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Do they adapt or react? A comparison of the adaptation model and the stress reaction model among South African unemployed

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Abstract

This study investigates affective experience as a function of unemployment duration in South Africa. The study contrasts two models. The stress reaction model proposes a linear decrease of affective experience as unemployment prolongs. The adaptation model assumes a curvilinear pattern between affective experience and unemployment duration. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) with contrast revealed no differences in affective experience between short-term (N = 101), long-term (N = 152) and very long-term (N = 119) unemployed. The findings do not favour either of the models, yet indicate that unemployment is a severe stressor regardless of its duration. These results underline the need for structural changes (e.g. delivering unemployment benefits, stimulating job creation) in order to overcome the negative affective experiences of the South African unemployed.

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Adaptation, affective experience, South Africa, stress, unemployment

Introduction

Perhaps the greatest struggle since the post-apartheid era has been the numerous attempts to deal with rising unemployment rates. Unemployment has a range of psychological, social and economic costs. These costs are one of the main reasons why national policies consider low unemployment rates as a top priority. Unemployed people are generally regarded as people between the age of 16 years and 64 years who did not have a paid job or were not self-employed during a specific reference period in time (e.g. three months). They were however physically and psychologically available for work and have taken active steps to seek a job during this period (International Labour Organization, 2000). With an average unemployment rate of 23.8%, unemployment seems to be particularly high in South Africa (World Bank, 2011). The main reason may be found in the large increase in the labour force. Over the period 1995–2004 employment grew by 14%, while the labour force increased almost twice as fast (36%); causing the average unemployment rate to increase instead of decline (International Monetary Fund, 1995–2004). Unlike in other developing countries, there is no subsistence culture for the unemployed to be involved in (Banerjee et al., 2008; Kingdon and Knight, 2006, 2007). Although the number of unemployed people in the informal sector has risen, Banerjee et al. (2008) and Kingdon and Knight (2006, 2007) argue that the informal sector is unable to absorb many of the South African unemployed and remains small compared to neighbouring African countries or to other countries with similar unemployment rates such as India. As such, these numbers represent 'true' unemployment. Besides a high number of unemployed in South Africa, 58.6% of those who ever worked have been unemployed for more than one year (Banerjee et al., 2008). In general, unemployment has been reported to last on average two years and two months; indicating a very long unemployment duration for a high proportion of the South African unemployed (Kingdon and Knight, 2001). Only 9.6% of those who are unemployed find a job in the formal or informal sector within six months (Banerjee et al., 2008). Long-term unemployment is clearly a problem in South Africa.

Several international studies have well documented the consequences of unemployment. Unemployment has been related to indicators of psychological well-being such as feelings of depression, anxiety, pessimism, apathy, decreased self-esteem (Gonzo and Plattner, 2003; McKee-Ryan et al., 2005; Mohr and Otto, 2011; Paul and Moser, 2006, 2009; Ribton-Turner and De Bruin, 2006). It may also impact on physical well-being as reflected in, for example, cardiovascular disease (McKee-Ryan et al., 2005) and psychosomatic disorders (Paul and Moser, 2009). Finally, unemployment may be related to social outcomes such as violence, alcoholism and less connection to the community (Mohr and Otto, 2011; Paul and Moser, 2006, 2009). In sum, these studies revealed a range of negative effects of unemployment on well-being; indicating that unemployment may be regarded as a stressful event. One intriguing question – particularly in the South African context – would be how psychological well-being evolves as unemployment lasts. As such, we aim to address this aspect in our current study by focusing on

the negative affective experience of the unemployed. In line with Jahoda (1982), psychological well-being was conceptualized as the negative affective experience of unemployment based on the frustration of five latent functions: (1) establishment of structure in life, (2) providing social contact outside the family, (3) status and prestige, (4) opportunities for self-realization and activity and (5) the ability to deploy one's capacities to fully contribute to society. Satisfaction of these latent functions is associated with basic human needs and a psychologically healthy life, which has been supported in a range of empirical studies (e.g. Creed and Reynolds, 2001; McKee-Ryan et al., 2005; Paul and Batinic, 2010). Based on the stress literature, we identify two ways in which prolonged unemployment could be related to negative affective experience when unemployment spells get longer. Drawing on the stress reaction model (Frese and Okonek, 1984; Zapf et al., 1996), we may assume that negative affective experience will linearly increase as the duration of unemployment prolongs. Alternatively, following the adaptation model (De Witte, 1993; De Witte et al., 2010; Lazarus and Folkman, 1984; Warr and Jackson, 1987), we may assume a curvilinear pattern between negative affective experience and the duration of unemployment in which the unemployed recover from the negative consequences of unemployment.

In general, there is limited research available on the impact of prolonged unemployment on negative affective experience in the South African literature. Moreover, to the best of our knowledge, no studies to date have suggested or tested theoretical frameworks that could explain the impact of unemployment on negative affective experience for South African unemployed. This study aims to address these existing shortcomings by (1) further investigating the effects of unemployment for South African unemployed individuals – in view of the duration of unemployment – and (2) by testing the generalizability of two contrasting – European – models regarding effects of (long-lasting) unemployment in South Africa. Specifically, the current study wants to explore which of these contrasting models fits the South African unemployed by investigating differences in negative affective experience as related to the duration of unemployment in the North West Province of South Africa. We compare three categories of unemployed: short-term (less than one year unemployed), long-term unemployed (between one year and five years unemployed) and very long-term unemployed (longer than five years unemployed), which is reasonable given the long-lasting duration of unemployment in the North West Province of South Africa (Kingdon and Knight, 2001). The comparison of these groups moreover adds to the general unemployment literature as studies to date have generally compared short-term (i.e. less than one year) and long-term (i.e. one year and more) unemployed. Moreover our design allows us to also investigate differences between long-term and very long-term unemployed.

The stress reaction model and the adaptation model

The stress reaction model

Drawing on the stress reaction model (Zapf et al., 1996), unemployment can be identified as a stressor having a positive impact on negative affective experience. Employment takes a central position in life and co-determines the self-esteem of the individual

(McKee-Ryan et al., 2005). As such, it seems obvious that becoming unemployed results in a sharp increase in negative affective experience (De Witte, 1993). According to the stress reaction model a prolonged exposure to the stressor will result in a further linear increase of negative affective experience due to the highly stressful experience of being unemployed (Paul and Moser, 2009; Zapf et al., 1996). These findings are in line with, for example, research of Jahoda (1982), De Witte (1993) and McKee-Ryan et al. (2005). Prolonged unemployment duration is associated with the prolonged deprivation of the latent and manifest (income) functions of employment (Jahoda, 1982). As these latent functions are generally associated with the satisfaction of basic human needs and with a healthy psychological life (Jahoda, 1982; McKee-Ryan et al., 2005; Paul and Batinic, 2010), one could elaborate that prolonged deprivation results in a further increase in negative affective experience. Moreover, one could argue that after months of unsuccessful job application behaviour the probability of finding a job declines. This aligns with findings of Elsby et al. (2010), who indicated that employers generally hire short-term unemployed before they hire long-term unemployed. As a consequence, the long-term unemployed have decreasing prospects of being able to control the outcomes of the job application behaviour; and their negative affective experience may continue to increase. Specifically – in view of our study – the stress reaction model would be reflected in a linear increase in negative affective experience as unemployment spells lengthen:

Hypothesis 1: According to *the stress reaction model* there will be a linear increase in negative affective experience as unemployment spells lengthen, resulting in higher levels of negative affective experience among the long-term unemployed (compared to the short-term unemployed) and the highest levels of negative affective experience among the very long-term unemployed (compared to the long-term and short-term unemployed).

The adaptation model

The adaptation model predicts a curvilinear stressor–strain relationship. In our study, this would be reflected in three phases as the duration of employment is prolonged. The first phase is similar to the stress reaction model; the negative affective experience increases sharply after becoming unemployed (De Witte, 1993; Warr and Jackson, 1987). The unemployed are confronted with high levels of uncertainty caused by new social expectations, stereotypes and the pressure of finding a new job. As a consequence, job-related and general life aspirations are reduced and the unemployed have to find their way around the new expectations and procedures of being unemployed. In a second and eventually third phase, however, the adaptation model assumes a recovery in affective experience. Several adaptation mechanisms can be applied to explain this recovery. First, the unemployed might get acquainted with the new social expectations and stereotypes of being unemployed. Second, they might develop specific coping strategies towards the stressor (e.g. denial of the importance of employment, help seeking or a social support network) resulting in a positive change in the stressor–strain relationship. (Frese and Zapf, 1988; Parkes, 1990). Moreover, the unemployed strive to reach consensus between personal values and social expectations on the one hand and behaviour on the other hand

(Festinger, 1957). Any discrepancy will trigger negative emotions, which are relieved by either a change in behaviour or an adjustment of ideas and expectations. In order to clear the dissonant feelings, the unemployed could adjust their ideas about paid work by lowering their employment commitment or by psychological withdrawal from the labour market (Ajzen, 1991; Van Hooft et al., 2004; Warr, 1978). As a consequence, the negative affective experience stops increasing (De Witte, 1993; Warr and Jackson, 1987). The adaptation mechanisms described above contribute to the improvement of the negative affective experience caused by unemployment. Moreover, the adaptation model might even cause a recovery to the level of psychological well-being found in working samples (De Witte, 1993; Payne and Jones, 1987; Warr and Jackson, 1987). Specifically – in view of our study – this adaption process would be reflected in a quadratic trend (i.e. curvilinear relation) between negative affective experience and prolonged unemployment. As such we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: According to the *adaptation model* there will be a quadratic trend (i.e. curvilinear relation) between negative affective experience and prolonged unemployment, resulting in higher levels of negative affective experience among the long-term unemployed (compared to short-term unemployed) and lower levels of negative affective experience among the very long-term unemployed (compared to long-term unemployed).

Method

North West Province in comparison with South Africa

The current study was conducted in the North West Province, one of South Africa's poorest and most rural regions (Naudé and Serumaga-Zake, 2001). This is evident from a comparison with national South African unemployment and poverty rates. In South Africa in general, unemployment rates have proven to be rather robust since 2004 (World Bank, 2011).

In 2004, 26% of South Africa's economically active population was unemployed. In 2001, the average unemployment rate was 23.8% (World Bank, 2011). Statistics South Africa (2006) indicated that in 42% of households, one or both partners were employed. These household unemployment rates are however highly differentiated by racial background and gender. Among black South Africans households, 31% were unemployed, while this was only the case for 5% of white South Africans households (Statistics South Africa, 2006). In 2004, 22% of men were unemployed, while this was the case for 30% of women (Statistics South Africa, 2005). Despite a growing South African economy, the country has not been able to create employment fast enough to absorb all the unemployed. This results in high household poverty.[1] As such, approximately 35% of all households (40% in unemployed households; 29% in employed households) are considered poor (Statistics South Africa, 2005).

In the North West Province, 32% of the economically active are unemployed (Census, 2011). These figures point to a higher unemployment rate compared to the general South African statistics. Moreover, there appears to be a high rural–urban inequality when it comes to unemployment. Rural areas are more affected by unemployment as reflected in

an average unemployment rate of 48% (Francis, 2002). These rural–urban inequalities align with those found in other developing countries (Gabriel and Cornfield, 1995). In general male unemployment rates (14.3%) are lower than female rates (17.1%) for all population groups (Census, 2011; Francis, 2002). Based on a sample of 2354 households, Naudé and Serumaga-Zake (2001) report a distribution of economic activity by racial group and gender in the North West Province. They found male unemployment rates to be on average 20 percentage points higher for black unemployed men (24%) compared to white unemployed men (5%). Similar results were found for female unemployment rates, they were on average 25 percentage points higher for black unemployed women (43%) compared to white unemployed women (17%) As a consequence of the high unemployment rates a striking 63% of North West households are considered poor (Statistics South Africa, 2005).[2]

Representativeness of the current sample for the North West Province

Although our current sample contains slightly more men (52.53%) compared to the overall North West Province (50.03%) and South Africa (48.47%) (Census, 2011), a Pearson chi-square test revealed that these differences were not significant, $\chi^2(4, N = 381) = 4$, $p = .41$. A distribution of gender by racial group indicated that the current sample is composed of slightly fewer black men (41.3%) compared to the overall North West Province (50.7%) and South Africa (48.6%) (Census, 2011). However, these differences were found not to be significant, $\chi^2(6, N = 381) = 5$, $p = .31$. Moreover, (slightly) more coloured (56.5%) and white (59.8%) men were included in our sample compared to the overall North West Province (coloured: 49.4%; white: 50%) and South Africa as a whole (coloured: 48.1%; white: 48.7%) (Census, 2011). A Pearson-chi square test revealed no significant differences, respectively $\chi^2(6, N = 381) = 5$, $p = .31$ and $\chi^2(4, N = 381) = 4$, $p = .41$.

As all respondents in the current sample were unemployed at the time of the data collection, a distribution of unemployment duration by racial group and gender was made. This distribution indicates that the biggest group (45.1%) of white people had been unemployed for less than one year at the time of data collection, while this was only the case for 27.5% of coloured people and a striking 7.6% of black people. Most of the coloured people (38.2%) and black people (46.7%) had been unemployed for between one and five years. Both among men (37.3%) and women (42.5%) the biggest group had been unemployed between one and five years. Finally, when looking at the distribution of financial hardship (i.e. having financial difficulties) between the three racial groups in our sample: 83.8% of white respondents reported having financial difficulties compared to 70.3% of coloured respondents and 57.6% of black respondents. Although this study used an indirect measure of financial hardship (i.e. having financial difficulties), a comparison of this poverty indicator by racial group with the ones reported by Statistics South Africa (2005) shows much higher financial difficulties among all racial groups and especially among white respondents in our sample.

Procedure

Data were collected in the North West Province during July 2006 using a random door-to-door collection procedure (Alreck and Settle, 2004). Addresses were sampled from a list drawn from all postal addresses in the given area. A Kish grid (Kish, 1949) was used to randomly include individuals who were 16 years or older and unemployed at the time the questionnaire was administered. This Kish grid technique (Kish, 1949) is often used in equal-probability sampling to randomly select cases when more than one case is found to be eligible for inclusion in the sample.

'The Experience of Unemployment Questionnaire' (EUQ) (De Witte and Hooge, 1999; De Witte et al., 2010) was developed in English and translated into Afrikaans and Setswana. In order to ensure that the meaning of the words in the different languages were the same, a process of back-translation was used (Brislin, 1970). Three fieldworkers (who speak Afrikaans, English and/or Tswana) distributed the questionnaire among unemployed people in the North West Province. Administration was anonymous and participation was voluntary in order to secure the reliability and validity of the data. However, given the poor educational background of most respondents, structured interviews were conducted with all participants and responses were recorded on the questionnaire.

Participants

The final sample consisted of respondents who were unemployed at the time of the study ($N = 381$). Respondents were sampled from three racial groups, namely coloured people[3] (mainly living in the Promosa area = 54.3%), black people (mainly living in the Ikageng area = 24.1%) and white people (mainly living in the Potchefstroom area = 21.5%). The majority of the respondents were male (54.0%), between 25 and 34 years old (38.2%), had attained secondary education (69.1%) and had been unemployed for more than five years (31.2%). Further, 50.2% of the respondents had almost always or mainly been employed while 21.0% of them had almost always been unemployed. Looking at the duration of unemployment; 26.5% ($N = 101$) of the respondents had been unemployed for one year or less, 39.9% ($N = 152$) had been unemployed between one year and five years and 31.2% ($N = 119$) had been unemployed for five years or more. A total of 2.4% ($N = 9$) were dropped from further analysis due to missing information about their duration of unemployment. The participants' characteristics are reported in Table 1.

Measures

Data were collected by means of the EUQ (De Witte and Hooge, 1999; De Witte et al., 2010). Negative affective experience of unemployment was assessed with six items, each measured on a three-point Likert scale ranging from '*never'* (scored 0) to '*often*' (scored 2). Items were then reverse scored in order to heighten the ability to interpret the results. As such, a lower score indicated a stronger negative affective experience. The items were developed based on Jahoda's (1982) latent deprivation model and were further adapted based on De Witte et al. (2010). Examples are 'My life has become empty since becoming unemployed' and 'It feels as if I am no longer part of society'. All

Table 1. Participants' characteristics.

Variable	Item	%
Racial group	Coloured	54.3
	White	21.5
	Black	24.1
Gender	Male	54.0
	Female	46.0
Age	18 years or less	6.6
	19–24 years	25.5
	25–34 years	38.2
	35–44 years	17.5
	45–54 years	7.7
	55–62 years	3.4
	62 years or more	1.1
Education	No degree or primary education	23.2
	Secondary education	69.1
	Higher education	4.5
	University education	3.2
Time unemployed	1 year or less	26.5
	Between 1 year and 5 years	39.9
	5 years or more	31.2
Employment history	Almost always employed	24.7
	Mainly employed	25.5
	As much employed as unemployed	8.1
	Mainly unemployed	20.7
	Almost always unemployed	21.0

items were combined into one aggregated measure of negative affective experience of unemployment (Cronbach's $\alpha = .84$), on a scale from 0 (minimum) to 12 (maximum). Table A1 in the Appendix reports the principal component analysis conducted on the six items measuring negative affective experience, resulting in one negative affective experience factor with an explained variance of 55.45%. Communality values were all above .40, indicating that the items represent the factors adequately (Field, 2009). Duration of unemployment was assessed with a direct question and coded as 1 for '*one year or less*', 2 for '*between one year and five years*' and 3 for '*five years or more*'.

Controls

Given the expected influence of racial group, age, gender, level of education and financial hardship on negative affective experience (Banerjee et al., 2008; De Witte et al., 2010; Griep et al., 2012; Kanfer et al., 2001; Kingdon and Knight, 2001; Paul and Moser, 2009; Vleugels et al., 2013) these variables were controlled for during all analyses. The different *racial groups* were coded as 'Coloured' (scored 1), 'White' (scored 2) and 'Black' (scored 3). *Age* was measured in years on a continuous scale. *Gender* was coded

as 'male' (scored 1) and female (scored 2). *Level of education* was coded as 'no degree or primary education' (scored 1) 'secondary education' (scored 2), 'higher education' (scored 3), 'university education' (scored 4). A single item measured *financial hardship*. Respondents had to indicate on a three-point Likert scale ranging from '*often*' (scored 0) to '*never*' (scored 2) how often they experienced difficulties to survive financially because of not having a job (McKee-Ryan et al., 2005). A lower score indicated more perceived financial hardship.

Data analysis

The data were analysed using SPSS 20.0 (SPSS Inc., 2011). Before merging the data and testing the hypotheses, two extra tests were conducted to check if the obtained scores on the EUQ could meaningfully be compared between the three unemployment groups. In a first step, a structural equivalence test was conducted on the three 'duration of unemployment groups' in order to be able to meaningfully compare their score on negative affective experience (Poortinga, 1989; Van de Vijver and Leung, 1997a, 1997b; Van de Vijver and Rothmann, 2004). We checked the factor loadings and structure of the items measuring the outcome under study for the three groups and for our current sample as a whole. This was analysed using an exploratory factor analysis. The equivalence of the negative affective experience factor was assessed by means of a factor congruence coefficient, Tucker's phi. According to Van de Vijver and Leung (1997a, 1997b) values above .90 point to essential agreement. Values above .95 imply factor loadings to be equal to a multiplying constant. Our results revealed that the Tucker's phi values ranged from .96 to .99 when comparing the different groups with the current North West Province sample and from .90 to .97 when comparing the different groups with each other. These results point to universal validity of the negative affective experience factor. In a second step, we aimed to explore whether our results regarding the relationship between long-term unemployment and negative affective experience of unemployment could perhaps be influenced by gender and racial background. Indeed, Naudé and Serumaga-Zake (2001) and Banerjee et al. (2008) indicated that – due to the legacy of apartheid – these predictors are significant determinants of unemployment in the North West Province. As such, we conducted a moderation analysis introducing gender and racial group as moderators of the relationship between the duration of unemployment groups and negative affective experience of unemployment. Our results revealed that the interaction term between the duration of unemployment and gender, $\Delta R^2 = .01$, $F(3, 330) = .60$, $\beta = -.02$, $p = .62$, and that the interaction term between the duration of unemployment and racial background, $\Delta R^2 = .01$, $F(3, 330) = 1.00$, $\beta = -.02$, $p = .38$, explained no significant increase in variance in negative affective experience of unemployment. Thus, neither gender nor racial background was a significant moderator of the relationship between the duration of unemployment and negative affective experience of unemployment.

Hypothesis 1 was tested using an analysis of variance (ANOVA) with polynomial contrast, while hypothesis 2 was tested using an analysis of variance (ANOVA) with quadratic contrast (Field, 2009). We predicted negative affective experience of unemployment based on the three 'duration of unemployment groups'.

Results

Descriptive statistics

On average, the unemployed obtained a mean score ($M = 3.85$) well below the midpoint on the negative affective experience scale, indicating a strongly negative affective experience of unemployment. Mean scores for the short-term ($M = 4.08$), long-term ($M = 3.89$) and very long-term ($M = 3.44$) unemployed are very similar and also well below the midpoint on the negative affective experience scale. Studies measuring psychological well-being or (negative) affective experience based on Jahoda's model (1982) among working samples generally found mean scores above the midpoint on psychological well-being measurements (e.g. McKee-Ryan et al., 2005; Winefield et al., 1992) providing an indication that respondents from this sample were worse off in terms of negative experiences of unemployment.

Controlling for age, level of education and financial hardship showed to be necessary as significant correlations were found with negative affective experience. Age was negatively correlated ($r = –.15$, $p < .01$) with negative affective experience, indicating that older people were subject to a more negative affective experience of unemployment. Level of education correlated positively ($r = .16$, $p < .01$) with negative affective experience, indicating that people with a lower level of education had a more negative affective experience of unemployment. Financial hardship correlated positively ($r = .32$, $p < .01$) with negative affective experience, indicating that the more difficulties experienced to survive financially the more negative respondents experienced their unemployment.

Stress reaction or adaptation?

Testing the stress reaction model. ANOVA with polynomial linear contrast (Field, 2009) was used to assess the impact of the duration of unemployment on negative affective experience according to the stress reaction model. The duration of unemployment has no significant effect on negative affective experience, $F(2, 323) = .16$, $p = .85$. A 95% confidence interval of negative affective experience, 95% CI (–.88, .50), confirms this finding. Polynomial linear contrast indicates that the three 'duration of unemployment groups' do not significantly differ ($p = .58$) resulting in very similar mean scores and 95% confidence intervals between the three groups. These results indicate no linear increase in negative affective experience between the three unemployment groups. In hypothesis 1, we predicted a linear increase in negative affective experience as unemployment spells lengthen. This decrease would result in higher levels of negative affective experience among the long-term unemployed (compared to short-term unemployed) and the highest levels of negative affective experience among the very long-term unemployed (compared to long-term and short-term unemployed). Hypothesis 1 is, however, not supported by the evidence.

Testing the adaptation model. ANOVA with quadratic contrast (Field, 2009) was used to assess the impact of the duration of unemployment on negative affective experience according to the stress reaction model. The duration of unemployment has no significant effect on negative affective experience, $F(2, 323) = .16$, $p = .85$. A 95% confidence interval of negative affective experience, 95% CI (–.55, .63), confirms this finding. Polynomial quadratic contrast indicates that the three 'duration of unemployment groups' do not

significantly differ ($p = .89$), yet showed similar mean scores and 95% confidence intervals between the three groups. These results indicate no quadratic trend in negative affective experience as the duration of unemployment prolonged. In hypothesis 2, we predicted – according to the adaptation model – a quadratic trend (i.e. curvilinear relation) between negative affective experience and prolonged unemployment, resulting in higher levels of negative affective experience among the long-term unemployed (compared to short-term unemployed) and lower levels of negative affective experience among the very long-term unemployed (compared to long-term unemployed). Hypothesis 2 is also not supported by the evidence.

Discussion

The current study aimed to investigate the impact of prolonged unemployment on affective experience for the South African unemployed. More particularly, because there are no well-developed theoretical frameworks in place that explain the impact of unemployment on affective experience among the South African unemployed, we identified two models – building on the stress literature – that could predict this relationship: the stress reaction model (Frese and Okonek, 1984; Zapf et al., 1996) and the adaptation model (De Witte, 1993; De Witte et al., 2010; Lazarus and Folkman, 1984; Warr and Jackson, 1987). Our study wanted to investigate which of these contrasting models can be applied to the South African unemployed. Specifically – in view of our study – the stress reaction model would be reflected in a linear increase in negative affective experience among the three unemployment groups (i.e. one year or less, between one year and five years, five years or more). The adaption process would reveal a quadratic trend (i.e. curvilinear relation) regarding negative affective experience in the three unemployment groups.

Our results neither endorsed the stress reaction model, nor supported the adaptation model. In fact, negative affective experience remained stable for the short-term, the long-term and the very long-term unemployed in South Africa. Nevertheless, based on a mean score well below the midpoint on negative affective experience, we could conclude that unemployment is a serious stressor for all South African unemployed in our current sample, irrespective of their duration of unemployment. Although the previous statement seems highly plausible, we are unable to underpin this explanation as the only correct one as we did not measure the levels of negative affective experience in the South African population as a whole. Moreover, we did not longitudinally track the levels of negative affective experience in our current sample (i.e. levels before becoming unemployed). The fact that none of the two proposed theoretical models were detected might be explained by three plausible alternative explanations.

With regard to the first model, our results did not endorse the hypothesis related to *the stress reaction model*. One possible explanation could be that we defined the intensity of the stressor (i.e. low versus high score) in terms of the length of the unemployment period (i.e. short versus long). However, it could be the case that a prolonged exposure to unemployment does not increase the stress reaction. In our case, the unemployment stressor might yield an 'on' or 'off' principle: the fact that one is unemployed reflects itself in strain regardless of the duration of unemployment. Therefore, prolonged duration of unemployment may not have aggravated the negative effects of being unemployed.

With regard to *the adaptation model*, our results revealed that no adaptation took place at all. One reason for adaption could be that the unemployed develop some coping mechanisms over time in order to alleviate the distress caused by a life without work (De Witte et al., 2010; Warr and Jackson, 1987). Two aspects could however explain the absence of adaptation. First, the absence of an unemployment state support system within South Africa renders many South African unemployed financially deprived, especially in the long run (Klasen and Woolard, 2008). Griep et al. (2012) argue that the South African unemployed might experience their income – derived from employment or from social state pensions – as a necessary monetary resource to make ends meet in times of unemployment. Whether or not the unemployed have access to income replacement benefits in times of unemployment could indeed have serious consequences for the way people cope with unemployment. Country of residence could indirectly affect how negative the unemployed experienced their unemployment, through perceived financial hardship (Vleugels et al., 2013). Second, as stated in the introduction, the South African informal sector is unable to absorb many of the unemployed and remains small compared to neighbouring countries or to other countries with similar unemployment rates such as India (Banerjee et al., 2008; Kingdon and Knight, 2006, 2007). Possible benefits of informal jobs are twofold. For one thing, informal work could replace some of the latent functions of employment (i.e. sense of collective purpose, time structure and social contacts) and hence enhance well-being among the unemployed. On the other hand, informal work could allow the unemployed to improve their financial situation. Limited access to informal jobs could therefore be another reason why the South African unemployed do not seem to adapt to their unemployment status over time. It could well be that some external factors (e.g. limited access to informal work, lack of financial support) may work against an adaptation process, which could explain why the South African unemployed do not find a way to live with their jobless status over time.

Finally, Table A1 reports that over 50% of our sample experienced feelings of emptiness, feelings of uncertainty about the future and more household conflicts. Almost half of our sample reported a low self-worth or self-confidence and a low connection with society. These results align with the results found in other European and South African unemployment samples (Creed and Macintyre, 2001; McKee-Ryan et al., 2005; Paul and Moser, 2009; Ribton-Turner and De Bruin, 2006) and suggest that the unemployed lack some important 'latent' functions which are normally fulfilled by employment, like status, the enforcement of regular activity, time structure and collective purpose (Jahoda, 1982). In this context, empirical studies showed that the employed report higher levels of status, collective purpose, time structure and purposeful activity compared to the unemployed, which is associated with lower distress and better mental health among the employed (Hoare and Machin, 2010; Paul and Batinic, 2010). Moreover, results suggest that the unemployed lack sufficient resources to survive financially. This is indicated through a positive correlation between financial hardship and negative experience: the more difficulties the respondents have to survive financially, the more negative they experienced their unemployment. These results align with the importance of the manifest functions of employment as argued by Jahoda (1982). The loss of these financial resources causes progressive financial hardship, which results in a further increase of the negative affective experience of the unemployed (Fryer, 1986, 1997). In the current study, financial hardship only had a moderate impact on the affective experience. Banerjee et al. (2008) and Klasen

and Woolard (2008) owe this effect to South Africa's fairly generous social pension programme that grew from extending the apartheid-era pension for white farmers to the entire population. As a possible consequence, many unemployed South Africans can survive without employment. As such, people who have one or more family member receiving a social pension tend to work less (Bertrand et al., 2003). Research by Ranchhod (2006), for example, showed that receiving a social state pension resulted in labour force withdrawal of the adult children in the household. When the pensioners passed away, the employment rates increased. When discussing the necessity to develop South African contextual theory – in the next paragraph – we point to the incorporation of social state pensions in measures of affective experience of unemployment.

Study limitations

Despite some novel insights regarding long-term unemployment in South Africa, some of the study's limitations need to be taken into consideration. First, as to date no theoretical frameworks were introduced that may explain the impact of (prolonged) unemployment on negative affective experience among the South African unemployed, the current study tested the generalizability of two contrasting – European – models in South Africa. However, applying European theoretical frameworks to the South African context might be considered problematic given the multicultural nature of the population in South Africa. As such, scientific literature has debated the generalizability of western theoretical frameworks to a South African context (Van de Vijver, 2002, 2003; Van de Vijver and Rothmann, 2004). As a consequence, scholars called for culturally specific and culturally informed theoretical frameworks taking into account, for example, the legacy of apartheid and the precarious financial situation of numerous South Africans (Van de Vijver, 2002, 2003; Van de Vijver and Rothmann, 2004). As a step up for South African contextual theory building, we suggest incorporating measures regarding the aforementioned social state pension programme (Banerjee et al., 2008; Klasen and Woolard, 2008). This could be a collective buffer for the negative affective experiences of unemployment. Also, as members from collectivistic cultures (e.g. South Africa) are usually depicted as more committed to each other's lives, to share more resources and to maintain intimate relationships with each other (Hofstede and McCrae, 2004; Triandis et al., 1990), they might be able to rely on an extended social support network that could again buffer the negative consequences of unemployment (Kuo, 2011).

Next, the cross-sectional design limits the scope of our conclusions as a selection effect could equally well explain the current results. It might be possible that negative affective experience (e.g. decreased self-worth) was already low prior to becoming unemployed or might even precede unemployment (Hammarström and Janlert, 2005). Longitudinal research may investigate selection effects by, for example, exploring whether duration of unemployment is an antecedent or a consequence of increased negative affective experience. Moreover, future research could include several potential control groups in order to investigate the negative affective experience of unemployment in more detail. For example, Naudé and Serumaga-Zake (2001) indicated that living in urban areas of North West Province increases the probability of being employed by 8% compared to living in rural areas.

Third, future research should include a more comprehensive measure of financial hardship. Such measures could additionally include rates of household income, deprivation of financial resources, social state pensions and poverty. Moreover, household income and social state pensions could be weighted for the number of persons in the household, as the needs of a household grow with each additional member. Using equivalence scales, each household type in the sample could be assigned a value in proportion to its needs, taking into account the size of the household and the age of its members (Atkinson et al., 1995).

Next, data were sampled using a self-report questionnaire, which might raise concerns regarding social desirability and common-method bias. However, by carefully constructing our questionnaire (e.g. use of specific and concise questions only, no bipolar numerical scale values), by relying on voluntary participation by our respondents, and by ensuring respondent's total anonymity, we believe we reduced the risks owing to social desirability and common-method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

Finally, the present sample was not representative for the total population of the South African unemployed. While the sample was limited to unemployed people from the North West Province, it did not include data of South African unemployed of Indian origin. The small sample size furthermore limits the generalizability of the results beyond the present sample. Moreover, the information needed to report the response rate was missing. Future research should therefore rely on bigger unemployment samples, keep track of response rates and should preferably include data from South African unemployed of Indian origin to increase representativeness.

Practical and political implications

Notwithstanding the above-formulated limitations, our results yield some practical and political implications. It is needless to mention that unemployment has far reaching consequences for the unemployed. Especially in South Africa, where jobs are scarce, the unemployed are at risk of getting caught in a downwards spiral of long-time unemployment (Kingdon and Knight, 2007). Studies show that impaired well-being might work against a swift reintegration into the labour market by inhibiting job search behaviour (Vinokur and Schul, 2002). Furthermore, extremely low prospective returns to search for most long-term South African unemployed could discourage any future job search attempts, which may even further impede a possible transition out of unemployment (Kingdon and Knight, 2006). Therefore, policy makers should attach importance to policies that limit the negative effects of unemployment to an absolute minimum. In doing so, an individual and structural approach is recommended that pays equal attention to both the short-term and (very) long-term South African unemployed.

First, on an individual level, interventions could reinforce a person's coping skills by teaching him or her how to deal more effectively with the negative consequences of unemployment (Mohr and Otto, 2011). Based on the latent deprivation model of Jahoda (1982), three distinct interventions are proposed by Vuori and Vesalainen (1999). First, they suggest increasing unemployed people's labour market knowledge, job skills and personal abilities. On a related matter, Vuori and Vesalainen (1999) suggest the further development of cognitive abilities and initiative taking. Finally, outplacement programmes should be introduced for those who are still employed but on the verge of losing their jobs. Such

programmes could train individuals in how to protect their psychological well-being during unemployment, and help them to increase their knowledge of job-search techniques. While these interventions are effective in protecting well-being, they are most beneficial for the group of unemployed with the poorest mental health (Machin and Creed, 2003; Vuori and Silvonen, 2005). However, such interventions targeting the individual are merely a drop of water on a hot plate as these interventions only make sense when enough financial resources and jobs are available. Therefore, the South African government should take a leading role in creating jobs and developing a state support system in order to overcome the negative affective experiences among the South African unemployed.

On a national scale, income replacement benefits could be a way to decrease household poverty and to increase unemployed people's financial resources. According to welfare regime theory (Gallie and Paugam, 2000), fewer lower-income and poverty spells occur in countries that offer universal income replacement benefits compared to countries where such unemployment benefits are absent (Fouarge and Layte, 2005). Moreover, various studies affirm a strong positive relationship between disposable household income and well-being (Diener et al., 1995; Fritzell et al., 2004). Therefore, increasing individual's financial resources could be an important strategy to strengthen unemployed people's coping mechanisms and prevent a downward spiral of sustained poverty. Unemployment policies should primarily counter economic deprivation and feelings of desperation among the unemployed (Nordenmark and Strandh, 1999). Moreover the South African government should invest in the creation of more jobs in order to reverse the high unemployment and underemployment rates (National Planning Commission, 2011). A combination of both individual and national approaches could ultimately result in enhanced consumer welfare, greater domestic and international competitiveness and increased employment. However, while the need for cash injections into poor households is pressing (National Planning Commission, 2011), creating jobs is a gradual and time consuming process. Therefore, installing a comprehensive South African state support system is needed in the short term in order to protect the unemployed from the negative affective experiences of unemployment.

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Notes

1. A household is considered as poor if they report a monthly income of R1200 or less (Statistics South Africa, 2005).
2. Two-thirds (69%) of African households had a monthly income of R1200 or less (the absolute poverty line), compared to 30% of coloured households, 17% of Indian households and only 4% of white households (Statistics South Africa, 2005).
3. During the apartheid era – in order to keep divisions and maintain a racially segregated society – the apartheid government used the term 'coloured' to described one of the four main racial groups identified by the law: black people, white people, coloured people and Indian people. The term 'coloured people' refers to a heterogeneous ethnic group who possess ancestry from Europe and various Khoisan and Bantu tribes (Gibson, 2006, 2009).

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Appendix

Table A1. Factor loadings, communalities (h^2), percentage fully agreeing to item and percentage variance explained for principal components analysis on items of negative affective experience (NAE).

Item	NAE	h^2	% fully agree
Decreased self-worth/self-esteem	.80	.63	49.1%
Feel life is empty	.77	.60	54.3%
Lost self-confidence	.75	.56	45.9%
No longer part of society	.74	.55	44.9%
Uncertain about the future	.71	.50	61.9%
Have conflicts at home	.70	.49	52.5%
Percentage variance explained	55.45		
Cronbach's alpha	*.84*		

Note: '% fully agree' only includes the respondents who answered 'yes' on the item.