

Mindscape Discrepancy:  
Structure, Agency, and Attribution in the Light of Job Loss -- A Critique

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### Abstract

Anaf, Baum, Newman, Ziersch and Jolley (2013) researched the “consequences of job loss for retrenched workers’ mental health,” (p. 1). Drawing from their discussion of mental health consequences in the light of structure and agency theory and starting with a methodological critique, this article discusses their findings in the light of attitude and attribution, developing perspectives on subsequent research.

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#### **Introduction**

Academic advance of knowledge not only continuously quests for truth, it permanently challenges the consensus of normal and extraordinary science elaborating on or deconstructing prevailing paradigms within the scientific community. Each study sets its focus by posing an ideal research question to investigate reality. This focus necessarily submits each investigation to its own bias (Kuhn, pp. 10-21, 82ff). Following holism, what applies to psychology also applies to the nature of scientific studies: their findings are confined to their particular context. As time passes, shared perspectives and context gradually evolve. Assuming best efforts of their original creators, results of earlier studies repeatedly need to be challenged or reframed to see if their findings hold true, they have to be redone to maintain credibility, or they are not applicable altogether.

#### **Study**

Anaf, Baum, Newman, Ziersch and Jolley (2013) researched the “consequences of job loss for retrenched workers’ mental health” (p. 1). The study consisted of two waves of semi-structured interviews, sampling about 3% of the retrenched workers during 2004 and 2005 at Mitsubishi Motors in South Australia. Population (371 worker longitudinal study over 2 years drawn from “700 forced and 400 voluntary retrenchments”) and sampling strategy (mass mail, snowball sampling) were clearly stated, as well as drawing the smaller qualitative sample from the prior longitudinal study (p. 4). However, the willingness to participate in the study may depend on the structure/agency relationship that the study aims for, as participation is an act of agency. The study’s result depends on the subjects’ participation in the prior longitudinal study, which may predispose participants to the anticipation of long-term effects. 10% of a 30% sample may be small to generalize on psychological effects, however, the

coding method (framework analysis using Nvivo software) and coded themes were clearly stated (“stress, changes to perceived control, loss of self-esteem, shame and loss of status, experiencing a grieving process, and financial strain”; *ibid.*, pp. 1,4). The author’s contributions and affiliations were openly listed (p. 10). The study had been a priori ethically approved by Flinders University standards. The discussion of findings appears well-discussed against literature research (pp. 1-3) and result sampling (pp. 5-9). Generally, the study revealed a strong structural bias among retrenched workers, attributing the event to circumstances from a self-as-object perspective. The exercise of agency, however, was limited to supporting life circumstances, for example, wealth (p. 10).

### **Discussion**

Job loss poses a direct challenge to the personal perception of in-group and out-group in the sense of Allport (1954), an early, binary, emotional judgment in human development connected with the formation of attitudes. Belonging to an in-group (being employed) creates prejudice against an out-group (being unemployed; p. 29-46). Job loss can thus be seen as a binary transition of individuals from in-group to out-group with emotional bias against the out-group they subsequently belong to. This bias creates a dissonance persons seek to relieve using strategies based on individual cognition and contingency (Festinger, 1957, 18-22). It is safe to assume that in meritocracies the majority of people try to avoid unemployment. Thus, according to self-discrepancy theory, regulatory focus, and following the bipolarity of affect, impending job loss likely activates prevention strategies and anxiety responses (Higgins, 1987, pp. 320-324; Higgins, 1997, pp. 1282-1290). Response intensity and subsequent coping strategies are dependent on personal attitudes, i.e. subjective evaluations against expectations, clouded by availability bias or expectancy-value (Ajzen, 2001, p. 27-30; Kahnemann, 2011, pp. 133-136). Anaf et al. (2013) place the most obvious consequence of becoming unemployed on the depression spectrum (p. 2), which suggests a regulatory switch upon job

loss to unsatisfied promotion focus (Higgins, 1997, p. 1228). On the other hand, fear of failure co-arises along with unemployment (Anaf et al., 2013, p. 2).

### **Conclusion**

Anaf et al.'s (2013) qualitative study raises scientific interest for two subsequent phenomena. Firstly, the ambivalence between unsatisfied promotion and prevention behavior anticipates bipolar oscillation between malfunctioning regulatory promotion and prevention focus (and maybe dead-locked superpositions), recombining depressive and anxiety spectrum disorders. Secondly, attitude, that is personal evaluation of psychological objects, does not only depend on personal history and experience (conditioned behavior, beliefs and affect), but also on the evolution of personal cognitive style or mindscape (tendency to hierarchical, independent-event, homeostatic or morphogenetic thinking; Maruyama, 1980). At an advanced stage, people may even suffer from *mindscape discrepancy*: dissonance from the judgment of their activation of particular cognitive styles in response to particular stimuli or contexts, that is their observation of a constant interplay between habituated and voluntary responses, or self-structure and the execution of cognitive agency.

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