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**PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF UNEMPLOYMENT:
ATTRIBUTIONS ABOUT THE CAUSES
OF SUCCESS AND FAILURE IN JOB SEEKING**

A thesis presented in fulfilment of
the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Psychology
at Massey University.

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November, 1982

ABSTRACT

The validity of applying Kelley's covariation attribution model to understanding the perceived causes of success and failure of job seekers was tested on 168 psychology students using hypothetical case descriptions in a laboratory study. The same model was also tested on the self attributions of 82 newly registered unemployed in a field study. Results from the laboratory study provided support for Kelley's predictions for ability and luck attributions. Mixed support was obtained for task difficulty/ease attributions, partly because of the influence of order effects and the bias against attributing success to task ease. Little support was obtained for effort attributions, with only distinctiveness demonstrating the predicted significant main effect. In the field study, where self attributions were obtained for a previous success in job seeking and for currently being unemployed, support for Kelley's covariation model was weak with only distinctiveness relating significantly to lack of ability and consistency to bad luck. Possible reasons offered for the lack of support for the theory in the field study include the influence of group identity, individual differences in the perception of the stability and locus of causes, and the greater realism of the field setting. The fundamental attribution error and the success failure bias were tested in the laboratory setting for other attributions and in the field study for self attributions. More support was obtained for the predicted relationships involving attributions about others' behaviour in the laboratory study than for self attribution in the field study. For both self and other attribution, internal factors were stressed more than external factors. In the field study the combined influence of self-esteem and locus of control on the perceived causes for being unemployed was examined. Those with high self-esteem and an internal locus of control attributed success to ability and failure to lack of effort as predicted. Those with low self-esteem and an external locus of control did not attribute failure to lack of ability, but they did attribute success to unstable factors. Of the 82 unemployed, 51 were followed up one month later when 24 had jobs

while 27 remained unemployed. Those with jobs had, at the first interview, made stronger task difficulty attributions for being unemployed and stronger effort attributions for a previous success than had those who remained unemployed. It appeared that the successful group externalised their difficulty while taking credit for success. In the group as a whole lower G.H.Q. scores (fewer negative mental health symptoms) were obtained among those who made strong lack of effort attributions for failure. The G.H.Q. correlated positively and significantly with the number of job interviews attended and with age. The dilemma of an active job search strategy which was associated with lower well-being as well as a greater likelihood of obtaining work is discussed. Supplementary analyses, including detailed case descriptions, were used to explore the relationship between personality variables, demographic variables, work importance and measures of well-being. Recommendations arising out of the research are offered and the importance of perceived skill level (distinctiveness) in influencing the extent to which blame attaches to the unemployed themselves for being out of work is stressed.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my supervisors, Professor G. Shouksmith and Dr J. Kang for their constant encouragement, help and support; Dr K. McFarland for improving my understanding of statistical procedures; Mrs A Stewart for preparing the graphs; my colleagues and graduate students for their informal support, interest and advice; the many community workers whose interest in the research was a major source of motivation; the staff of the Department of Labour for their help in obtaining access to the newly registered unemployed; the City Librarian and Public Relations Officer for providing interviewing facilities; the 93 unemployed who shared with me a part of their lives; and most of all, Tim, my husband still.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

<u>Chapter One:</u> General introduction	1
<u>Chapter Two:</u> Research into psychological aspects of unemployment.....	5
1.0 Trends in unemployment research	5
2.0 Antecedents and consequences of unemployment.....	6
2.1 Self-esteem, locus of control and unemployment.....	7
2.2 Employment status and well-being moderated by work involvement and demographic variables.....	10
2.3 Summary of research examining the antecedents and consequences of unemployment	13
3.0 Attribution related unemployment research.....	14
3.1 New Zealand studies relevant to perceived causes of unemployment.....	14
3.2 Questionnaire based studies examining attributions and unemployment.....	16
4.0 Summary	19
<u>Chapter Three:</u> Kelley's covariation attribution theory and Weiner's causal classification model.....	21
1.0 Attribution theory	21
2.0 Kelley's covariation attribution model.....	23
3.0 Kelley's covariation model applied to unemployment.....	26
4.0 Weiner's causal classification and unemployment examples.....	27
5.0 Research on Kelley's covariation model and Weiner's causal classification.....	29
6.0 Summary.....	34
<u>Chapter Four:</u> Antecedents and consequences of attributions made about success and failure in job seeking..	36
1.0 Fundamental attribution error.....	36
2.0 Differences in attributions for success and failure.....	37
3.0 Antecedent influence of the personality variables on causal attributions.....	39
3.1 Self-esteem.....	39
3.2 Locus of control.....	41
3.3 Combined influence of self-esteem and locus of control on causal attributions.....	44
4.0 Relationship of information antecedents to other antecedents of attributions.....	44
5.0 Consequences of attributions.....	45
5.1 Consequences on a behavioural level.....	45
5.2 Consequences on an affective level.....	46
6.0 General summary.....	47

<u>Chapter Five:</u> Aims, hypotheses and rationale for the laboratory and the field study.....	48
1.0 Kelley's covariation model.....	48
2.0 Attributional biases.....	52
3.0 The antecedent influences of the personality variables on attributions.....	54
4.0 Consequences of attributions.....	56
 <u>Chapter Six:</u> Laboratory test of Kelley's covariation model and attributional biases.....	 57
1.0 Method	
1.1 Design.....	57
1.2 Subjects.....	59
1.3 Instruments.....	59
1.4 Procedure.....	60
2.0 Results	
2.1 Comments on the approach used in testing Kelley's theory in the laboratory study.....	61
2.2 Planned comparisons test of the predictions from Kelley's theory.....	62
2.3 Main effects from the multivariate and univariate analyses of variance.....	63
2.4 Task difficulty/ease.....	67
2.5 Ability.....	71
2.6 Luck.....	73
2.7 Effort.....	74
2.8 Success failure bias and the fundamental attribution error.....	77
3.0 Discussion.....	80
4.0 General conclusions.....	84
 <u>Chapter Seven:</u> Field research: Method.....	 86
1.0 Preliminary negotiations and rationale for general procedure.....	86
1.1 Access to unemployed subjects.....	86
1.2 Interview protocol.....	87
1.3 Pilot study.....	88
2.0 Subjects.....	88
2.1 Assessment of bias in the 82 subjects interviewed.....	89
2.2 Follow up interviews.....	91
2.3 Demographic data relevant to the 82 unemployed interviewed.....	92
3.0 Measuring instruments used.....	93
3.1 Structured questions in the interview protocol.....	93
3.1.1 Demographic variables.....	93
3.1.2 Information antecedents: consensus, distinctiveness and consistency.....	94
3.1.3 Causal attribution dependent measures	95
3.1.4 Motivation to continue seeking a job.	96

3.1.5	Life satisfaction.....	97
3.1.6	Happiness measure.....	98
3.1.7	Job satisfaction items for follow up interviews.....	98
3.1.8	Recreational activities.....	98
3.1.9	Relative importance in life of work, social activities and family.....	99
3.2	Standardised Instruments.....	99
3.2.1	Self-esteem.....	99
3.2.2	General Health Questionnaire (G.H.Q.)	100
3.2.3	Locus of Control.....	101
3.2.4	Social Desirability.....	102
4.0	Procedure.....	103
 <u>Chapter Eight: Results from the field research.....</u>		105
1.0	Introductory comments.....	105
2.0	Test of Kelley's covariation theory in the field setting.....	106
2.1	Test of Kelley's theory on the full sample..	106
2.2	Separate test of Kelley's theory among males and females.....	108
2.3	Test of Kelley's theory on the follow up sample.....	109
3.0	Differential attributions made for success and failure and the fundamental attribution error....	112
3.1	Success failure bias.....	112
3.2	Fundamental attribution error.....	113
3.3	Combined influence of the success failure bias and the fundamental attribution error..	114
4.0	Test of the predicted relationships between the personality variables and causal attributions....	115
5.0	Consequences of attributions made.....	118
5.1	Outcome of obtaining and not obtaining a job.....	118
5.2	Affective consequences of attributions.....	120
6.0	Summary.....	121
 <u>Chapter Nine: Discussion of results and supplementary analyses.....</u>		122
1.0	Discussion of the results testing Kelley's covariation model.....	122
2.0	Biases in the attributions for success and failure.....	127
3.0	Self-esteem and locus of control.....	131
4.0	Discussion of results relating to the consequences of attributions.....	132
 <u>Chapter Ten: Interrelationship among the personality variables and well-being measures.....</u>		135
1.0	Intercorrelations among the personality, demographic and well-being measures.....	135

2.0	Suggested causal influences on weeks unemployed and GHQ.....	136
3.0	Relationship between unemployment and well-being.	141
3.1	General Health Questionnaire (GHQ).....	142
3.2	Happiness.....	143
3.3	Life satisfaction.....	144
3.4	Comment on results.....	145
4.0	Intercorrelations among job satisfaction and well-being measures at the follow up interviews..	146
5.0	Importance of work as a moderator variable.....	147
6.0	GHQ: Discussion and comparative data.....	151
7.0	Summary discussion.....	153
 <u>Chapter Eleven: Case studies.....</u>		156
1.0	Working and unhappy.....	156
2.0	Working and happy.....	160
3.0	Unemployed and unhappy.....	162
4.0	Unemployed and happy.....	165
5.0	General discussion of these and other cases.....	167
 <u>Chapter Twelve: Summary and conclusions.....</u>		169
1.0	Results relating to the hypotheses outlined in Chapter Five.....	169
1.1	Kelley's covariation model.....	169
1.1.1	Task difficulty/ease attributions.....	169
1.1.2	Ability attributions.....	169
1.1.3	Luck attributions.....	170
1.1.4	Effort attributions.....	170
1.2	Attributional biases.....	170
1.3	Personality variables.....	171
1.4	Consequences of attributions.....	171
2.0	Summary of additional findings.....	171
3.0	General discussion.....	173
4.0	Recommended action for helping the unemployed....	177
5.0	Conclusion.....	178
	183
	245

LIST OF APPENDICES

App.	Page
A. Instruments used in laboratory research and justification for their development.....	180
B. Trend analysis using a constructed factor.....	186
C. Analysis of variance tables.....	188
D. Interview protocol.....	191
E. Pilot study.....	200
F. Letter and short questionnaire used by employment officers in approaching registered unemployed to volunteer for the study.....	206
G. Comparison of sample with official Department of Labour statistics.....	208
H. Results and discussion relevant to the operationalisation of the key variables in the field study....	212
I. Expectancy based models of behavioural intention: Discussion relating to the test of the model in the present study.....	224
J. General Health Questionnaire (GHQ).....	231
K. Locus of control and social desirability items.....	233
L. Cross lagged or panel correlations.....	236
M. Summary of repeated measures analysis of variance for sex by causal attribution by success failure on the 82 registered unemployed.....	239
N. Intercorrelations among key variables.....	240
O. Algorithm for reconstituting correlation coefficients in simplified path diagram 10.2.....	241
P. Analysis of variance tables for the well-being measures obtained on the 51 subjects involved in the follow up interviews.....	243

LIST OF TABLES

Table Number		Page Number
2.1	Variables examined in research on psychological aspects of unemployment, assigned antecedent or consequential status.....	7
3.1	Conceptual framework after Kelley and Michela (1980).....	22
3.2	Summary predictions from Kelley's covariation attribution theory.....	24
3.3	Weiner's two way classification of attributional causes and predictions from Kelley's model.....	28
5.1	Predicted ordering of consensus, distinctiveness and consistency influences on causal attributions..	51
5.2	Combined predictions from the fundamental attribution error and the success failure bias.....	53
5.3	Influence of self-esteem and locus of control on causal attributions.....	54
6.1	Results from the one by seven planned comparisons testing Kelley's theory, collapsing across order of presentation of information and success and failure.....	63
6.2	Multivariate and univariate F values for the main effects of consensus, distinctiveness and consistency and success/failure on the four causal attributions.....	64
6.3	Rank order correlations between the predicted order of cell means based on Kelley's theory and the order based on the actual mean attributions made to different levels of consensus, distinctiveness and consistency.....	67
6.4	Results from the main effects of the ANOVA and the mean attributions made for success and failure to each of the causal categories.....	77
6.5	Analysis of variance, success vs failure by internal vs external attributions (university students).....	78
7.1	Age and sex of those interviewed and those in the sample not interviewed.....	89
7.2	Assessment of educational bias among the males in the sample.....	90

Table Number		Page Number
7.3	Assessment of educational bias among the females in the sample.....	91
7.4	Reasons for non follow up.....	92
7.5	Weiner's causal classification illustrated with examples used in this research for success and failure.....	95
8.1	Beta weights from the multiple regressions testing Kelley's covariation model using the attributions made for failure among the 82 registered unemployed.....	107
8.2	Beta weights from the multiple regressions testing Kelley's covariation model on failure attributions made among the 48 unemployed males.....	108
8.3	Beta weights from the multiple regressions testing Kelley's covariation model on failure attributions made among the 34 unemployed females.....	109
8.4	Beta weights from the multiple regressions testing Kelley's covariation model on attributions made for failure among the 27 unemployed at the second interview.....	110
8.5	Beta weights from the multiple regressions testing Kelley's covariation model for success attributions made among the 24 respondents offered jobs by the time of the second interview.....	111
8.6	Success failure bias among males and females.....	113
8.7	Analysis of variance, success vs failure by internal vs external attributions (registered unemployed respondents).....	114
8.8	Mean attributions made by respondents with combinations of high and low levels of self-esteem and an internal or external locus of control.....	116
8.9	Results from the discriminant function analysis between the group offered jobs and those still unemployed at the second interview.....	119
9.1	Attributions made in response to success and failure, university and unemployed sample.....	128
10.1	Intercorrelations among personality and well-being measures in the 82 newly registered unemployed obtained at the first interview.....	136

Table Number		Page Number
10.2	Simple correlations and reconstituted correlations for the variables given in Figure 10.2.....	140
10.3	Overall and total life satisfaction means for the unemployed and employed group at both times.....	145
10.4	Intercorrelation among job satisfaction and well-being measures for respondents working at time two and those still unemployed.....	147
10.5	Well-being by ranked importance of work among the 27 respondents still unemployed.....	148
10.6	Well-being by ranked importance of work among the respondents actually working.....	149
10.7	Relative importance of work in the unemployed and working subsample.....	150
10.8	GHQ results from the various studies for respondents working and those unemployed.....	151
11.1	Means and standard deviations of key variables used in the case discussions.....	156
A.1	Design for laboratory study with six student groups.....	185
B.1	Means and F values for the trend analysis using a constructed factor.....	187
E.1	Characteristics of respondents in pilot study....	201
E.2	Means and standard deviations of the attribution scores for success and failure (pilot study).....	203
G.1	Sampling rate for males and females.....	208
G.2	Age of all registered unemployed in the Department of Labour District compared with the age of the research sample.....	209
G.3	Stated usual occupation of subjects interviewed and not interviewed.....	211
H.1	Test retest correlations for structured causal attribution questions.....	213
H.2	Intercorrelations among the causal attribution measures for success and for failure at the first interview.....	213

Table Number		Page Number
H.3	Correlations between locus of control and causal attributions made to Weiner's four causal categories for success and failure at time one	215
H.4	Correlations between locus of control and causal attributions for being unemployed and for obtaining a job at time two.....	216
H.5	Weiner's causal classification for failure.....	217
H.6	Weiner's causal classification for success.....	217
H.7	Interjudge agreement on the classification of attributions to one of Weiner's four causal categories collapsing across the first and the second interviews.....	218
H.8	Responses to the open causal questions for both success and failure.....	219
H.9	A comparison of the open and structured causal attribution responses for failure.....	222
H.10	A comparison of the open and structured causal attribution responses for success.....	223
I.1	Test retest correlations for the variables in the Behavioural Intention model.....	228

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure Number		Page Number
3.1	Kelley's covariation (cubic) attribution model.....	23
5.1	Relationship among the antecedent information and personality variables and the causal attributions.....	55
6.1	Diagrammatic representation of the 2x2x2x3x2 mixed design with a repeated measure on the last factor...	58
6.2	Main effect of consensus, distinctiveness and consistency on task difficulty/ease, ability, luck and effort attributions collapsed across success and failure and order of presentation of information.....	65
6.3	Consensus by order interaction for attributions to task difficulty/ease collapsed across success and failure.....	68
6.4	Consensus by consistency by order interaction for failure attributions to task difficulty.....	70
6.5	Consistency by order for ability attributions collapsed across success and failure.....	72
6.6	Distinctiveness by success vs failure for ability attributions.....	73
6.7	Consensus by consistency by success failure interaction within the cab order, consistency first, followed by consensus, followed by distinctiveness.....	75
6.8	Consistency by success vs failure for effort attributions.....	76
6.9	Mean attributions for testing predicted linear and quadratic trends in the combined fundamental attribution error and success failure bias.....	79
10.1	Path diagram of selected demographic, attributional and behavioural variables.....	138
10.2	Simplified path diagram for the same variables as Figure 10.1.....	139
10.3	Cross lagged panel correlations between GHQ and locus of control on the 51 respondents in the follow up sample.....	141

Figure Number		Page Number
10.4	Marginal means for the GHQ score obtained at the first and the second interview for the 27 subjects still unemployed and the 24 offered work.....	143
10.5	Marginal means for the happiness item obtained at the first and the second interview for the 27 subjects still unemployed and the 24 offered work...	144
H.1	Placement within Weiner's two dimensional model, the categories derived from responses to the open question about reasons for being unemployed.....	220
H.2	Placement within Weiner's two dimensional model, the categories derived from responses to the open question about the reasons for getting a previous job.....	221