Assessing the experience of unemployment and its associated coping strategies:

Grasping context-specific details using Photovoice

Yannick Griep[1], Elfi Baillien[2], Isabelle Ysebaert[3], & Hans De Witte[3, 4]

[1]*Work and Organisational Psychology (WOPs), Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Belgium*

[2]*Work and Organisation Studies Research Group, University of Leuven Campus Brussel, Belgium*

[3] *Research Group Work, Organisational & Personnel Psychology, University of Leuven, Belgium*

[4]*Optentia Research Programme, North-West University, Vanderbijlpark, South Africa*

Despite the significant contributions made by previous unemployment studies, we aim to further unravel the complex reality of being unemployed. To do so, we introduce Photovoice to grasp the experience of unemployment and its coping strategies from the perspective of the unemployed. We used a phenomenological approach to analyze the photographical data from this Photovoice project. Participants mainly conveyed financial problems associated with unemployment. In terms of coping strategies, participants mainly relied on emotion-focused strategies in which they combined personal and social resources to offset the negative effects of unemployment. Our findings supported and expounded the latent deprivation and agency restriction theory used in unemployment research.

Keywords: Unemployment, Experience of unemployment, Coping, Photovoice.

Address of correspondence: Yannick Griep, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Faculty for Psychology and Educational Sciences, Research Group of Work and Organisational Psychology (WOPs), Pleinlaan 2, 1050 Brussels, Belgium. Tel: 0032-2-6292479, E-mail: yannick.griep@vub.ac.be

Introduction

By social scientific research standards, the grounds for confidence in the claim that unemployment is experienced as a detrimental situation that causes psychological and physical distress are compelling (for a meta-analysis see McKee-Ryan, Song, Wanberg, & Kinick, 2005; Paul & Moser, 2009). Perhaps the most influential theory explaining these detrimental consequences of unemployment has been Jahoda's (1982) latent deprivation model (for a review see Creed & Bartrum, 2006). According to Jahoda (1982), unemployment deprives an individual from both manifest (i.e., income) and latent (i.e., time structure, social network, participation in collective effort, social identity, and regular activity) benefits of employment and by doing so decreases psychological and physical health (e.g., Hoare, & Machin, 2010; Paul, & Batinic, 2010). Indeed, a plethora of research suggests that being unemployed may result in a range of stress-related, psychological, and physical consequences for the unemployed such as a decreased life satisfaction and self-esteem, feelings of depression and pessimism (McKee-Ryan et al., 2005; Mohr & Otto, 2011), a higher likelihood of psychosomatic disorders (Paul & Moser, 2009) and a lower self-rated physical health (Mohr & Otto, 2011). These stress-related, psychological, and physical consequences of unemployment are influenced by individuals' choice of coping strategies (Wanberg, 2012).

According to Snyder and Dinoff (1999, p. 5) coping could be defined as "a response aimed at diminishing the physical, emotional and psychological burden that is linked to stressful life events and daily hassles". As such, coping strategies comprises the appraisal of the threat posed by an external event (i.e., unemployment) and the thoughts and actions taken to protect one's well-being. It entails constantly changing one's cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding one's resources (Lazarus, & Folkman, 1984). Generally, coping strategies have been positioned as either problem-focused—aimed at eliminating the stressor by engaging in adaptive behavior—or emotion-focused—focused at the regulation of negative emotions—to control or minimize the emotional distress (Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989; Weiten, 2010). In her review of the literature, Wanberg (2012) argues that a negative appraisal of one's unemployment in combination with an ineffective coping strategy results in reduced well-being.

Despite their significant contributions to today's knowledge about unemployment, we argue that these studies may not fully cover the complex reality of being unemployed. The results obtained from these studies were predominantly established using quantitative methods that tapped into unemployment and its consequences by means of pre-structured questionnaire items (for a review see McKee-Ryan & Kinicki, 2002; McKee-Ryan et al., 2005). As a consequence, these studies may only have partially revealed (1) how the unemployed experience their unemployment (i.e., consequences), and (2) what opportunities they see to deal with their unemployment (i.e., coping strategies). In reply to this we aim to add to the existing knowledge by introducing a participatory action research method labeled Photovoice—concisely defined as "a process by which people can identify, represent and enhance their community issues through a specific photographic technique" (Wang, Cash, & Powers, 2000, p. 82)—into the field of unemployment research. By building on a specific photographic technique this method adds to existing findings by grasping more context-specific details and processes in an attempt to gain a better understanding about the experience of unemployment and the coping strategies associated with unemployment. In other words, adopting Photovoice allows us to understand the associated problems of unemployment from the perspective of people affected by those problems in the context were the problems occurred (Fryer & Fagan, 2003; Rappaport, 1987).

In what follows, we will first introduce Photovoice as a method to identify and present the complex phenomenon of unemployment, its associated outcomes and coping strategies. Next, we will identify experiences of and coping with unemployment and consequently explain these findings in reference to the dominant theoretical framework of Jahoda (1982) and the general coping theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Introducing Photovoice to unemployment research

The key objective of this study was to gain a better understanding of the (1) *experience of unemployment,* and (2) *coping strategies adopted by the unemployed* in its complex context. In order to capture this information from the perspective of the unemployed, we adhered to the Photovoice methodology (Wang & Burris, 1994, 1997: Wang et al., 2000). Photovoice is a particularly appropriate method given the objectives of this current study for several reasons. First, Photovoice entrusts cameras to the hands of people to enable them to document the reality of their daily lives and its associated significance from the perspective of the research participant (e.g., McIntyre, 2003; Wang & Burris, 1997). In other words, the specificities of Photovoice allows participants to both identify and present the phenomenon of interest (i.e., experience of and coping with unemployment) by giving personal meaning to the associated problems. By adopting this method, we were able to sidestep the limitations of classic survey designs as the process of Photovoice can affirm the ingenuity and experience of society's most vulnerable populations such as the unemployed. Furthermore, the photographical component of Photovoice enables researchers to gain "the possibility of perceiving the world from the viewpoint of the people who lead lives that are different from those traditionally in control of the means for imaging the world" (Ruby, 1991, p. 50). Put

differently, the use of photographs may identify important nuances and factors that may otherwise not have been identified or mentioned when using other qualitative or quantitative methods (Palibroda, Krieg, Murdock, & Havelock, 2009; Rhodes, & Hergenrather, 2002). The use of photographs provides the researcher with a window into a much richer and complex setting from the participant's reflection. The process of discussing the content of these photographical images allows participants to share and guide researchers into the complex reality of a phenomenon as seen through the lens of the participant (Collier, 1979). Moreover, numerous researchers (e.g., McIntyre, 2003; Wang, & Burris, 1997) have underlined the value of photographs when facilitating reflection and discussion.

Study context

The Brussels-Capital Region was selected as a research context as it is a textbook example of what is called the "Urban Paradox" (Brussels Observatorium voor de Werkgelegenheid, 2009; Peterson, 1991). Although Brussels is—in terms of GDP per capita—one of the wealthiest regions in Belgium and is economically growing at a faster pace (2.8%) than Flanders (2.1%) and Wallonia (1.9%), they are at the same time struggling with an unemployment rate of 22% (Brussels Observatorium voor de Werkgelegenheid, 2009; Eurostat, 2011; Thys, 2009). This "Urban Paradox" becomes even more evident when shedding light on the internal socio-economic differences within Brussels. Although Brussels generates 1.170.000 jobs—or 26.7% of all Belgian jobs—the unemployment rate is increasing steadily over the years. In addition, approximately 50% of all workplaces in Brussels are destined for highly educated people. However, about 75% of all unemployed people in Brussels are less educated; a number that has only been increasing over the last years (Brussels Observatorium voor de Werkgelegenheid, 2009; Observatorium voor Gezondheid en Welzijn van Brussel-Hoofdstad, 2011). Moreover, factors as ethnical discrimination, the high competition pressure, the low level of bilingualism of unemployed, and the residential segregation leaves a continuously growing group of unemployed people in Brussels without jobs (Thys, 2009).

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited in collaboration with an employment guidance office located in Brussels. The employment guidance office and the Photovoice project team recruited seven participants during the spring of 2012 who met the following conditions for participation: being unemployed for longer than six months, living in Brussels, having an interest in sharing thoughts about unemployment, and being willing to commit time to the project. Because Photovoice is an unfamiliar process that requires a substantial investment in terms of time and effort, potential respondents were first invited to attend a workshop designed to familiarize them with Photovoice and explain the implications on time and effort. Of the seven individuals who attended this introduction workshop, four agreed upon participation and were asked to sign an informed consent explaining the purpose of the study, the procedure and timetable, the possibility to stay anonymous and to withdraw from the project at any given point in

time. Of the final participants, three were female and one was male, their age ranged from 23 to 36 years. The length of unemployment ranged from eight months to two years.

Procedure

In line with recommendations put forth by Wang and Burris (1997) and Wang and Redwood-Jones (2001), we organized a one-day training during which participants were explained the four areas of privacy regarding the act of taking pictures (i.e., intrusion of people's private space, disclosure of embarrassing facts, giving a false image of a person through a photograph and using photographs for commercial purposes). Moreover, they received photography training and a briefing on ethics and safety. However, throughout this training we tried to minimize technical advice (e.g., the use of specific shutter time) to avoid stifling people's creativity (Wang & Burris, 1997). Participants were subsequently provided with a basic auto focused 35-55mm camera and an SD-card. They were asked to take photographs using two framing questions as guidance for the respondents of their photographs: (1) how do you experience being unemployed?, and (2) how do you cope with being unemployed?

Guided by four established Photovoice manuals (Blackman, & Fairey, 2007; Palibroda et al., 2009; Shimshock, 2008; Gustafson, & Al-Sumait, 2009), the third author of this paper organized a bi-weekly group meeting during a period of three months. The purpose of these meetings was to fully involve the participants in a three-stage process that provides the foundation for further analysis: 1) selecting, thus choosing those photographs that most accurately reflect their experience of and coping with unemployment, 2) contextualizing, thus giving meaning to the selected photograph and 3) codifying, thus identifying the significance behind the photograph (Wang & Burris, 1997; Wang, & Pies, 2004). During these bi-weekly sessions, participants individually presented the photographs they took. They explained how these photographs related to their experience of, and coping with being unemployed. Subsequently, the group selected— using a group voting process—the three images (four images were selected in two of the six sessions) they considered to reflect best their common problems and coping strategies (stage 1; selecting). During a final group session participants engaged in dialogue with each other and the facilitator about the meaning of the selected photographs in terms of the meaning for their experience of unemployment and their coping strategies with unemployment. The role of the facilitator was to stimulate the overt sharing of ideas and encourage the active participation from all group members without taking on a superior position (Blackman, & Fairey, 2007; Schwartz, 1994).

We used the SHOWED-technique proposed by Shaffer (1983) and Wang (1999) to stimulate the group discussion by asking the following specific questions: (1) what do we see here?, (2) what is really happening here?, (3) how does this relate to our lives?, (4) why does this situation, concern or strength exist?, and (5) what can we do about it? (stage 2; contextualizing). Through the use of this SHOWED-technique, multiple meanings for a singular photograph were generated in the form of discussion transcript that can be used by the group for codifying. At the end of the group discussion, participants were asked to signify and rank (from most important to less important)

the main issues that had been mentioned during the entire group discussion (stage 3; codifying). All group discussions were recorded with permission of the participants.

Analytical strategy

a) Data. A Photovoice project produces several types of data from the photographs, recorded reflections to discussion transcripts about the photographs. In a first step, we decided to only focus on those photographs that were selected for the final group discussion ($N = 20$) instead of focusing on all photographs that were taken throughout the course of the Photovoice project ($N = 426$). The decision to focus on the selected photographs was grounded in the specific nature of the participatory research methodology in three distinct ways: (1) the selected photographs embodied an issue that was considered to be of significance for the entire group, (2) these photographs were given meaning and significance throughout the group discussions, and (3) these photographs entailed the richest impression of participants thought and feelings.

b) Within-case analysis. As the scope of this study was to develop a better understanding of the experiences and applied coping strategies of the unemployed, we selected a phenomenological approach to analyze the photographs. Such an approach seeks to understand empirical matters from the subjective perspective of those under study (i.e., our Photovoice project participants) while interpreting the meaning and significance given to these experiences (Rieman, 1998). Consistent with the phenomenological approach to data analysis of among others Giorgi and Giorgi (2003) and Rieman (1998) we followed several iterative stages/phases during the analysis. At first, a framework of key interpretation questions (i.e., What do the unemployed experience? How do the unemployed cope with their unemployment? How is this a barrier in their daily life?) was developed to guide our process of identifying the main themes in the data. Next, the initial framework was reviewed and improved to reflect the different ways the unemployed experienced and coped with their unemployment. For example, interpretation questions such as "Do the unemployed have hope for a better future" were included. Two coders subsequently applied this interpretation framework to seek for *first-order significant statements* (e.g., this photograph is important because it shows poverty associated with unemployment) in each case transcript. In a second step, the *second-order meaning* (e.g., poverty associated with unemployment is important because financially unemployment slowly turns into a disaster) was assigned to represent the formulated meaning of participants (Rieman, 1998). To make sure that both coders were using the integrative framework in a similar way, both coders first coded all four cases separately, before coding all four cases together. Dissimilarities in first-order significant statements and second-order meanings were discussed to reach consensus on the final use of the integrative framework.

c) Cross-case synthesis. Based on the resulting first-order significant statements and second-order meaning of each case summary overarching *themes* (e.g. financial situation) were identified through a process commonly described as a creative synthesis stage (Patton, 2001). Such a creative synthesis stage is characterized by the identification and integration of common themes that emerged from the significant statements and meanings in

an overall framework in order to capture the full meaning and significance of respondents' experiences and coping with unemployment. For example, all statements concerning monetary resources, loss of financial resources, unstable financial situation were incorporated in the overarching theme 'financial situation'.

Results

Through the photographs taken by the participants and the meaning and significance they gave to them, our cross-case synthesis identified respectively four and five overarching themes for the experience of unemployment and the associated coping behaviors.

Cues conveying the experience of unemployment

Four big overarching themes related to the experience of unemployment were identified in the cross-case synthesis. Moreover—as after the end of the final group discussion—participants were asked to identify and rank (from most important to less important) the main themes they identified throughout the codifying process, we present the overarching themes from most important to less important as identified by the participants.

Unstable financial situation. Participants frequently chose to photograph situations that represented financial problems associated with being unemployed (i.e., supermarkets they could not go to because it was to expensive, areas they could not live in because of the high rent, luxuries they could not afford). For example, several participants took photographs of goods or services they were unable to afford. One participant described the impact of her financial problems in the following way (see Figure 1): *"Obviously, financially, unemployment slowly turns into a disaster. This is a friend of mine, a mother, manually washing the clothes of her children like they did in the middle-ages. She can't afford to buy a washing machine, or to go to a laundry shop".*

Figure 1. Example photograph used to describe the unstable financial situation.

Besides the mere loss of financial resources and its influence on daily life, other finance-related consequences of unemployment were mentioned. For example, the inability to get a loan from the bank especially worried one participant: *"I feel like my life is on hold. I'm young, I'd like to construct a future, build a family in a nice family house in a safe neighborhood. But being unemployed and not getting out of that situation, means I don't get to move and I'm stuck in this dangerous neighborhood. Owners aren't fond of taking people in without a job, out of fear we won't pay".* Through interpretations such as these, participants conveyed the financial problems associated with their unemployment. The inability to provide in certain basic needs and the necessity to avoid certain "luxuries" served as concrete reminders of their financial problems. Participants were worried about the deterioration of their financial situation and were afraid to find themselves in poverty. At the root, these interpretations suggested that a financial unstable situation was meaningful and significant for the experience of unemployment.

Loss of time structure. In addition to their unstable financial situation, participants described the loss of time structure in their daily activities. They frequently chose to photograph signs that depicted time or deformed aspects of their lives. Their reflections and discussions about the significance and meaning behind these photographs suggested that a clear time structure is important because it communicates active involvement in the planning of one's day, life and community participation. This aspect was articulated by a participant who photographed her bed and alarm clock (objects depicting time): *"Sometimes I just stay in till noon, you know, and that's not because I'm lazy, I used to be a hard worker! It's because there are simply days you don't have a reason to get up, you have no obligations".* Similarly, several participants took deformed photographs (i.e., blurry) and reflected upon these photographs as being significant because these deformed images represented their experiences of being unemployed as described by one participant (see Figure 2): *"Everything is deformed in this picture of me in my apartment. I liked this photo-effect, because that's how my life feels now, deformed. I don't have a normal daily rhythm anymore".*

Narratives such as the ones presented above, seem to suggest that when participants are faced with unemployment they consider the loss of a daily time structure taxing on their daily life. It entails feelings of frustration and feelings of shame resulting from the loss of time structure. Some respondents talked about the confrontation with this 'deformed' life or 'lack of obligations' as becoming more invasive due to the daily confrontation with a lack of time structure.

Negative stereotypes. In addition to having implications for one's financial situation and perception of time structure, participants identified struggling with society's negative stereotypes towards them. The awareness that society judges the unemployed for being without a job was particularly salient in a commentary put forward by a young female participant who took a photograph of her empty bed: *"It's hard to face the judgment of people about unemployment. This stereotype that unemployed are lazy, staying in bed all day long and getting money for it, taking advantage of the system, it's not true!".* The same idea was put forward by another young female, in reflecting on a photograph of her bedroom in her parents' house: *"I had a very bad night and slept until 11o clock, I suffered from nightmares and*

anxiety. Unfortunately, I was staying with my mother and when she saw the time, she completely freaked. She told me that I'm useless, that I would get nowhere if I keep doing nothing. It was exceptional that I stayed in bed that long, but she immediately treated me it as if I always did that. People do that all the time; for them there's no difference between someone who has been 6 months unemployed or 10 years, we're all equally bad". Interpretations such as these illustrate how the unemployed are confronted with society's tendency to project characteristics of a few unemployed (i.e., those that do not look for a job) to the larger population of the unemployed. They reported feeling threatened by these prejudice and felt the urge to constantly defend themselves, even towards relatives.

Figure 2. Example photograph used to describe the loss of time structure.

Education and retraining. Finally, participants also described their need to have access to additional education and training. However, they strongly felt that efforts to access additional training were blocked by society and unemployment regulations. For example, several participants chose to photograph a classroom or training environment. In considering the significance of one of these photographs, a female participant commented: *"This is me with some friends from my training. Unfortunately, I can only get a discharge for training in a shortage occupation in my situation. This means that if I want to start the training of my interest, I would still be required to actively look for a job and I couldn't refuse jobs offered to me. It's hard combining study with job search and I'd like to finish this training completely to be able to do the job I really want for the rest of my life. These regulations doesn't make any sense, it discourages me".* Throughout these interpretations participants underlined their frustrations about the training and educational policy for the unemployed in the Brussels area. Participants had the feeling they were forced into doing nothing while they felt the need to do something useful. This need to do something useful is more than just a need for any activity as participants clearly considered the lack of additional educational training as stressful. Moreover, they highlighted the fact that having access to additional

education could be reinforcing and helpful when dealing with the negative aspects of unemployment.

Cues about coping with unemployment

Five big overarching coping themes were identified in the cross-case synthesis. Moreover—as after the end of the final group discussion—participants were asked to identify and rank (from most important to less important) the main themes they identified throughout the codifying process, we present the overarching themes from most important to less important as identified by the participants.

Social support. Seeking social support was the most prominent coping strategy identified by our participants. Several participants chose to photograph next of kin, friends or a partner who supported them. When participants shared the meaning behind these photographs, they described the significance of their friend or partner in terms of the role they play in their everyday life. One participant for example described the significance of a photograph of her and her partner in the following way (see Figure 3): *"It's my boyfriend that keeps me going, he encourages me. We're in the same situation and both of us have to deal with the continuous judging of the people around us. But when I'm with him, I feel good; I feel I have a future. Sometimes, I think he's the only thing that keeps me going, he's my source of motivation, I keep going to make him proud of me. You can see in this picture, that even if we don't have a job, we know how to love like other people, we can be happy like other people".*

Figure 3. Example photograph used to describe social support.

Narratives such as these illuminated participants' need for social support as a coping mechanism in times of unemployment. Some participants noted that they mainly sought social support among people who were also unemployed because they felt less-worthy and uncomfortable when being confronted with employed people.

Creating structure in time. In line with the loss of time structure discussed above, respondents underlined the

significance and meaning of creating a new structure in their day and lives. This can be understood from the feelings of frustration and shame resulting from the initial loss of time structure. For example, one female participant shared a photograph of her dog and expressed the significance of this photograph as followed: *"It's dangerous to adopt bad habits. If you don't have to get up at 7 o' clock for work, why would you get up early? Getting out of bed just for yourself can be really difficult. So recently I bought myself a dog and it changed so much. He gives me structure. I feel I have a responsibility again, I have to get up to feed him, walk with him, play with him".* Another, male participant photographed his three children and expressed the meaning and significance of this photograph as followed: *"If it wasn't for them there would be a big void I wouldn't know how to fill. They give me meaning and force me to structure my life".* Through these accounts participants underlined the negative experiences of the initial loss of time structure while they simultaneously highlighted their efforts to regain a sense of responsibility and control over their environment and emotions. Imposing a new time structure on one's day might serve as a way to deal with the negative consequences of a lack of time structure caused by unemployment.

Education and retraining. In addition, retraining was also identified as a resource when coping with unemployment, as represented by the photographs regarding education and retraining in the previous section. However—as described above—participants did not feel encouraged by the training and educational policy of the Brussels area to engage in any further education or training. Thus while participants had several frustrations about the training and educational policy for the unemployed in the Brussels area, having access to additional education and/or training was highlighted as being reinforcing and helpful when dealing with the negative aspects of unemployment.

Outdoor-activities. In addition to the previously described coping strategies, participants took numerous photographs of their activities, hobbies or voluntary work and gave meaning to these photographs by underlying the importance of such outdoor-activities. Their reflections about the meaning and significance of these outdoor-activities suggested the associated importance of these activities in their lives because they allowed them to detach from every day hassles of being unemployed. A young female participant, who shared a photograph of her going to dancing lessons, articulated these feelings and importance in the following way: *"Dancing is one of the only activities in which I can completely relax myself. Even when things are bad, I leave the house, I go to my dance class and I don't think of anything anymore, I feel freed".* Another participant photographed a man at his volunteering work and reflected on this picture in the following way: *"I go and volunteer with handicapped people. This guy on my picture immediately caught my attention. I really liked how he was having fun. He was constantly smiling, dancing, I mean, this guy has a handicap, he has to deal with being 'different' every day, but still he has found his way to be happy. That inspires me",* Interpretations such as these illustrated the meaning and significance these outdoor-activities had for the participants. The nature of these activities (i.e., all activities were unrelated to being either employed or

unemployed according to the participants) allowed them to detach for a moment from their home environment in which they are constantly reminded of their unemployment.

Hope. Finally, participants displayed an enduring belief in the eventual coming true of their goals and dreams. They frequently chose to photograph objects that depicted a sense of hope in the future. Their reflections about the meaning and significance of these photographs suggested that hope was the central key that kept them going and looking at the future. This hope for a brighter future was articulated in the following way by one of the participants (see Figure 4): *"This picture, it's like a haven of light surrounded by black. There is a lot of black, but if we persist, we will eventually achieve something, we must keep looking for that light, keep believing that we will find it. Where there is life, there is hope".*

Figure 3. Example photograph used to describe hope.

Another participant reflected on a picture of a friend holding a baby and expressed her view of hope for a better future as followed: *"This is my girlfriend with the baby of my cousin. When I saw those 2 together, I saw this vision of the family I want to have in a couple of years. This is my dream, us being a happy stable family later".* Through these narratives participants conveyed an enduring belief in the hope for a brighter future. The significance and meaning given to these photographs displayed the central importance of hope in a future time perspective. At their root these stories suggested that some belief in the eventual coming true of their goals and dreams were meaningful to the unemployed because they held an important place in their future orientation.

Discussion

The interest in this research was sparked by the conclusion that the results of several unemployment studies may only have partially revealed the associated problems of unemployment from the perspective of those affected by unemployment in the context were it occurred. Therefore, this Photovoice project did not statistically test whether the data supported a set of a priori hypotheses. Instead, we

adopted a problem driven approach to achieve a rich contextual understanding of how the unemployed experience and cope with their unemployment. The goal of this study was to achieve—in collaboration with the unemployed—understanding of the associated problems of unemployment in the context in which they occurred. Two main themes were tackled: (1) the experience of unemployment, and (2) coping with unemployment. The results presented here provide us with several important contributions and nuances to the existing conceptual understanding of both the experience of unemployment as the associated coping behaviors from the perspective of the unemployed.

Experience of unemployment

Whereas Jahoda (1982) mainly emphasizes the latent function of employment when explaining the detrimental consequences of unemployment for one's psychological well-being and risks of distress symptoms (Hoare, & Machin, 2010; Paul, & Batinic, 2010), participants in our study mainly identified their *unstable financial situation* as the most pressing problem associated with their unemployment. This focus on the monetary functions of employment (i.e., manifest functions) is more in line with Fryer's agency restriction model (1986, 1995). Fryer argues that the most important negative consequences of unemployment are attributed to the loss of sufficient monetary resources and financial stability. According to Fryer (1995) humans are agents that strive for a meaningful future in line with their personal goals, values and expectations. Following this perspective, Fryer (1995) argues that unemployment brings about poverty, future insecurity, and low social power, which eventually results in disempowerment and a reduction in psychological well-being. Although Fryer (1986, 1995) recognizes the importance of the latent functions (Jahoda, 1982), he considers them insufficient to fully explain the deterioration of one's psychological well-being. Findings from this Photovoice project suggest that the unstable financial situation plays a bigger role in influencing the psychological well-being of the unemployed than Jahoda (1982) initially proposed. In addition, we revealed new insights into the factors contributing to this unstable financial situation. While Fryer (1986, 1995) and Jahoda (1982) refer to the loss of income, findings from this Photovoice project revealed that this unstable financial situation included more aspects than merely the loss of income as our participants also underlined—for example— the inability to obtain a loan from the bank. Hence, our results advance the initial operationalization of Fryer (1986, 1995) and Jahoda (1982) by showing that manifest functions of employment are a broader category than previously expected.

In addition to their unstable financial situation, participants gave meaning and significance to the *loss of time structure*, which supports the importance of a daily time structure as argued by Jahoda (1982). Although Jahoda (1982) argued that the loss of a daily time structure is the most important aspect of unemployment influencing one's psychological well-being, participants in our Photovoice project identified it as the second import aspect. This suggests that financial stability is more important for their psychological well-being than having a well-defined structure in life (Fryer, 1986, 1995).

Next, our participants focused on an aspect of unemployment that has not covered by most studies on unemployment which mainly focus on the manifest and latent functions of employment. Compared to past research, this Photovoice project brings us more insights into the *negative stereotypes* society holds towards the unemployed. These prejudices are based on the postulation that one is to blame for one's unemployment and can easily find a new job with the right amount of effort. According to Steele and Aranson (1995) these negative stereotypes have an undermining effect on one's behavior and performance; a phenomenon often labeled as 'stereotype threat'. Once conscious about the fact that one is judged according to a stereotype, one develops the tendency to incorporate this stereotype in one's attitudes and behaviors. In reference to Jahoda (1982) latent deprivation model, some overlap—but not quite coincide—with "social identity" can be found. Jahoda (1982) postulated that people could connect with their job in such a way that it became a significant part of their identity and provided them with a sense of status. Consequently, becoming unemployed implies losing a part of one's self-esteem (McKee-Ryan et al., 2005). However, the way our participants described this problem, it is not so much the loss of their employment status that troubled them but it is primarily the gain of a new negative stigmatizing status that influenced their psychological well-being. By adopting this Photovoice methodology, we were able to further unravel the meaning of this "social identity" and uncovered that our participants felt that becoming unemployed labeled them with conceptions that did not correspond with their self-image.

Finally, participants in this Photovoice project gave meaning and significance to a forth theme labeled '*education and retraining*', originating in the respondents' frustration about the training and educational policy in Brussels. This theme partly covers what Jahoda (1982) has called 'regular activity'. According to Jahoda (1982) being unemployed means losing the regular activity that is normally provided by employment. This aligns with the impression our participants had about being forced into doing nothing while they felt the need to do something useful. However, this need for regular activity does not completely correspond to the more fine-grained answers of our Photovoice participants. Our participants reported more than just a need for any activity as they clearly underlined a need to have access to additional education and training. Offering such educational and training opportunities to the unemployed was proven effective in several studies (e.g., Oddy, Donovan, & Pardoe, 1984; Stenberg, & Westerlund, 2007) as education and training has the potential of providing many of the latent functions of employment. Moreover, participants considered these educational and training opportunities to be a reinforcing and helpful factor when dealing with unemployment. In other words, while the lack of access to training and education was taxing their well-being, they reported that training and education could be a potential meaningful way to cope with their unemployment.

Coping with unemployment

In reference to Carver et al. (1989) and the general coping theory of Lazarus and Folkman (1984), most of the coping strategies mentioned by the participants of this Photovoice project (*social support, creating structure in*

time, outdoor-activities, and hope) are considered emotion-focused coping strategies. The coping strategy '*education and retraining*' is the only one that can be considered a problem-focused strategy. Although traditionally problem-focused coping strategies are considered to have a more profound impact on the problem, our Photovoice project nuanced this black and white differentiation between both coping strategies. In contrast, our participants described that they did not have access to education and training and therefore did not use this problem-focused strategy as it caused them to even feel worse about their unemployment. In addition, we were able to further nuance the assumption that problem-focused coping strategies are preferable to overcome the stressor at hand. Although our participants described a relatively strong focus on emotion-focused coping strategies, they did acknowledge a period of intensive problem-focused coping (i.e., job application behavior and acquiring access to education and retraining). However, over time they were confronted with the failure of their job application attempts due to a decreased sense of control over the outcomes of the job application process (Elsby, Hobijn, & Şahin, 2010) or were confronted with the boundaries of the educational and training policy for the unemployed in Brussels. Although they were aware that finding a job or having access to additional education and training is the key solution to their problems, they found themselves forced to adjust to reality. In order to preserve a (minimum) sense of psychological well-being, they shifted their focus to more emotion-focused coping strategies (Lazarus, & Folkman, 1984; Van Hooft, Born, Taris, Van der Flier, & Blonk, 2004). This coincides with a phenomenon often labeled as "the adjustment trap", which pinpoints the vicious circle of long-term unemployment (De Witte, 1992). In sum, we can decide that—in order to maintain a healthy level of psychological well-being—emotion-focused coping becomes exceedingly more important as unemployment spells length.

Furthermore, and in line with McKee-Ryan et al. (2005) and Paul and Moser (2009) framework of coping resources, our respondents mainly relied on a combination of personal and social resources to offset the negative effects of unemployment. *Social support* and *outdoor activities*—as the utilization of social resources—can soften the blow of unemployment by providing a sense of support and continuity. Hence, social resources might potentially serve as a moderator in the relationship between the experience of unemployment and one's psychological well-being. *Creating structure in time, hope* and *education and retraining*—as a personal resource—are related to more control over one's environment and emotions. Previous research of McKee-Ryan et al. (2005) and Paul and Moser (2009) has indicated that increased feelings of control in times of unemployment is related to a better psychological and physical well-being. Moreover, Evans and Haworth (1991) and Haworth and Ducker (1991) argued that involvement in—what they called—a meaningful activity might prevent the deterioration of one's psychological well-being. McKee-Ryan et al. (2005) and Mohr and Otto (2011) gave meaning to these 'meaningful activities' when arguing that leisure activities (i.e., outdoor-activities) and personal aspects (i.e., education and retraining) that are perceived as personally meaningful have a positive effect on one's psychological well-being. Although all strategies identified by our participants can be regarded as effective because the

participants reported positive feelings when adopting them, some can be considered more advantageous on the long run as they keep the unemployed in touch with society (i.e., outdoor-activities) or are beneficial for the reintegration on the workplace (i.e., education and retraining).

Limitatons

Findings from the present Photovoice project need to be considered in the light of some limitations. First, when using Photovoice, personal judgments may intervene at many different levels of representation (e.g., who used the camera, what did the user photographed and—perhaps even more important—what they did not photograph). Although participatory research in general, and Photovoice in specific, has been criticized for its lack of validity and reliability (Stringer, 1996; Pretty, Guijt, Scoones & Thompson, 1995) it has numerous advantages: 1) it enables researchers to perceive the world from the viewpoint of the respondents (Ruby, 1991), 2) it facilitates the sampling of different social and behavioral setting that might otherwise be neglected by researchers (Palibroda et al., 2009; Rhodes & Hergenrather, 2002), and 3) it addresses the descriptive mandate of needs assessment through the exceptionally powerful means of visual image. Sontag (1973, p. 180) summarizes the strengths of Photovoice as followed: "the force of photographic images come from their being material realities in their own right, richly informative deposits left in the wake of whatever emitted them, potent means for turning the tables on reality".

Second, it can be assumed that individuals who are willing to commit to a bi-weekly group meeting for a period of three months during which they discussed photographs, wrote personal reflections, and participated in reflection meetings may differ substantially from the average unemployed person. Several factors such as the substantial investment in terms of time and effort and/or a desire to learn the photography may distinguish those who participated from other unemployed people. On a related matter, as all our participants were sampled in collaboration with an employment guidance bureau, they may not be representative for the entire unemployment population as De Witte (1992) found that unemployed individuals who enrolled in a similar employment guidance bureau were more motivated to change their situation, in bigger need for help, and looking for more guidance than people who were not registered in such an initiative. However, while we do not think that this threats the validity of our obtained results, it remains unclear whether the experiences of unemployment and coping strategies of the participating unemployed individuals differ in a unique way from those of the average unemployed person.

Furthermore, due to our small sample size—according to Wang (1999), an ideal Photovoice group contains seven to ten participants—our ability to generalize the obtained results to unemployed individuals beyond this sample is also limited. However, we found other researchers using a small Photovoice group to gain in-depth insight into everyday lives of a few research participants (e.g. Baker & Wang, 2006; Jurkowski & Paul-Ward, 2007; McAllistern, Wilson, Green, & Baldwin, 2005; Oliffe & Bottorff, 2007). Consequently, we are relatively confident that the findings of this Photovoice project are bolstered by two factors. First, our findings were not inconsistent with—and in some instances even allowed the incorporation of a more nuanced category (i.e., a broader financial category)—

existing theories. Second, applying this Photovoice methodology allowed us to analyze participant' perspectives in the context of a larger dialogue in which participants gave meaning and validated each other's perceptions.

Suggestions for future research

Based on the advancements and insights obtained from this Photovoice project, we are able to formulate some avenues for future research. First, as we revealed that there is more to manifest functions of employment than previously assumed, we suggest that future research tries to uncover the different financial aspects that contribute to financial hardship associated with the loss of the manifest functions of employment. This could be achieved by conducting a similar Photovoice project that focusses specifically on financial hardship associated with unemployment.

Next, as we uncovered that our participants were concerned with the negative stereotypes that society holds towards them, we believe that future research could investigate and develop interventions to change the attitudes held by society towards the unemployed. For example, techniques to change stereotypes about a certain group in the population have included frequent exposure to the group one holds stereotypes against, heightening sensitivity to the stereotyping of the unemployed, increasing perspective taking, and increasing cooperation opportunities (Braithwaite, 2002). However, as there is little research that examines the effectiveness of such techniques, we urge future research to explore the effectiveness of such interventions. Similarly, research can better clarify whether and how increasing perspective taking and challenging automatic biases towards the unemployed can lead to fewer negative stereotypes.

Finally, we suggest that future research focusses on the interplay between problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies as we found that our participants tended to shift their coping strategies towards more emotion-focused coping strategies the longer they were unemployed. Although, in general, problem-focused coping is best because it removes the stressor and deals with the root cause of the problem, it is not always possible to use problem-focused strategies. For example, when individuals are under the impression that the situation is beyond their control to remove the source of stress, as can be the case in long-term unemployment, individuals might become more inclined to use emotion-focused strategies. Future research could investigate under what circumstances unemployed individuals are more likely to rely on problem-focused coping strategies or emotion-focused coping strategies to further understand the mechanisms of coping shifting (Lazarus, & Folkman, 1984).

Conclusion

Participants in our study mainly identified their unstable financial situation (manifest functions of employment) as the strongest problem associated with their employment. Next, they identified a loss of time structure (latent function of employment), being exposed to negative stereotypes (stereotype threat), and frustrations about access to education and training as pressing problems associated with unemployment. Our participants mainly dealt with these problems by engaging in emotion-focused

coping strategies and by relying on a combination of personal and social resources.

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