattering*, the two other factors of meaning, have been shown to be beneficial for mental health (Frankl, 2006; Ryff and Singer, 2009). In this study, we therefore analyzed the two effects of meaning on the unemployed person. This means that on the one hand, we considered the possibility that meaning – more precisely a high level of meaning of work – may have a negative impact on the unemployed, due to stress caused by the incongruence between a person's beliefs and the person's actual situation (Paul and Moser,

2006). On the other hand, we hypothesized that the presence of meaning – more precisely meaning in life – may have a positive influence on the unemployment experience and consequently reduce the stress that people experience during unemployment (Frankl, 2006; Steger, 2009).

Methods

Participants and procedure

A total of 165 unemployed people participated in this study. According to the guidelines of the International Labour Organization, an unemployed person is a mature person without work who is actively looking for a job (Eurostat, 2019). Participants were addressed personally at the *Agence pour le Développment de l'EMploi* (ADEM), the Public Employment Services (PES) in Luxembourg. They were informed that the questionnaire was part of an academic study conducted by the University of Luxembourg. Additionally, participants had to give their consent that the data could be used for research purposes, and they had to consent to the publication of the results of the study. Participation was voluntary and confidential. Modalities for data collection have been accepted by both the FNR experts and the public employment services' partners in France (Pôle emploi) and Luxembourg (ADEM). Information about the study, the identities of the researchers and the guaranties mentioned above have been communicated to the participants in oral and written form. Moreover, the *Luxembourg Agency for Research Integrity* (LARI) specifies that according to Code de la santé publique – Article L1123-7, it appears that France does not require research ethics committee (Les Comités de Protection des Personnes (CPP)) approval if the research is non-biomedical, non-interventional, observational, and does not collect personal health information. Otherwise, with regard to Luxembourg regulations, Code de déontologie médicale, Chapter 5, Article 77 of states "The experimentation on a healthy subject is admitted if it is about a person of major age able to give freely his consent." Further text describes providing information for the consent process.

The average age of the participants was 40.68 (SD = 9.42). The majority were women ($n = 90$) and had children ($n = 98$). Ninety participants were married or were part of a couple, and 52 were single. The rest were divorced or separated from their former partner. A total of 41 unemployed people were living alone. Concerning unemployment length, the majority had been unemployed for a short time: 76 participants had been unemployed for less than 6 months, 51 between 6 months and a year. The other 38 unemployed people had been in their situation for more than a year. One hundred two participants were receiving unemployment benefits, and about 50% of those participants believed that the unemployment benefits were not enough. Ninety participants had prior unemployment experience.

Measures

The questionnaire was composed of four major scales. Participants answered the Unemployment Normalization Questionnaire, which uses four factors to evaluate how people perceive unemployment. The Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ) measures the presence of meaning in life and the search for meaning in life. Meaning of work was measured with the four factors from the Meaning of Work Inventory (IST – *Inventaire du Sens du Travail*). The last questionnaire, the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12), was used to assess mental health. The whole questionnaire was in French, one of the official languages in Luxembourg.

Unemployment Normalization Questionnaire. The Unemployment Normalization Questionnaire (Pignault and Houssemand, 2017) consists of 16 items, which form four factors. The first factor, negative perception of unemployment (five items; $\alpha = .77$), refers to the perception of the negative consequences of unemployment. By contrast, the positive perception of unemployment (five items; $\alpha = .74$) factor specifies that unemployment might be considered an opportunity. External justification (three items; $\alpha = .59$) explains how people "justify" their situation as a consequence of uncontrollable factors (Pignault, 2011). Unemployment norm (three items; $\alpha = .69$) refers to the impression that unemployment is a "normal" stage in a person's professional career. Negative perception of unemployment and positive perception of unemployment compose the affective dimension as they explain how people experience unemployment. External justification and unemployment norm form the cognitive dimension as they refer to how people explain their situation to themselves. Participants are asked to indicate their level of agreement on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). External justification and unemployment norm show low internal consistencies, which may be due to the small number of items and the number of dimensions on the questionnaire (Cortina, 1993).

Meaning in Life Questionnaire. The meaning in Life Questionnaire (Steger et al., 2006) assesses the presence of and the search for meaning in life. Item ratings range from 1 (absolutely untrue) to 7 (absolutely true). Presence of meaning in life and search for meaning are each represented by five items. The internal consistencies of both dimensions were good. Cronbach's alpha for presence of meaning in life was $\alpha = .86$. Cronbach's alpha for search for meaning was $\alpha = .87$.

Meaning of work inventory. The meaning of work inventory (Arnoux-Nicolas et al., 2017) consisted of 15 items. Participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement on a scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The 15 items formed a four-factor model. The four factors assessed the importance, comprehension, direction, and purpose of work. The items on this questionnaire had to be rephrased so they would make sense for people without a current job. Therefore, we used "work" as a general term instead of "my job." Importance of work was assessed with four items ($\alpha = .90$). The second factor, comprehension of work, was represented by three items ($\alpha = .74$). Three items assessed direction of work ($\alpha = .75$). The last factor, purpose of work, contained five items ($\alpha = .73$).

General Health Questionnaire. The GHQ-12 (Goldberg, 1972) is a 12-item measure that assesses lack of mental health in the general population. The French version (Langevin et al., 2011; Lesage et al., 2011; Salama-Younes et al., 2009), which was used in this study, shows a high level of internal consistency ($\alpha = .91$). A 4-point Likert scale was used with different anchors for different questions. A high score indicated mental health risks.

Statistical analyses

All the statistical analyses were executed with the open source software R. Structural equation modeling with the R-package Lavaan used the diagonally weighted least squares estimator (Carroll, 1961; Muthén, 1984) to appropriately account for the ordinal level of the measurement of the data (Stevens, 1946).

Results

Before focusing on the hypotheses, we investigated the relations between the demographic factors and the various psychological concepts. Analyses of variance showed no significant differences between men and women for unemployment normalization, mental health risks, and both meaning scales. Marital status again had no relation with any of the constructs, but having children was associated with the meaning scales and the perception of the unemployment norm. Presence of meaning in life ($F = 16.01$; $p < 0.001$) and the three subscales of the meaning of work, *work importance* ($F = 5.05$; $p < 0.05$), *direction of work* ($F = 4.72$; $p < 0.05$), and *purpose of work* ($F = 5.34$; $p < 0.05$), were more important for people with children. However, the perception of the unemployment norm ($F = 5.25$; $p < 0.05$) was more important for people with no children.

Unemployment recurrence was not related to the psychological constructs, but length of unemployment went along with an increase in the negative perception of unemployment ($F = 3.27$; $p < 0.05$).

After the analyses of variance, we also verified the relationships between age and the different constructs. Results indicated that older people had higher scores on presence of meaning in life ($r = .161$; $p < 0.05$) but also higher scores on mental health risks ($r = .202$; $p < 0.01$). There were no significant correlations between age and the unemployment normalization factors or meaning of work factors.

Links between unemployment normalization, meaning, and health

First, we computed correlations between the different variables in order to understand the possible relationships. Table 1 presents the correlations between all of the dimensions.

Mental health problems were negatively correlated with presence of meaning in life and positive perception. External justifications of unemployment and negative perception of unemployment were positively correlated with mental health problems. Meaning of Work and the perception of the unemployment norm were not significantly related to mental health. The presence of meaning in life was only related to meaning of work. Meaning of work was negatively correlated with positive perception of unemployment. Negative perception of unemployment was also negatively correlated with positive perception of unemployment but showed a positive relationship with external unemployment justifications. Purpose of Work was negatively related to search for meaning in life and unemployment norm.

Path analysis of unemployment normalization

On the basis of the correlations described above, we computed several path analyses including the abovementioned psychological variables. To simplify the representation of the models, the links between the items and their corresponding latent constructs are not shown, and only significant relations between the constructs are displayed.

In a first model, we checked for the influence of unemployment normalization on mental health risks (RMSEA = .045, CFI = .987, TLI = .986). The two cognitive dimensions of unemployment normalization had an effect on the two affective dimensions of unemployment normalization. More specifically, external justification had a positive influence on negative perception, and unemployment norm had a positive effect on positive perception of unemployment. There was also a negative correlation between positive and negative perceptions of unemployment. People who perceived unemployment as negative showed higher mental health risks. Figure 1 shows the representation of the first model.

In a second model, we checked for the impacts of meaning in life and meaning of work on mental health (RMSEA = .058, CFI = .990, TLI = .988). The results showed that the presence of meaning in life had a negative

Table 1. Correlations between normalization dimensions and psychological variables.

	1. GHQ	2. P-MiL	3. S-MiL	4. WI	5. UW	6. DW	7. PW	8. NEG	9. POS	10. JUST
1. GHQ										
2. P-MiL	−0.176*									
3. S-MiL	0.111	−0.059								
4. WI	0.046	0.350***	0.068							
5. UW	0.077	0.342***	−0.046	0.724***						
6. DW	−0.018	0.418***	−0.092	0.560***	0.534***					
7. PW	−0.084	0.419***	−0.166*	0.594***	0.728***	0.572***				
8. NEG	0.527***	−0.049	0.079	0.100	0.038	0.040	0.011			
9. POS	−0.265**	−0.078	0.034	−0.424***	−0.306***	−0.255**	−0.253**	−0.205**		
10. JUST	0.263**	−0.064	0.010	0.022	−0.026	−0.023	−0.067	0.343**	0.025	
11. NORM	−0.009	−0.121	−0.102	−0.065	−0.125	−0.130	−0.164*	0.029	0.139	0.139

GHQ: general health questionnaire; P-MiL: presence of meaning in life; S-MiL: search for meaning in life; WI: work importance; UW: understanding of work; DW: direction of work; PW: purpose of work; NEG: negative perception of unemployment; POS: positive perception of unemployment; JUST: external justification; NORM: unemployment norm.
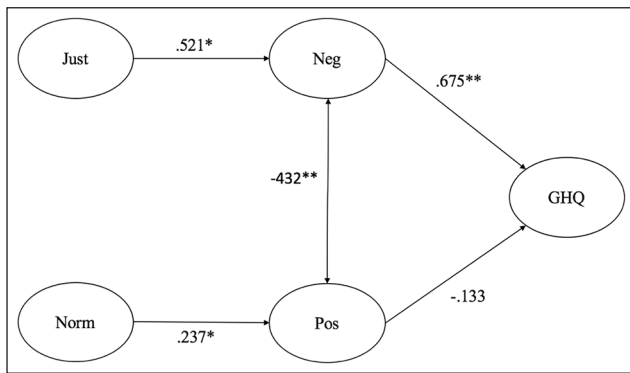*$p < 0.05$. **$p < 0.01$. ***$p < 0.001$.

Figure 1. Path analysis between unemployment normalization, and mental health problems.
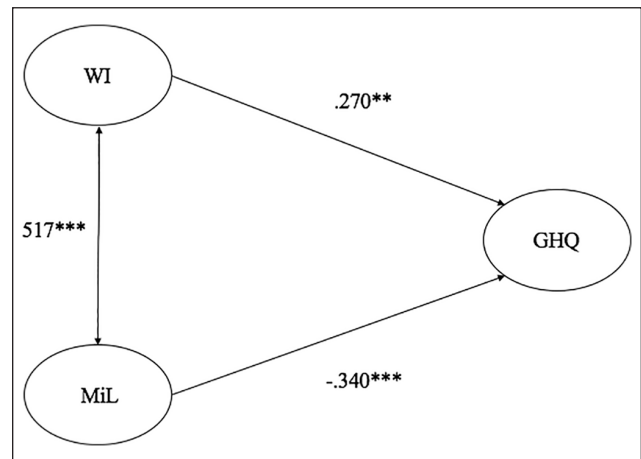

Figure 2. Path Analysis between meaning of work, meaning of life, and mental health problems.

effect on mental health risks, and work importance had a positive effect on mental health risks. The correlation between the two predictor variables was positive. It is important to note that we had to exclude some variables from the model. The *search for meaning in life* dimension from the meaning in life questionnaire did not show a significant relationship with other constructs. Therefore, we removed this dimension from the following models. For the meaning of work questionnaire, we only kept the *work importance* dimension for two reasons. This will be discussed in more detail in the Discussion section. The second model is shown in Figure 2.

The final heuristic model shows the mediating role of unemployment normalization between mental health risks and meaning of work and meaning of life (RMSEA = .052, CFI = .980, TLI = .978). The model is represented in Figure 3. External unemployment justification had a strong positive effect on negative perception of unemployment, and unemployment norm had a positive effect on positive perception

of unemployment. Negative perception of unemployment had a strong influence on the GHQ score, whereas positive perception had a rather moderate negative impact on mental health risks. Work importance had a strong inhibiting effect on positive perception of unemployment, but it had no further interactions with any of the other constructs. The expected relationship with negative perception of unemployment and the direct relationship with lack of mental health could not be verified (Paul and Moser, 2006). Presence of meaning in life showed a positive effect on positive perception of unemployment, but it did not show an effect on negative perception of unemployment. External justification was negatively influenced by the presence of meaning in life. Meaning in life also showed a direct negative effect on the GHQ score. The model also showed a strong positive correlation between work importance and meaning in life.
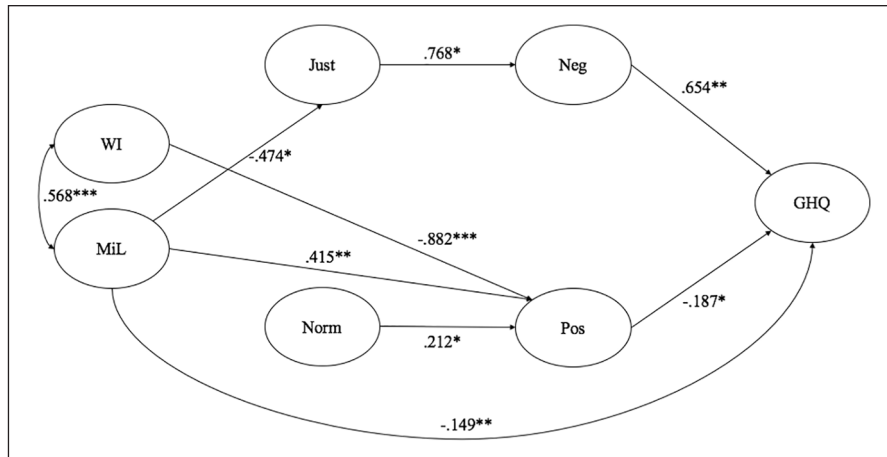
Figure 3. Path Analysis between meaning of work, meaning in life, unemployment normalization, and mental health.

Discussion

Unemployment can be considered as one of the most stressful events in people's lives (Hobson et al., 1998). It causes depression and related symptoms, and it features psychic and social costs (Frey and Stutzer, 2002). The deleterious effects of unemployment on very different aspects of mental health and well-being are analyzed by many studies in the social and behavioral sciences (e.g. Probst, 2009). In particular, unemployment is linked to a constant decrease in subjective well-being, or a linear increase in negative emotions (Lucas et al., 2004; McKee-Ryan et al., 2005; Paul and Moser, 2006, 2009; Schöb, 2013; Wanberg, 2012). These consequences of unemployment correspond to stress reactions, and reflect feelings of coping inadequately with a situation (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). Coping processes are used as a specific behavioral response in a stressful situation caused by unemployment. In particular, the use of strategies based on proactive behaviors have a positive effect on well-being and perceptions of uncertainty (Mantler et al., 2005). Several models have been proposed to clarify the active processes used for coping with unemployment (Pignault and Houssemand, 2018; DeFrank and Ivancevich, 1986; Latack et al., 1995; Gowan and Gateway, 1997; Leana et al., 1998; Waters, 2000). From these studies, a general processual model of coping with unemployment can be created. Unemployed people use cognitive mechanisms to appraise the present period of their career path. Their perception depends upon personal and individual factors, but also on the general social and economic situation (Leana and Friedman, 1988). This process uses two sequential steps: a cognitive reappraisal that seeks to decrease the gap between reality and expectations (unemployment and will to work); and an emotional adaptation which regularizes situational arousal. This double-behaviors process, which features cognitive and emotional dimensions, permits the maintenance of psychological equilibrium during unemployment, and explains long-term effects or outcomes of psychological, social and physiological well-being. The process of unemployment normalization can be considered as being one of these coping processes. It is an emotional regulation process based on cognitive reappraisal where unemployment is viewed as a "normal" and "inevitable" phase in a person's career path, and as a result of external circumstances. The outcome of this process is that a person's feelings about being unemployed are less negative, and thus stress may decrease.

Considered as a coping strategy, the unemployment normalization strategy is studied in the present research as a mediator between meaning and mental health. Before discussing the main findings, we will mention some interesting results in the preliminary statistics. People who had children showed significantly higher scores on meaning of life and work importance than people without children. From an existential perspective, life is considered to have no meaning per se, but it contains meaning (Reker and Wong, 1988). Baumeister (1991) expanded this existential perspective on meaning and claimed that people find meaning in different domains such as family, faith, or work, among others. Hence, people with children might find more meaning in their lives because they have an additional source of meaning in their lives. The results also showed that people with children attribute greater importance to work. This might be because people with children have a more important responsibility. They work not only for themselves but also for their children. This might also be the reason why people with children showed a lower score on the unemployment norm than people without children. People with children cannot perceive unemployment as a normal stage in life because they need to guarantee a safe future for their children. These results are in line with previous research (Pignault and Houssemand, 2017; Luhmann et al., 2014).

With regard to the length of the current unemployment period, people in long-term unemployment showed significantly higher scores on negative perception of unemployment than people in short-term unemployment. This

has already been discussed in previous research (Thill et al., 2019).

Another interesting result concerning the age of the participants showed that, on the one hand, older people showed higher scores on the presence of meaning in life (Steger et al., 2006), but on the other hand, they also showed higher scores on mental health risks. Reker and Fry (2003) explained that with increasing age, the personal meaning system becomes more integrated and consolidated. There might be a difference in temporal orientation, such that whereas young adults focus more on future goals, older adults tend to view their past achievements as fulfilled or in the process of being fulfilled (Van Ranst and Marcoen, 1997). This might explain the higher scores on the presence of meaning in life for older people compared with younger people.

The main purpose of this study was to identify how meaning of work and meaning in life influence the perception of unemployment and consequently impact mental health. We achieved this goal by computing several path analyses. First, we calculated a correlation matrix between the different psychological constructs. This matrix was used as the basis for the path analyses that followed and helped us identify the important factors. *Search for meaning in life* was not related to any of the other constructs and was therefore excluded from the path analysis. This is probably due to the fact that the search for meaning in an adverse event is a different construct than the search for meaning in life in general (Steger et al., 2011). The three factors of meaning of work, *direction of work, work finality*, and *comprehension of work*, were excluded from the structural equation model for two reasons. First, work importance was the closest dimension to work commitment used in the incongruence study by Paul and Moser (2006). Second, we tested different models and noticed that the model worked best with a single dimension. An explanation for this might be the strong correlations between the four dimensions of the meaning of work questionnaire. Therefore, we used *work importance* solely for meaning of work in the heuristic models.

In the first model, we differentiated between two negative and two positive factors for the structure of unemployment normalization. People with a high level of external justification during unemployment also perceived this situation as more negative. People who considered unemployment as a normal stage in life identified unemployment as more positive. A negative correlation between positive and negative perceptions of unemployment was found (Pignault and Houssemand, 2017; Thill et al., 2019). The *negative perception of unemployment* had a strong positive effect on distress (Houssemand and Pignault, 2017; Pignault and Houssemand, 2017, 2018; Thill et al., 2019). Different from what we expected, *positive perception* did not lower the level of distress. In earlier studies, we had already found that the effect of negative perception of unemployment was

lower than the opposite effect of positive perception (Pignault and Houssemand, 2017; Thill et al., 2019). However, both effects were always significant. In this study, the relation between positive perception and mental health risks was not significant. An explanation for why people are able to perceive unemployment as positive in some cases but not in others is that the difference might be due to different factors. Thill et al. (2019) found evidence that the stage of the unemployment experience is an important indicator of when the positive perception of unemployment has a significant effect on mental health.

External justification and unemployment norm were not directly related to mental health.

In the second model, we analyzed the influence of meaning of work and meaning in life on mental health. As expected, both variables showed a significant effect on mental health risks. On the one hand, people with a high meaning of work also showed a higher risk of mental health problems. This might be due to the incongruence people with a high level of work commitment experience after job loss (Paul and Moser, 2006). On the other hand, people with high meaning in life showed a lower risk of suffering from mental health problems. People who perceive their life as meaningful and purposeful tend to show fewer health risks (Steger et al., 2006). Meaning in work was also positively correlated with meaning in life. This might represent the fact that work is a strong source of meaning in life (Baumeister, 2001; Frankl, 2006).

In the final heuristic model, we analyzed the role of unemployment normalization as a mediator between mental health and meaning. Different from the previous model, *work importance* did not show a significant direct relationship with mental health risks. *Work importance* was also not indirectly related to lack of mental health through *negative perception of unemployment*, but it showed a strong negative impact on *positive perception of unemployment*. This could mean that the state of incongruence is not shown through a direct link between *work importance* and *negative perception of unemployment* or even distress. However, it may be shown through a suppression of the ability of the unemployed person to perceive positive aspects of unemployment and therefore may have a full mediated effect on distress through the *positive perception of unemployment*.

On the other hand, the *presence of the meaning in life* showed the expected direct link with distress. People who perceive their lives as meaningful and purposeful show fewer risks of suffering from mental health problems (Steger et al., 2006). *Meaning in life* also had an effect on *positive perception of unemployment* and on *external justification of unemployment*, but again, it had no effect on *negative perception of unemployment* or *unemployment norm*. The link between *meaning in life* and *positive perception* was positive, which means that people who perceive their lives as meaningful and purposeful also perceive unemployment as a more positive experience. This

relationship leaves room for interpretation. People who know the meaning and purpose of their lives might be better able to see positive aspects of unemployment because they are aware of their goals and do not consider unemployment to be a life-changing event but either as only a minor setback or even as a convenience (Fryer and Payne, 1984). They might still feel able to pursue their career goals. For example, unemployment could be an opportunity to start a training program or even completely change one's career path.

Another less work-related explanation could be that people with a high level of meaning in life will want to pursue other goals during this event. These might be goals that they could not pursue while they were working. As already mentioned before, from an existential perspective, meaning in life can be drawn from different life domains (Baumeister, 1991). Maybe people who are unemployed can focus on other life domains such as family or leisure and therefore view their situation as more positive. The results of the demographic analyses showed that people with children showed higher meaning in life. People could spend more time with their children during unemployment, for example. However, it is important to note that there is a strong positive correlation between work importance and meaning in life. This means that work plays an important role in people's lives. Previous research has shown that work is one of the main sources of meaning in life (Frankl, 2006). Work importance considers work in general and not specifically employment. People might view housework and caring for their children as work. Some researchers have even hypothesized that job seeking could be considered work (Amundson and Borgen, 1982). Not only does meaning in life influence the positive perception of unemployment, but it also shows a negative effect on external justification. This means that people with a high level of meaning in life resort to external justification less often (e.g. blaming their unemployment on the economy). These results are similar to those from a study in which people's homes were damaged or lost in a fire (Thompson, 1985). The people who found positive meaning were less likely to blame others and were better able to cope with the situation.

In addition to this topic being of scientific interest, it provides greater understanding of coping processes which can be used during periods of unemployment. It also investigates how personal characteristics affect perceptions of meaning in life and the meaning of work. Thus this research may lead to practical prescriptions. For example, career or job counselors should take unemployment normalization into account when helping people to better understand the experience they are going through. This might permit people to see this as a transitory phase which gives them an opportunity to rethink their career and their ideas about the meaning of work. They could achieve a greater degree of subjective well-being by decreasing unemployment-related stress. Furthermore, the Covid-19 health crisis will see millions of people being made unemployed, and has led to the expression of the desire for sometimes radical changes in the content and modes of working. Thus, the study of meaning in life and work is more relevant than ever. Now, the current pandemic-induced economic crisis will lead to numerous job losses, with deleterious effects on physical and mental health, as has already been highlighted by previous studies, such as those linked to the Great Recession of 2007–2009 (Kirsch and Ryff, 2016). It is with humility that we suggest that the results of our study can help those in charge of counseling unemployed people. This study points to new ways of thinking about meaning in life as well as their current and future work situations.

Conclusion

In sum, the relation between unemployment normalization and distress supported the expected results except for positive perception of unemployment. In the first model, positive perception did not have a significant effect on mental health risks. However, this relation always showed a significant buffering effect on mental health. In the third model, we again found this significant effect of positive perception of unemployment. Meaning was found to have two opposing effects on mental health (Model 2) and on unemployment normalization (Model 3). Different from our expectations, work importance did not influence the negative perception of unemployment and was not directly related to mental health. However, the strong negative impact of work importance on positive perception might represent a milder form of incongruence through the process of not necessarily perceiving unemployment as more negative but by blocking the perception of the positive aspects of unemployment. The presence of meaning in life had an opposite but weaker influence on positive perception of unemployment, but meaning in life also showed a negative influence on external justification and even a direct influence on distress. In accordance with logotherapy (Frankl, 2006), meaning in life showed a positive effect on the perception of a stressful life event and even mental health. Our findings showed that perceiving one's life as meaningful and not only focusing on work could be interesting factors for people who are stressed during unemployment. This means that people should continue to pursue goals and use their time during unemployment in meaningful ways so that they can remain healthy and be able to accelerate their reemployment.

Limitations and future research

A minor limitation of this study is the small sample size. Even though the path analyses showed excellent fit indices, the research would profit from a larger sample size.

Another limitation of this study is related to the setup of the research. A longitudinal study would be able to provide more insights into the process of unemployment normalization.

Here, we could only compare people instead of following people over a certain timeline. A study in which people are followed over a period of time from employment to unemployment, over a period of unemployment, or back to reemployment could be very beneficial. This leads to interesting questions for future research. Does the relationship between meaning and unemployment perception change over time? Does work importance show an impact on negative perception in different stages of unemployment? Does positive perception in this case function as a coping strategy during unemployment (Pignault and Houssemand, 2018)? This last question arises because Folkman (1997) proposed that positive reappraisal is a meaning-making coping strategy. In this case, future research could aim to determine whether work importance will lead to a situation of incongruence with negative consequences and whether unemployment normalization can function as a meaning-making strategy.

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