NAVIGATING THE BLACK HOLE: EXPLICATING LAYERS OF JOB SEARCH CONTEXT AND ADAPTATIONAL RESPONSES

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Via a qualitative study, we introduce and elucidate 5 layers of context-related job search demands (omnibus, organizational, social, task, and personal) that are encountered by both employed and unemployed job seekers. We develop a process model to portray the mechanisms (managing mood and motivation, feedback/help seeking, and self-reflection/learning) through which these context-related demands are related to several important job search outcomes. We provide new insight into employed job seekers, showing that they report the job search as full of difficulties, obstacles, and challenges, and that some of these demands parallel those that unemployed job seekers face.

"I have a pretty decent resume and I've sent it out maybe 100 times and I've gotten two responses. So I almost feel like in sending your resume to an Internet application, it's a black hole that swallows up resumés." (an employed job seeker from this study's sample)

Job search, the process of looking for new work, is a common activity in today's economy. Unemployment rates are at the highest levels observed since the Great Depression, creating a competitive and challenging situation for unemployed job seekers trying to find work (IMF & ILO,

2010). At the same time, there are thousands of employed job seekers on the job market, for reasons such as career building, job insecurity, or dislike of their current position (McKeown, 2009). A simple Google search with the phrase "job search" yields 1,070,000,000 hits, attesting to popular interest in this topic (February 15, 2011).

Traditionally, job search has been portrayed as one of many behaviors that unemployed individuals can engage in to cope with the stressful experience of job loss (e.g., DeFrank & Ivancevich, 1986; Leana & Feldman, 1988, 1995) or as one of the steps in the turnover process of employed individuals (e.g., Hom, Griffeth, & Stellaro, 1984; Mobley, 1977). More recently, theory and research have focused more specifically on job search per se, specifying its dimensions and identifying its predictors and outcomes (Boswell, Zimmerman, & Swider, 2012). Job search is not an easy task. It "requires the use of complex strategies, substantial self-control, and self-regulation skill, all of it punctuated by discouragements and setbacks that present major motivational challenges" (Price & Vinokur, 1995, p. 192). As with other goal-directed behaviors, individual differences in job search can be evaluated according to three dimensions: *intensity-effort* (i.e., time spent on job search activities), *content-direction* (i.e., specific job search methods used, quality of job search activities), and *temporal-persistence* (i.e., continuation of effort over time and changes involved in the search over time; Kanfer, Wanberg, & Kantrowitz, 2001). Of these three dimensions, most academic research has focused on the amount of time and effort individuals put into their job searches (intensity-effort) and the effectiveness and use of specific search methods (one portion of content-direction).

Studies on job search intensity-effort have shown that individuals who put more time and effort into their job searches find jobs faster (e.g., Wanberg, Hough, & Song, 2002; Wanberg, Kanfer, & Banas, 2000). Several variables have been associated with higher search intensity including job seeker Extraversion, Openness to Experience, Agreeableness, Emotional Stability, Conscientiousness, perceived control, self-esteem, self-efficacy, employment commitment, financial situation, social support, age, gender, education, and race (for a meta-analytic review, see Kanfer et al., 2001). Studies on job search methods have shown that informal methods (e.g., networking) tend to result in faster employment than formal methods (e.g., advertisements, employment agencies; Granovetter, 1995). Job seekers who use and are comfortable with informal methods are higher in Extraversion, Conscientiousness, and proactivity (Lambert, Eby, & Reeves, 2006; Tziner, Vered, & Ophir, 2004; Van Hoye, Van Hooft, & Lievens, 2009; Wanberg et al., 2000).

Recently, research has also focused on the more proximal motivational and cognitive mechanisms or processes involved in job search.

This research has primarily focused on the process through which job seekers' personality exerts its influence on job search intensity, with less attention to the process by which other dimensions of job search (content-direction and temporal-persistence) may be affected. For example, Cote, Saks, and Zikic (2006) found that the relationship between Conscientiousness and positive affectivity and job search intensity is mediated by job search clarity (having clear job search objectives and a good understanding of the search process). Metacognitive activities (e.g., setting goals, developing plans, and monitoring progress) and emotional control (managing one's emotions during unemployment) also mediate the relationship between personality and search intensity (Creed, King, Hood, & McKenzie, 2009; Turban, Stevens, & Lee, 2009; Wanberg, Zhu, Kanfer, & Zhang, 2012). Another body of research focused on the efficacy of interventions aimed at increasing reemployment speed (e.g., Eden & Aviram, 1993; Van Hooft & Noordzij, 2009; Vinokur, Schul, Price, & Vuori, 2000).

A close examination of the job search literature to date, including information provided by recent reviews of the job search literature (Boswell et al., 2012; Saks, 2005; Wanberg, 2012), suggests certain gaps in knowledge. One observation is that the predictor space in the job search literature (i.e., the predictors used in job search research) has been heavily focused on job seeker personality traits and biographical variables, with limited attention to the specifics of the job seeker's situation or other contextual variables (see Saks, 2005). For example, Kanfer et al. (2001) meta-analysis identified only two nonpersonality/nonbiographical antecedents (i.e., financial need and social support) available for meta-analysis. Saks (2005) similarly included only these two situational variables in his integrative self-regulatory model of job search predictors, behaviors, and outcomes. A second observation is that there is a significant need to understand aspects of the job search criterion space beyond job search intensity and choice of search methods. For example, there is a significant void of information available about influences on job search *quality*, why and how individuals make *changes to their job search strategy and goals*, and factors related to *persistence in job search*. Finally, although some of the mechanisms by which personality influences job search intensity have been identified, the process or mechanisms by which antecedent variables are related to search intensity as well as other job search dimensions are in need of further explication.

The goal of this paper is to lend insight into these gaps in the literature. In this paper, we identify important dimensions of the "contextual milieu" in which job search takes place for both unemployed and employed job seekers. We specifically demonstrate how these context-related dimensions affect self-regulatory, adaptational processes on the part of the job

seeker as well as a broad array of job search dimensions including job search persistence, quality, and modification of the search process. We use a semistructured interview protocol to derive the rich contextual and experiential information required to meet these goals. Our chosen methodology is well-suited to describe and solicit new insight into a specific event, its context, and associated processes directly from the lived-experience perspective of the event participant (Lee, 1999; Pratt, 2009). Although qualitative research is less suitable than quantitative research for issues of theory testing, exact quantification or prevalence, and generalizability, it is a strong and important methodology for theory development, for delving into an event to delineate its proposed components and associated processes (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Gephart, 2004). Because qualitative research imputes new richness, depth, and the participant's vantage point into an area of research, Fryer (1992) and Pernice (1996) argued that qualitative methods should be used to supplement the quantitative approaches being used to study the job search experience. Yet, despite a few exceptions (e.g., Patton & Donohue, 1998; Ranzijn, Carson, Winefield, & Price, 2006; Wang, Lo, Xu, Wang, & Porfeli, 2007), research in the area has continued to rely on quantitative methods.

Our study provides new empirical, theoretical, and practical contributions to the literature. From an empirical standpoint, we introduce and elucidate five layers of context-related job search demands (omnibus, organizational, social, task, and personal) that are encountered by both employed and unemployed job seekers. We develop a process model to portray the mechanisms through which these context-related demands are related to affective reactions, adaptational responses, and an array of job search outcomes. Thus, we open up the black box by elaborating the mechanism by which context-related job search demands are related to several job search outcomes. In addition, we provide new insight into employed job seekers, showing that they report the job search as full of difficulties, obstacles, and challenges, and these are for the most part similar to those that unemployed job seekers face. From a theoretical standpoint, our study extends the predictor space that is currently the focus of attention in the job search literature to incorporate a new array of contextual variables related to job search demands. This expansion of predictor space allows us to explain in new and deeper ways why the job search itself (in addition to the experience of being unemployed) can be a stressful experience and how contextual factors may impact the three dimensions of job search (i.e., intensity-effort, content-direction, and persistence; Kanfer et al., 2001) as well as other outcomes. From a practical standpoint, the detailed information about the context experienced by job seekers that stems from our investigation can be used to help job seekers navigate their search experience.

The Need to Explicate the Role of Context

The motivation literature emphasizes that both person variables (e.g., personality) and situation variables (e.g., context) have important influences on core motivational processes. Context is defined as "conditions and events that originate as a consequence of experiences with a changing environment" (Kanfer, Chen, & Pritchard, 2008, p. 608). The notion of context is wide-ranging and multidimensional, involving among other things an individual's history, perspective, physical location, national or organizational culture, interpersonal relations or available social support, subjective state, number of children, features of the task environment or task and time (Kanfer, 2009; Kanfer, in press). Mischel and Ayduk (2004) additionally note that situational context may include "events and social stimuli that are either encountered, self-initiated (e.g., thoughts and affects activated by thinking, planning, or ruminating) or created by internal states (e.g., when hungry, or craving drugs, or in other arousal states)" (p. 102). Broad, overarching aspects of context have been referred to as omnibus (i.e., national culture), whereas more specific situational variables (i.e., aspects of the task, social context, or physical situation) have been referred to as discrete (Johns, 2006).

Researchers have recognized the importance of context in their studies (Pervin, 1989). Yet, in a review of personality research, Funder (2001) argues: "for all the arguments that the situation is all important . . . , little is empirically known or even theorized about how situations influence behavior, or what the basic kinds of situations are (or alternatively, what variables are useful in comparing one situation with another)" (p. 211). Particularly, ill-formed is our understanding of how context may influence affective and motivational processes that are involved in individual behavior (Kanfer, 2009).

Similar to other areas of research, the unemployment, turnover, and job search literatures have paid some, but insufficient, attention to examining how contextual influences may affect job seeker self-regulation and behavior. First, the negative consequences of unemployment on well-being have been explained through a variety of models that are contextual in nature (Creed & Bartrum, 2006). For example, according to the deprivation model (Jahoda, 1987), unemployment is stressful because jobless individuals are deprived of the latent (time structure, social contact, common goals, status, and activity) and manifest (money) benefits of working, all important factors for individual well-being. Warr's (1987) vitamin model states that mental health deteriorates after job loss because unemployed people's environments typically contain reduced features such as opportunity for skill use. Underemployment induces similar deprivation, leading to poorer psychological well-being (Feldman, Leana, & Bolino, 2002).

Other models reveal ways in which job loss creates economic, psychological, physiological, and social discrepancies, leading to appraisals that influence people's coping responses (Latack, Kinicki, & Prussia, 1995). For example, financial strain affects the mental health of unemployed individuals and their partners (Vinokur, Price, & Caplan, 1996). Importantly, these models and studies pertain to the impact of contextual factors on coping with the effects of job loss and on mental health during unemployment rather than to the impact of context on job search. In other words, these models do not incorporate contextual factors specific to the job search. Second, the turnover and employed job search literature has paid some attention to contextual factors (e.g., Bretz, Boudreau, & Judge, 1994; Cavanaugh, Boswell, Roehling, & Boudreau, 2000; Feldman & Leana, 2000). However, these factors describe situational characteristics that may push (e.g., underemployment, job satisfaction, job insecurity) or pull (e.g., perceived employment opportunities) employed individuals into a job search rather than context factors that job seekers encounter, and that affect their emotions and adaptational responses, during their job search. Third, job search research has recognized the role that financial difficulty and social support play in the job search process. Individuals with higher levels of financial difficulty spend more time in their job search and become reemployed faster, presumably because they have a stronger motive to find work (Saks, 2005). Social support, involving counseling, assistance, and encouragement received from friends and family, is similarly related to higher levels of job search intensity (Saks, 2005). Yet, financial difficulty and social support have been studied primarily in relation to one job search dimension (job search intensity) and without regard to other contextual factors related to the job search that may be important.

Especially helpful would be a clear delineation of context-related job search demands, aspects of the situation that job seekers see as variously challenging, difficult, demanding, frustrating, discouraging, or that require adaptational responses in order to navigate the needs of the search process. This focus follows from the prevailing conceptualization of job search as a difficult and challenging activity that requires the use of multiple and complex strategies and substantial self-regulation to handle obstacles, setbacks, rejections, and subsequent negative emotions (Kanfer et al., 2001; Price & Vinokur, 1995; Van Hooft & Noordzij, 2009; Wanberg, Zhu, & Van Hooft, 2010). Despite the pervasive recognition that job search is a difficult process and the acknowledgment of unemployment as being very stressful for individuals, studies have not addressed the question of what exactly makes the job search process difficult and whether unemployed and employed job seekers experience the same difficulties. For instance, a recent study reported that negative experiences in the search are related

to higher feelings of distress for the job seeker (Song, Uy, Zhang, & Shi, 2009). Negative experiences, however, were referred to in a general sense (i.e., "I encountered difficulties today in my job search"); the paper did not describe or specify what difficulties the job seekers encountered. A small amount of work has also recognized that circumstantial factors may impact job search intensity and reemployment success (e.g., Adams & Rau, 2004; Wanberg, Kanfer, & Rotundo, 1999), such as physical health, child care responsibilities, and inadequate transportation. In their discussion, however, Wanberg et al. (1999) argue the need for a more comprehensive understanding of contextual factors that are relevant to search behavior and success.

In conclusion, despite pockets of work relevant to the job search context, there is an absence of comprehensive, synthesized information about aspects of the situation and context that may affect job seeker motivation and the multiple dimensions of search behavior. The information that is available is scattered across the literature and appears without a clear understanding of the meanings, emotions, and consequences for job seeker motivation and search behavior. To respond to this need, we seek to explicate the difficult and challenging context of the job search experience. We focus on aspects of the situation that may require adaptational responses in order to successfully navigate the search process.

Study Questions

Drawing clear boundaries around the "who" involved in the context (Johns, 2006), we studied both employed and unemployed white-collar, professional, managerial-level job seekers. Although the most dramatic effects of unemployment with respect to poverty are taking place in the lower half of the income distribution, recent reports have highlighted the struggles of white-collar, professional workers to find and keep quality jobs (Kuchment, 2009). Our focus on white-collar, professional-level job seekers helps focus the interview on difficulties originating from job search itself as opposed to focusing on economic challenges. In addition, much of the knowledge available about job search comes from research on unemployed individuals and student job seekers, yet employed job seekers make up a significant number of the job seekers in the job search market (Meisenheimer & Ilg, 2000). For example, in a study among a representative sample of the Dutch population, of all individuals that were actively engaged in job seeking about three quarters were employed (Van Hooft, Born, Taris, Van der Flier, & Blonk, 2004).

To summarize, we aim to extend previous research on employed and unemployed job search by expanding the predictor space related to context-related job search demands and building theory on how these

context factors impact the job search process. These aims led us to examine what are the specific, experienced contextual components of job search that job seekers report as challenging, demanding, frustrating, or discouraging? How do these contextual factors influence motivational processes and other job search related outcomes? How do the experienced contextual components and their consequences differ for unemployed and employed job seekers?

Method

Participants and Data Collection

Our sample consisted of 40 unemployed, 23 employed, and 9 partially employed individuals searching for professional positions in the areas of finance, human resources (HR), marketing, operations, and sales. The participants were enrolled on an online career site designated for job seekers earning U.S. $100,000 or higher, thus representing a selective but yet substantial market segment of job seekers. According to the 2010 Current Population Survey, 13.9 million individuals, or 6.6% of the people with income in the United States earn $100K+ (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). A random sample of members was invited to participate by e-mail. Participants were offered a 2-month free subscription to the site. Eighty-six percent of the 72 participants were male, a slightly higher representation of men than those belonging to the site (as assessed through name profiling; 65%). Forty-eight percent had a bachelor degree, and 40% had a master degree; this compares closely to the membership on the site (e.g., 46% and 38%, respectively). The participants were distributed over different regions of the United States (Midwest = 22.2%, Northeast = 29.2%, South = 31.9%, West = 15.3%). We solicited individuals with varying levels of search duration to allow for a full spectrum of experiences to be shared. Duration of search included 0–3 months ($n = 15$), 3–6 months ($n = 17$), 6–9 months ($n = 5$), 9–12 months ($n = 8$), over 12 months ($n = 25$). Individuals had an average of 23 years of work experience, ranging from 9 to 40. Among those sharing this information, (current/last) average salary was $136,263 ($SD = 44,886$).

The employed individuals were all engaged in active search and indicated a variety of reasons for looking for work including underemployment (17%), needing more challenge or feeling stagnated in the current job (30%), and job insecurity (35%). The average job search hours per week among unemployed and employed job seekers were 25 and 8, respectively. At the time that this study was conducted the unemployment rate in the United States was 9.9%, higher than it had been in many years (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010).

We conducted semistructured interviews with each person in our sample. We developed an initial open-ended question protocol, then tested and improved this protocol via seven pilot interviews conducted by phone by the first and fourth author. The questions were designed to elicit information about the context that individuals viewed as difficult (operationalized by probing for situations that interviewees found challenging, demanding, frustrating, discouraging, and irritating) as well as the responses individual chose to these situations. The final interview protocol is shown in the Appendix. The final interviews were conducted in March and April 2010 by telephone. These interviews lasted between a half hour and slightly over an hour and were conducted by career consultants trained on the interview protocol. All interviews were recorded and then professionally transcribed. The transcribed interviews averaged 10 single-spaced pages in length. Overall, the study yielded 688 pages of interview text.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted by the first and second author and involved several detailed readings of the transcripts accompanied by listening to interview segments. For a substantial portion of time that transcript reading occurred, both the first and second authors were in the same room. Data analysis occurred over several consecutive days as a means of assisting with consistency in decisions and perspectives across the transcripts reviewed. The analysis of the data by two researchers together provided several benefits. On the one hand, the convergence in our understanding of the data improved the validity of our interpretations. On the other hand, our divergent perspectives helped us to catch interesting, novel themes in the data that might be lost by individual lenses (Eisenhardt, 1989).

In early stages, our analysis focused on identification of context-related categories emerging from the interviews. To reduce researcher bias, individual assessments of the category a phrase or passage was thought to reflect were made, followed by joint discussion. As noted by Corbin and Strauss (2008), this strategy "not only helps guard against bias but discussions often lead to new insights and increased theoretical sensitivity" (p. 422). As each new category was identified, it was defined and placed into an emerging code book. Constant comparison was used to assess similarities between new passages and previously identified themes and categories to accurately differentiate and consolidate themes (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). We began with very specific categories in our code book, but as the process continued we combined several categories to facilitate communication and synthesis of the data. To facilitate the process, each passage (ranging from a sentence to multiple paragraphs) was coded under its associated category in NVivo7, a qualitative software program.

Computer coding allowed us to quickly locate passages we had previously coded and assess similarities and differences to new text passages.

Although interrater reliability is often not used in qualitative research, because of our interest in accurately elucidating the nature of context-related demands involved in the job search context, we examined the reliability of the passages being coded into the correct categories for a portion of the interviews. Specifically, the fourth author coded 21 interviews, 29% of the data. She was given marked passages to code. Of the 515 passages rated, there was a total of 74% agreement, above the 70% threshold suggested by Cohen (1960). In cases where there was disagreement, we reviewed the categories. The disagreement fell into specific patterns that were easily remedied by combining two categories that had logical overlap. For example, the code book initially had a category labeled as "job decisions." It also contained a separate category labeled "relocation." The reliability process made it clear that it made better sense to have just one category because relocation was a special kind of job decision.

At a second and deeper level, we reviewed the transcripts for a deeper understanding of the self-regulation, self-control, or other agentic and adaptational responses to the situations encountered as well as how the underlying pieces fit together into a theoretical process model. We took notes and held frequent discussions about the emerging process model, solidifying the linkages between the foci of this study (context) and its associated consequences (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Previous transcripts were revisited as we began attempts to relate concepts to each other. Due to the great depth of the reading, discussion, and note taking that we engaged in during the analysis process, it took us several weeks to review the study transcripts. After finishing the first deep reading of the data, several rereadings of the transcripts were required for the second and deeper level of analysis.

Results

An overview of our findings is useful before we review the components of this model more specifically. Five major types of "context-related job search demands" (i.e., omnibus, organizational, social, task, and personal) viewed as difficult, challenging or demanding by the individuals in our sample were identified. Table 1 portrays these categories of context, subcategories within these categories, and the numbers of unemployed and employed individuals who mentioned each issue. There was extensive, almost complete, overlap in the themes mentioned by employed and unemployed job seekers (see frequency column in Table 1).

Deeper analysis of our data allowed us to explicate the process model shown in Figure 1, appropriate for both the unemployed and employed

TABLE 1
Five Layers of Context-Related Job Search Demands

Context level/ frequency	Category name	Definition	Example quotes
Omnibus context			
Unemployed: 27 (67.5%) Employed: 14 (60.8%) Partially employed: 6 (66.6%) Total: 47(65.2%)	Economic conditions	The state of macroeconomy at the specific time of the job search (e.g., availability of jobs [in general, in specific regions, and within specific occupations or industries]; compensation structure of open positions)	"It's a challenging environment economically. It's a challenging situation because there are so many candidates out there. There are a lot of people that are unemployed." "One of the positions I turned down because the pay they offered was absolutely ridiculous. So low, I mean, it was almost like they advertised for a senior vice president with a pay structure that equals that of a sales manager."
Unemployed: 3 (7.5%) Employed: 12 (52.1%) Partially employed: 1 (11.1%) Total: 16 (22.2%)	Employment status	The job seeker's current employment situation (e.g., unemployed, underemployed, unhappily employed, self-employed, etc.)	Unemployed: "People just don't want to hire somebody that's not employed. . .It's almost like there's this taint, that there must be something wrong with you if you're unemployed." Employed: "I give 8 to 10 hours of my time a week to job search. It is a challenge that I'm trying to also do a good job with my current employer."
Organizational			
Unemployed: 18 (45%) Employed: 11 (47.8%) Partially employed: 5 (55.5%) Total: 34 (47.2%)	Insist on a perfect match	Employers' expectation that applicant experience and background fit job specifications and location requirements very closely (e.g., requiring direct industry experience; avoiding offers to individuals with too much or too little experience; avoiding offers to individuals needing to relocate or commute extensively)	"And what I've discovered is that people have gotten ridiculously focused on the very, very fine specifics and said well, if we're a technology company that specializes in biotech companies we want an HR person who's worked in a technology company that specializes in biotech companies, you know what I'm saying? People are being very specific when that's not always the best fit." "It probably was one of the last interviews I had with a company and their feedback to me was they thought I was overqualified."

continued

TABLE 1 (continued)

Context level/ frequency	Category name	Definition	Example quotes
Unemployed: 18 (45%) Employed: 10 (43.4%) Partially employed: 5 (55.5%) Total: 33 (45.8%)	Lack of professionalism, competence, or efficiency	Lack of professionalism, knowledge, skill, helpfulness, and effectiveness among recruiters, interviewers, and human resources (e.g., individuals who don't understand the business; last minute canceling of interviews; late to interviews; slow process; failure to let job seekers know they were not chosen; failure to respond to phone calls),	"The recruiters are not as good as they used to be. The recruiters used to be very good at understanding one's capabilities and presenting them to the hiring manager. I see that less and less. Most of the good recruiters seem to be gone. You're getting kids who don't understand the business and when I talk about a company I've worked for that was significant they don't even know who they are." "The interviewing process is damn near ridiculous. I mean, I held a fairly high position as a COO, you know, and I've interviewed in my life, lots of people. And I've never seen interviewing processes that have become so encumbered, redundant; questions being asked over and over again by the same people."
Unemployed: 12 (30%) Employed: 5 (21.7%) Partially employed: 1 (11.1%) Total: 18 (25%)	Vague/dated advertising	Lack of accurate, up to date, and informative job postings, including poor labeling of jobs, misleading job descriptions, and changes in job requirements after job posting	"I turned down one job, basically, because it didn't turn out what it was advertised to be." "The job not being what was advertised to be. I…fit the bill quite well and then when you go in what they're looking for is not what you are."
Unemployed: 17 (42.5%) Employed: 3 (13%) Partially employed: 4 (44.4%) Total: 24 (33.3%)	Demographic discrimination	Candidates' beliefs that companies have a preference for individuals with certain gender, age, or ethnic backgrounds	"Second, it's still being a woman in high tech. I've been doing this for 25 years, and they still like guys better. Which is ridiculous; most women still have to be better than the men to get anywhere." "I'm 66. I have white hair. The age discrimination is so blatant and omnipresent. Of course you can never prove it…"

TABLE 1 (continued)

Context level/ frequency	Category name	Definition	Example quotes
Social			
Social network	Challenges related to the job seeker's network of friends, colleagues, and other personal contacts (e.g., having a network that is too small or unable or unwilling to help; having difficulty extending one's network, getting access to the right people, finding good networking events, or feeling comfortable with the process)	"They say go out there and network (laugh). Well, you know, when you go out and network you're in a crowded room filled with people who are as unemployed as you are."	
Unemployed: 27 (67.5%)			
Employed: 12 (52.1%)			"I find it very hard to call up someone I haven't talked to in 2 years and go hey, know of any jobs? You know. I can't do it; it's not me. It's not me."
Partially employed: 5 (55.5%)			
Total: 44 (61.1%)			"Networking has pretty well gone down the tubes because it seems like everyone is in the same boat right now, among my colleagues, everyone. The companies we all work for, there are no openings. They're all just hanging on by their fingernails just trying to survive."
Task			
Depersonalization	Technology-driven search process involving little human contact (e.g., computers, rather than humans, screen resumés; rare to receive replies)	"Mary and Susan and Kathy are not looking at your resumé. Software A, B, and C are looking at your resumé."	
Unemployed: 31 (77.5%)			
Employed: 12 (52.1%)			"It's that frustrating that, you know, I fill these out and . . . you're not going to hear from 95, 98% of them. I mean I've replied to hundreds and hundreds of jobs. It just goes in a black hole."
Partially employed: 7 (77.7%)			
Total: 50 (69.4%)			

TABLE 1 (continued)

Context level/ frequency	Category name	Definition	Example quotes
Unemployed: 26 (65%) Employed: 18 (78.2%) Partially employed: 9 (55.5%) Total: 53 (73.6%)	Uncertainty	Uncertainty about how to perform many aspects of the job search (e.g., how to explain job hopping, job search resources, how to cross industries, how to navigate cyber job search, where to spend time, how to navigate the age issue, how to tap the hidden job market, what to do next, and how to best present one's capabilities in a way that will get noticed)	"I just wish there was more feedback available so that you could grow constructively and, you know, optimize your next time." "I don't think you ever get the true reason you were rejected. So like I said, it's the lack of information, the lack of feedback that frustrates me, and that happens daily." "The most help that I need is to know why things didn't go the way I wanted them to. And even if somebody says no, I can handle that; that's not a problem; I don't mind that a bit; as long as you tell me why."
Unemployed: 8 (20%) Employed: 12 (52.1%) Partially employed: 4 (44.4%) Total: 24 (33.3%)	Repeated rejection	Difficulties associated with handling rejection, discouragement, frustration, and lack of motivation	"It's just hard to keep the energy level going…because it's sort of like you get kicked in the head enough times it's hard to continue to do it, right?"
Unemployed: 7 (17.5%) Employed: 7 (30.4%) Partially employed: 2 (22.2%) Total: 16 (22.2%)	Monotony	Repeated monotony and time-consuming aspects of the job search process (e.g., completing online applications, researching companies over and over, inefficient online tools)	"You have to fill out all your information every single time. It's very discouraging, time-consuming; and because you have other things to do, you just don't have the time to do that." "That's doing the same damn thing over and over and over again. You know? I mean I like doing research, to a point, but at some point you know you get; okay, I'm going to research this company, I do wish I didn't have to do this. You know?"

TABLE 1 (continued)

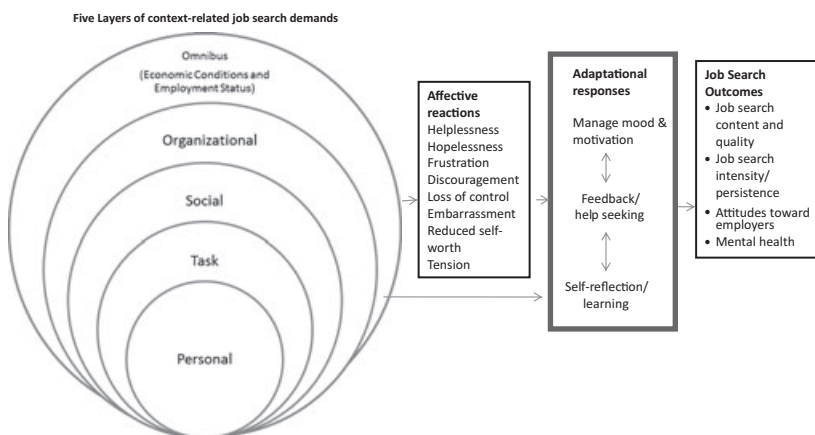| Context level/ frequency	Category/ name	Definition	Example quotes
Personal			
Unemployed: 16 (40%) Employed: 6 (26%) Partially employed: 2 (22.2%) Total: 24 (33.3%)	Impact on the family and finances	Financial worries (e.g., inability to pay bills or purchase needed services/items; reducing discretionary spending; getting family to save money) and other strains on family and significant other relationships associated with the job search	"I mean within probably the next 20, 30 days, the next thing I'll have to do is sell a house; the house I've been in for 18, 19 years; a house that I built 18, 19 years ago. So, yeah, I mean, if something doesn't happen soon then those decisions will have to be made." "It's destroyed my relationship, period. I had a 5 and a half year relationship with a gal; we were living together and it's completely destroyed it."
Unemployed: 28 (70%) Employed: 12 (52.1%) Partially employed: 4 (44.4%) Total: 44 (61.1%)	Job decisions	Being faced with multiple important decisions during the job search process (e.g., Should I take this job offer or wait? In the case of multiple offers, which one should I take? Should I continue to search or start my own business? Should I quit my job before I have another one lined up? Should I lower my criteria or stick to what I want? Can I relocate?)	"The one that I'm weighing right now, because the working conditions are so horrible, is literally letting go of this job without having another one lined up. Because, I mean, I kind of understand that I've been working at this for 2 and a half months and haven't even had a face to face interview, you know, how long do you stay in a job that's literally killing you?"

Five Layers of context-related job search demands

Figure 1: **Emergent Process Model: Context-Related Job Search Demands, Affective Reactions, Adaptational Responses, and Job Search Outcomes.**

job seekers in our sample. The model portrays the affective reactions stemming from five layers or types of context-related job search demands, as well as the process through which these layers of context affect several important job search outcomes. The depiction of the job search demands within layered circles illustrates the interconnectedness of the categories of context (i.e., experiences of one type of context may affect perceptions of and experiences within the other types of context) as well as the extent to which the types of context are more macro, broad, and overarching (e.g., omnibus) versus proximal (i.e., task). The depiction is also analogous to a black hole. As defined by Wikipedia (2012), a black hole is a "region of spacetime from which nothing, not even light, can escape." Although individuals can and do find new jobs, making the analogy imperfect, the comparison of job search to a black hole was mentioned a total of 49 times by 24 different individuals. Job seekers often felt they were trapped in a black hole, that to get out, to find a job, seemed a tremendous challenge. The figure portrays the adaptational processes, including managing mood and motivation, feedback/help seeking, and self-reflection and learning, used by individuals to overcome the search challenges.

We begin the description of this proposed process model by delineating the five types of context-related job search demands and the affective reactions that stemmed from these contextual factors. Later sections explicate the remainder of the process model, translating how individuals use positive adaptations to navigate the challenges they encounter. Thus, the results first provide detail about how frustrating and challenging the

job search experience can be, then relate how individuals cope, learn, and try to overcome these challenges.

Layers of Context and Affective Reactions

Omnibus.   The first omnibus context factor is *economic conditions*, reflecting the state of the macroeconomy in the United States at the time of our study (9.9% unemployment rate). Our data allow us to explicate the lived experience of this contextual factor from the perspective of our job seekers, along with their associated affective reactions. Although cognitively aware of the difficult labor market, job seekers indicated surprise about how bad things were. Several participants with strong industry experience had initially thought they wouldn't have a problem finding a job (e.g., "I didn't think *I* would have a problem."). One employed job seeker reflected on how, when the economy was better, he used to have head-hunters call him regularly. Now that he really wanted to find a new job, the headhunters had little interest in him. Individuals further observed that there are fewer positions available with salaries comparable to their previous or current position. The overall lack of jobs led to significant feelings of helplessness and hopelessness at times for job seekers, as depicted by these two comments:

> *But, you know, again, there's no job at the end of the tunnel. You're just hoping that these people are going to find a need to bring you in or, if something opens up, they're going to think of you. . . . Every day I feel like I've hit a brick wall, and although I continue to go on, and I keep reaching out and writing and calling and do all that kind of stuff, it's not easy because you feel like you're going to encounter more of the same and when is that nightmare going to end. (U1)[1]*

> *It's hard. (Laughs.) It's really, really hard. It's so hard that some days you think you want to die . . . People who you never think would contemplate suicide are contemplating suicide because they feel like they're in a vortex of a black hole where the option is going and working at Whole Foods or moving back in with their families and feeling like they're a failure. (U2)*

The second omnibus aspect of context was individual *employment status*, whether the job seeker was employed or unemployed. Although in an overall sense the job search demands identified by both employed and unemployed job seekers were substantially parallel (e.g., see frequencies shown in Table 1), unemployed participants emphasized that being a job candidate without a job is a severe, omnipresent handicap. They felt

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[1] Identifying numbers are used for each interviewee. Employment status is denoted by E for employed, U for unemployed, and SE for self-employed job seekers.

employers attach a stigma to individuals without a job and that it is difficult to network with others when you have to introduce yourself as being unemployed, a position with little to offer the other individual. Unique to the employed job seekers was the requirement of fulfilling job obligations while trying to engage in a quality search process. One of our employed participants explained he is looking for a new job because his current job involves extremely long hours. He described the challenge of trying to fit job search into his overloaded days. Another issue unique to employed job seekers had to do with the difficulty of communicating their availability to competitors or clients. The dilemma was basically, how can I present myself as available to a competitor or client without my employer finding out (and firing me) or without this appearing unprofessional?

Figure 1 portrays the omnibus context layer as the largest circle with others intersecting. Consistent with this portrayal, our interviews indicated that the omnibus context-layers influence the job seeker's experience of, and reactions to, more proximal layers of context. For example, poor economic conditions lead to a heightened experience of the other job search demands shown in Table 1, including repeated rejections, the monotony of making repeated inquiries, and family difficulties. As another example, being unemployed makes it harder to network (social level) and makes it less costly for employers to be rude or inefficient during the application process (organizational level).

Organizational. There were four types of context-related demands that stemmed from interactions with employers and recruiters (see Table 1). *Insistence on a perfect match* captured concern that the flooding of the market with job candidates has allowed employers to be very particular in their hiring. We found discouragement and sometimes substantial frustration about the strong fit employers expect between their position requirements and candidates' type and level of experience as exemplified by the following comment.

> *If they want a red widget sales manager and you sold blue widgets for 20 years, they're not interested in you. This business of exact fit to me is unbelievable cowardice and lack of confidence in one's own management skills, but it is what it is. I mean, it's a buyer's market and they control it, and there's nothing you can do about it. (E1)*

Such specificity made it extremely difficult for individuals who had hoped to change industries or type of work. Some individuals, due to having a hard time finding jobs or wanting a lower level of stress, were willing to take jobs below their previous skill or pay level. These job seekers expressed frustration that employers wouldn't hire them because they were *too* qualified:

Once people see you were a senior vice president in a corporate office. . .you know they immediately make a judgment that you're overqualified for a job and so they don't talk to you. That's really frustrating for me because at this point in my life, you know, I really don't care. I don't need a fancy job title, I don't need any of that. I just feel like I have. . .a lot of wisdom so why not be able to use it? (SE1)

Second, several job seekers mentioned experiences that in their view, suggested a *lack of professionalism, competence, or efficiency* in recruiters, interviewers, and HR. One common complaint was about interviewers or recruiters who didn't seem to understand the position or position requirements. For example,

I'd say the most irritating thing that I've found recently is to be interviewed by HR people who clearly are fairly junior and don't understand the answers to the questions I'm giving them. They don't understand the questions and they don't understand the answers. (U4)

Another common complaint was feeling interviewers and recruiters were not concerned about them as individuals. This was sometimes expressed as "being treated like a piece of meat." Issues such as being left to wait in a waiting room for an interview for a few hours or having interviews cancelled last minute were mentioned. One job seeker in our sample described the following incident. Excited about an interview, he woke early to study the company and prepare for his interview. He went to the gym to psych himself up and rehearse responses to potential queries. He then began a 2-hour drive to the interview, continuing to concentrate on interview-related thoughts and preparation during his drive. Forty minutes away from the interview location, he received a phone call canceling the interview. This individual had spent the whole day preparing for and excited about this interview, and the cancellation (without apology) was a crushing blow. Other remarks aimed at the company were about perceived inefficiencies in the process. For example, although acknowledging that some HR departments "run like a Swiss clock," there was also a common complaint that HR is "incredibly slow," with one job seeker saying that "in HR language ASAP means 6 months." An unemployed job seeker remarked:

Ah, I guess the most frustrating thing [is] dealing with human relations. They always seem to be the absolutely slowest group in the company and everything; it takes them weeks you know, to send out a nondisclosure letter. HR just slows everything down and that gets me frustrated. (U13)

The third context-related demand under this category, *vague/dated advertising*, referred to frustration that job postings sometimes inaccurately

reflect the job and the desired candidate qualifications. The loss of control that job seekers felt with this issue was twofold. First, job seekers related experiences of finding out late in the game that the job wasn't what it was advertised to be; they felt significant time had been wasted applying for and pursuing a job that had been misrepresented. Second, there was a feeling on the part of the job seekers that poor labeling and description of jobs made it difficult to identify positions that were suitable for them. For example, the job seeker might put in a typical key word for jobs in their area, with some success. However, later they would notice a suitable posting that had not turned up in the search due to being posted under some unusual label.

The last context-related demand under this category, *demographic discrimination*, reflects beliefs that companies have a preference for individuals with certain gender, age, and ethnic backgrounds. Age discrimination was the most commonly expressed concern within this sample, mentioned by 24 individuals. In the comments from job seekers on this issue, once again, there was a deep frustration as well as an underlying helplessness/loss of control:

> *Most companies are looking for, I call them Energizer bunnies. You know, young people who, you know, you point them in the right direction and tell them do this, this, and this. And they go do this, this, and this. . . . There is very little respect for many years of experience, even if some of us have been doing it for a long time and are pretty good at it. (U5)*

> *Older people have a lot to offer and you shouldn't just throw them out like society seems to do in America in the job market. . .People should look to hire everyone because of their qualifications not because they're 10 years younger or 20 years younger. Just hire the best people. (U3)*

> *I'm 53 so I just think a lot of the jobs I look at, the minute someone sees my resumé they toss it off to the side. (U6)*

Social.   The next level of context involves individual relationships with friends, coworkers, former coworkers, and other networking connections. Several difficulties and challenges related to one's social network were mentioned. Many job seekers felt a sense of unease about their weak network. Their contacts were sparse or ill-maintained; unwilling to help due to lack of time, empathy, or close association with the job seeker; or unable to help due to a lack of connection with hiring authorities (e.g., unemployed, retired). The job seekers said it is not easy to find good networking events or methods that allow for extending one's network. Several individuals found the process distasteful and uncomfortable. There was embarrassment associated with touching base with these contacts after being unemployed for some time—they cringed hearing the inevitable "Are

you *still* unemployed?" This was one context category, however, where positive emotions were mentioned by some individuals. About one-fourth of our sample indicated that they enjoyed networking. They liked meeting new people, reconnecting with old colleagues, making new friends, sharing experiences, and helping others.

Task. Five salient elements of the job search task emerged as difficult, challenging, or demanding. First, individuals found the *depersonalized nature of the job search process* stressful. Much of the search process is now automated. Print job ads have largely been replaced with online ads on job boards such as CareerBuilder. Many large companies draw individuals directly to their own online application portals. Autoscreening tools are frequently used to examine whether the candidate's application matches key job requirements. Technology allows automatic messages to be sent back to candidates. Participants felt unease about having their resumé reviewed by a machine and were often unsure if their materials ever reached a human body.

> *The most difficult issue is not having human contact. The human interface has absolutely vanished from the searching process. You're at the mercy of a piece of paper or the right tag words on your resumé. (E3)*

> *You get the autogenerated reply that says, you know, thank you for your submission, you're candidate number x, keep this for your records. But you never really get to speak to a live body, or you never know if your material gets to where it needs to go because that's just the nature of this Internet; it's just a black hole. (U1)*

Another substantial issue for individuals was the *uncertainty* of how to approach their job search, ranging broadly from how to best portray skills on a resumé for a particular job to not knowing what to do next. The job seekers desired information on a myriad of topics, including how to explain previous job hopping, how to cross industries, how to find jobs in the hidden (i.e., unadvertised) job market, how to use online search tools effectively (and wanting to know which ones are considered the best), where to invest time, how to navigate being an older job seeker, how to search better, when to follow up with employers, and how much time to spend on aspects of the search. Many individuals consulted books and online sources about job search but still had informational needs that they hadn't resolved. For many individuals in our sample, the uncertainty associated with this category was sickening. One employed job seeker stated, "I don't know what to do next! I just throw up my hands some days and I just go oh, my gosh." There were a few individuals, however, that savored the challenge of mastering job search techniques and getting themselves in front of an employer.

Individuals also talked a lot about dealing with *repeated rejection*, about how it was hard to stay positive and motivated after sending out many applications without success. Comments such as the following described the impact of being repeatedly rejected on feelings of self-worth.

> *When, at the end of another fruitless day you recognize that you have talent and that you have capabilities and that you could run a business entity probably better than 70% of the people that are out there, and nothing. I mean, just* **nothing**. *The market is telling you have no value. That's irritating. When you know you have, you know you'd be a good fit for a job, you know you could do it, and you're not even given the opportunity. (E1)*

For some of the job seekers, the constant rejection made persisting in the job search very difficult to stay motivated:

> *[It's tough] when day in and day out, doors are slamming in your face because, you know, you're not the only person applying for a particular job and you're not the only person reaching out to somebody. And, I think, trying to keep a smile on your face and staying motivated that it will happen when it's meant to happen. (U1)*

A final issue relevant to the task context stemmed from the *monotony* involved in the daily search process. Most complaints had to do with the tedious and time-consuming aspects of completing online applications over and over again. Whereas in the past, individuals may have simply mailed in a resumé and cover letter, contemporary job search requires uploading the resumé and cover letter, then entry of one's information into electronic application blanks for each company: First Name; Last Name; Street; City; Zip; Home Phone; Work Phone; Cell Phone; Current Employer; Current Job Title; Interest Level; Education Level, Institution, and Degree; Criminal Record, and so on. Some applicant tracking systems now have the capability to store candidate information, but not all companies use tracking systems with this capability. Consequently, candidates typically retype their information for each position they apply for. Our interviewees described the process as mind numbing. One unemployed individual laughed and wryly noted that at times it can get so frustrating that "you just throw your hands in the air and say I don't want to work for you because it's taken me an hour and I haven't finished filling out your friggin' application." Although the online forms are reminiscent of hard copy application forms used in past years, a few differentiating factors include (a) electronic data are so easy to capture and store some employers have extended the information requested, (b) the accessible nature of on-line job postings means that many job seekers complete more application

forms than they would have in the past, and (c) our job seekers, having held high-level positions, may be more easily frustrated with repetitive processes.

Personal. The last and most proximal layer of context to the person refers to difficulties regarding family relationships, personal finances, and decision making. The interviews demonstrate that the context-related demands that job seekers face at the various levels (e.g., economic conditions, insistency on a perfect match, depersonalization, repeated rejection) ultimately impact the personal level. *Impact on the family and finances* referred to financial worries and strain on the family stemming from the job search. When asked how the job search was affecting his family, one job seeker responded:

> *It's just a real challenge because of the financial pressure with my wife and other obligations so it's very stressful. . .At some point in the not-so-distant future it's going to force some very fundamental life-changing kinds of decisions. So that's unpleasant, to say the very kindest about it. (U7)*

When talking about the financial pressures, the individuals in our sample mentioned issues such as raw fear about making ends meet and convincing the other family members to cut back on spending. Other family stressors involved issues such as living a simpler lifestyle that involves a constricted budget and staying home more, and getting nagged by one's spouse with comments such as "Why can't you get a job quicker? Why can't you do some consulting? Why are you hanging around the house?" One of the unemployed job seekers in our sample noted that it is hard enough on a person to be unemployed from a professional standpoint and then to add the marriage tensions that result from it is too much. He noted that his wife will say things to him such as "How come you're not on the phone?" or "Why are you sitting there reading the paper?"

With the job search seems to come an array of heart-wrenching *job decisions* (e.g., Should I take this job offer or wait? Should I start my own business? Should I relocate?). Many of these decisions were significant dilemmas for individuals, involving substantial thought and worry. Most were decisions about relocating. For example, one 54-year-old underemployed job seeker noted that his wife works, and if he were to take a job elsewhere, it wouldn't make sense because then his wife would be unemployed. Another employed individual looking because of a pending reorganization described having come to the conclusion that he would have to be open to moving; this was heart-wrenching for him because he is a divorced dad with kids that live with his ex-wife. He lamented how fast kids grow up and how hard it would be to lose the opportunity to see his "kids march in the band and play baseball, and fun stuff like that."

Adaptational Responses

The previous section made clear that job seekers were experiencing many negative reactions to their situation as a consequence of context-related demands. Consistent with the literature on coping with job loss (e.g., Latack et al., 1995), the majority of our sample used positive adaptation strategies to help manage their situations. As reflected in Figure 1, job seeker adaptations included the classic coping strategies proactive management of mood and motivation (including both motivation and emotional control; Wanberg et al., 2012) and feedback/help seeking. In addition, prominent in discussions was the importance of self-reflection and learning during the search process. Our data suggest that engaging in these adaptational strategies is important to deal with the demands involved in job search and to navigate out of the "black hole." Although each of these types of adaptations has been recognized in the job loss literature, the narrative from job seekers provides rich and informative detail. This is particularly instructive for the category of self-reflection and learning, as the array of learning that occurs during the job search journey has been insufficiently elaborated in the literature.

Manage mood and motivation. Job seekers emphasized strategies they used to keep their emotions in check and their motivation to search going. Specific strategies to manage *emotional reactions* involved thinking positively, maintaining self-confidence, taking medication, going to the gym, volunteering, talking to others, and doing something fun. Several unemployed individuals noted it was important to work on another type of goal (other than finding a job) such as learning something new or getting in shape. This helped individuals feel a sense of accomplishment and worth, that they had a life beyond looking for a job. Job seekers also described the need to maintain their composure with employers. In response to some of the organizational-level factors mentioned earlier, a few job seekers related experiences of losing their temper during interviews or showing frustration with a recruiter. For example, one individual said he had let his frustration show once or twice and has learned he has to psych himself up before an interview to keep it in check.

Individuals kept their *motivation* up through positive self-talk and techniques such as setting goals and establishing a routine. Having a clear plan of action enabled individuals to get up and work toward accomplishing what they needed to get done. An important strategy, mentioned by 65% of the individuals in our sample, was to treat the job search as a job. Although this recommendation was voiced by both unemployed and employed job seekers, creating a solid routine and structure to the day was especially helpful to unemployed individuals to maintain momentum, as explained in the following quote:

I structure it very much like I structure a work day. I maintain my same structure that I had when I was working. I get up and I go to the gym. I'm up at 6:30 and I get home by 9:00. I'm having coffee and checking different message boards and emails by 9:30. . .Most days I will have a working lunch, very similar to what I would do if I worked in an office. I will either arrange lunch around a meeting or I will arrange lunch around an activity I have planned at home and that's one of the ways that I have found that I'm able to stay motivated, stay focused, as well as make sure that I get a lot accomplished. I also give myself days off because one of the benefits of being unemployed is you're unemployed, so you can a lot of things that you couldn't do when you were employed. (U2)

Feedback/help seeking.   In response to the myriad of uncertainties about the job search process, many individuals in our sample mentioned proactive attempts to seek out job search advice from a career coach or from individuals in their network. This was particularly useful to individuals when they were stuck. For example, one individual remarked that if he is stuck and reaches out to his network to review where he is, he usually comes back with a next step. Several job seekers commented about their experiences with a variety of fee-based (e.g., career coaches, outplacement, and professional resumé-writing) services to help improve their resumé or interview skills. These services were largely seen as worth the investment, as illustrated by the quote from the following unemployed individual:

Getting whatever help you need to professionally package yourself is money well spent. Most of us are not experts at writing about ourselves, or knowing how to present ourselves in a way that a hiring manager is going to want to look at us, and where we're going to jump out of the stack of, you know, a thousand applications and resumés. (U8)

Yet, other job seekers had warnings for others to be careful to do your research before paying for search services. For example, the following quote exemplifies the subjectivity of the assistance process.

And then, you know, I think another lesson is there are lots of different people and agencies that always have their hand out for money. You know there are some job boards that are free, there are some that are subscription based. It's extremely important for the individual to try and sort those out into which ones are useful and which ones are not, otherwise you're going to be spending an arm and a leg and you'regoing to be seeing the same jobs, the same job leads, over and over, again and again. (U12)

Self-reflection and learning.   Self-reflection and learning were prevailing outcomes stemming from the contextual demands and associated

affect. Self-reflection seemed to assist with learning. It was common for individuals to describe times where they paused to evaluate the situation and think about what they should do differently. For example:

> *(Sigh.) That's the ebb and flow of life. You know, you're going to get to times when you take a step back and you reevaluate everything you're doing. You know, am I spending too much time just looking at job boards? Am I spending too much time running down networking opportunities that lead to nothing? Am I spending too much time researching firms that possibly could have opportunities but, you know, there is none? I guess it's a matter of just trying to find that balance. (U9)*

Either as the result of self-reflection, experience, or from advice solicited, learning was mentioned by the majority of job seekers. First, over time many individuals realized the need to modify the types of positions for which they were applying. A total of 24 individuals mentioned they had started their application process with too narrow (applying for very select positions) or too broad (applying for positions that didn't suit their backgrounds or interests) of a focus. Individuals talked about their realizations that they had to be flexible, but yet they had to focus more on jobs they were truly qualified for and would take. Two examples follow:

> *You're not looking to send out 600 resumés, you're looking for two or three opportunities that could be a decent fit, that you really feel could be a decent fit, where it's worth your time and their time, you know, for you to send it and them to review it. (SE2)*

> *I guess the main thing, the first thing up front, is deciding what you really want to accomplish. And I mean that is like, you know, what type of job do you [want]. But what if that job is in Ft. Wayne, Indiana, for example? I mean are you going to move to Fort Wayne? Really try to define what you're trying to do and what you're trying to accomplish. (U10)*

A second common lesson was the importance of networks as well as learning how to network. With respect to the importance of networks, job seekers knew from the start that networks were important—aren't we all told that? Yet, there was an eventual, stark realization of how important they were. Several job seekers shared their emerging realization that they had to network to find a job, whether they liked it or not. Individuals also noted their growing understanding of how to network. For example, some job seekers learned how to use LinkedIn for the first time or learned how to find contacts within a company in which they were interested. At the same time, job seekers learned the importance of using varied means to look for jobs. Individuals who were already natural networkers and extroverts learned to use the computer more. They found they were relying too much

on networking because they found the isolated nature of computer-based job search work distasteful.

Third, as individuals gained more experience in their job search, they learned task-related lessons. For example, some learned to tailor their cover letters and resumés to the job opening—they had not done that from the start. They also collected tips or thought of tricks to get noticed and make their resumés stand out from the competition. For example, job seekers learned they needed to use keywords from the job posting in their resumé to get past autoscreening tools or that they had to follow-up with employers and recruiters rather than waiting to be called. Job seekers learned to research the industry, company, and position for which they were applying or interviewing. Individuals concerned about age discrimination learned to dress younger, dye their hair, and remove early career positions and degree date from their resumés. They also learned they had to be careful not to intimidate younger interviewers. Individuals learned from their mistakes in employment interviews and went back better prepared the next time. Participants furthermore mentioned they were learning how to be "a savvy player in this new job market." Specifically, they had a new appreciation for the need to research job trends, keep skills up to date, prepare for future job loss, and continue networking even after a new job is secured.

Finally, individuals reported learning to engage in the other two adaptational responses shown in Figure 1. Specifically, individuals recounted they learned how to better manage their mood and motivation over time as they gained more experience in their job search. They also learned the importance of feedback and help seeking.

In summary, in response to the context-related job search demands and associated emotions, job seekers engaged in adaptational responses. Figure 1 furthermore shows an arrow directly from the contextual demands involved in job search to adaptational responses to illustrate that context also can impact the *availability* of the adaptational responses. For example, to engage in effective help or feedback seeking, one needs to have a network of useful contacts available, or getting professional help to stimulate learning and self-reflection may depend on the availability of personal finances.

Job Search Outcomes

Our interviews reflected ways in which the previously mentioned experiences and responses had an influence on job seekers' *job search quality* (i.e., extent to which the visual presentation of their resumé, cover letters, wardrobe, performance in interview, and level of performance of other job search activities meet the expectations of selecting organizations,

recruiters, and hiring managers; Van Hooft, Wanberg, & Van Hoye, in press), *job search intensity and persistence, attitudes toward employers* (i.e., perceptions or evaluations of these employers as a good place to work), and *mental health* (i.e., state of psychological well-being).

First, interactions with the environment, followed by the adaptational responses shown in Figure 1, often had a positive impact on the (self-reported) quality of individuals' job search materials. For example, as a result of the help seeking, self-insight, and learning outlined in the previous sections, individuals said that compared to the beginning of their search they now made more use of networking, were preparing more for interviews, or customizing their applications. To get noticed, individuals began to use new tricks such as sending a resumé Federal Express along with a dozen bagels and cream cheese. Learning and self-reflection did not always result in higher job search quality, however. Some individuals cognitively understood what they needed to do but were unable to make changes to their behavior as needed. As one example, some individuals were unable to overcome their dislike for networking:

> *I'm not an extroverted person at all. I don't jump out of my comfort zone very easily, and it's hard for me to knock on a door. I'm always afraid of being a pain in the ass, if you will. So I just know that I haven't been as persistent [and] aggressive as I need to. (U11)*

Second, individuals made changes to their job search intensity and persistence. These changes were both positive and negative. For example, for those individuals who were unable to adequately manage their mood and motivation, search intensity declined.

> *In the beginning when I was out of work I was really hyped up, but as the weeks have gone on I've been more and more discouraged. I find I spend less and less time looking for a job because it's been so long; it's over 80, well, 90 weeks; you can just get discouraged. (U3)*

A small portion of job seekers that had particularly negative experiences with hiring organizations developed strongly negative attitudes toward those employers. In particular, several organizational context demands such as lack of professionalism, vague advertising, and demographic discrimination generated frustration and negative feelings among job seekers. Even though some job seekers attributed poor recruitment practices to intense working conditions of HR people, such as being overwhelmed with applications or dealing with other urgent business issues, some others identified those practices with an organization being a poor place to work and from which to buy. Summed up by an unemployed job seeker:

They may spend tens of millions of dollars on advertising, and they don't understand that the person that they were rude to, as part of a job search, or treated badly, is going to be very reluctant to be a customer of theirs in the future. (U4)

Woven through the many interviews in our study (both on the part of the unemployed and employed) were indications that the context-related job search demands have a direct impact on mental health. Individuals who were not able to adequately regulate their mood and found themselves getting pulled into the "black hole" as typified by the following comment:

Well, at this point, it's like I feel almost as if I'm in a death spiral . . . I've been out of work for a long time and, you know, I am in depression. (U11)

Yet others, with adequate adaptational responses, showed exceptional resilience.

There's this sailor during the 1812 war and he was in a naval battle. The British commander asked, are you ready to give up? And John Paul Jones says, give up? I have yet to begin to fight. And you gotta have that attitude. I'm not giving up; I haven't even taken my best shot pal. (E4)

Discussion

In this paper, we introduce a new set of contextual variables to the job search literature and extend theory by explicating the process through which these contextual factors affect several important job search outcomes for both unemployed and employed job seekers. In the following discussion, we delineate our contributions in more detail and discuss several practical benefits associated with this research.

Theoretical Contributions

The predictor space in the job search literature has been heavily focused on personality traits and biographical variables (e.g., gender, age, education, race) with a dearth of attention to situational variables, with the exception of financial situation and social support (Saks, 2005). We coin the term "job search demands" to represent the job seeker-environmental interactions shown in Table 1 (and in the circle in Figure 1) that individual participants reported as being variously demanding, that is, challenging, difficult, frustrating, or otherwise taxing their knowledge or self-regulatory abilities. The issues that were identified, although specific to job search, have parallels to the concept of daily stressors or hassles

(DeLongis, Coyne, Dakof, Folkman, & Lazarus, 1982). DeLongis et al., describe daily hassles as "the ongoing stresses and strains of daily living" (pp. 120–121). Like daily hassles (such as having unexpected company or forgetting a work item at home), job search demands vary with respect to their intensity and frequency. For example, some of the context-related demands identified in Table 1 can be categorized as more chronic, continuously faced issues in the job search (i.e., poor economic environment, not getting any response, dealing with online application interfaces), whereas others appear more sporadically (i.e., lack of professionalism, competence, or efficiency on the part of recruiters or company representatives). Likewise, some of the demands are more intense and have more important implications (e.g., having a poor network) than others (e.g., monotony involved in repeated applications). In addition, perceived controllability varies across these demands (McIntyre, Korn, & Matsuo, 2008). Some individuals, for example, may feel powerless with respect to how to get their resumé right; others may feel this is a completely controllable issue.

Job search demands may also be viewed from a challenge-versus-hindrance perspective (Cavanaugh et al., 2000; LePine, Podsakoff, & LePine, 2005). When a job search demand is appraised as an obstacle that, although stressful, can be overcome in order to learn and achieve, it reflects a "job search challenge." When a job search demand is appraised as a threat, or something that unnecessarily thwarts one's job search and personal growth, it reflects a "job search hindrance." LePine et al. (2005) theorized that challenge appraisals lead to adaptive coping whereas threat appraisals induce maladaptive coping. Synthesizing this theorizing with our data and model, we suggest that a challenge appraisal regarding context-related job search demands induces adaptational responses (e.g., managing mood and motivation, help and feedback seeking, self-reflection, and learning) that are needed to navigate out of the "black hole."

Our process model provides insight into the wide array of outcomes impacted by job search demands, including important and infrequently studied outcomes within the job search literature such as affective reactions, job search quality, job search persistence, and attitudes toward employers. For example, although a myriad of studies exist that describe the psychological health impacts of being without work (e.g., Jahoda, 1987; Vinokur et al., 1996; Warr, 1987), these studies have rarely addressed how aspects of the job search are relevant to more proximal *affective* reactions (Song et al., 2009). Underlying the narratives about job search demands were themes of lack of control, depersonalization, monotony, lack of respect, being pushed outside one's comfort zone, and having new needs for self-regulation of time and emotion. A myriad of negative emotions were expressed, including frustration, annoyance, fear, anger, hurt, confusion, and dismay. Important, extending current research that has focused

heavily on job search intensity and nondynamic use of certain job search methods, the components in our model were shown to be related to outcomes including *changes* in job search content and quality, the ability of individuals to persist in their search.

Mental health was also an outcome in the emergent process model. As mentioned in the introduction to this study, the impact of unemployment on well-being has been explained through a variety of models (e.g., Jahoda, 1987; Latack et al., 1995; Warr, 1987; for a review see Creed & Bartrum, 2006). The most well-known theory, by Jahoda (1987), proposed that employment provides both manifest (e.g., income) and latent (e.g., time structure, social contact, sharing of common goals, status, and activity) benefits to the individual. Although unemployed, individuals are deprived of these benefits and thus experience lower psychological health. This model, and others available, does not recognize the role context-related job search demands may play in experienced well-being during unemployment. Supportive of our model's suggested relationship between job search demands and psychological health, research has found that higher intensity and frequency of daily hassles, and perceptions of issues as uncontrollable stressors, are related to lower psychological health (DeLongis et al., 1982; Folkman, Lazarus, Gruen, & DeLongis, 1986).

Our model also portrays *mechanisms* by which job search demands have an impact on several important aspects of the job search criterion space. For example, our data suggest that, individuals, by and large, proactively adapt to the challenges, obstacles, and difficulties they face through managing their moods and motivation, feedback and help seeking, and self-reflection/learning. These adaptational mechanisms resemble how individuals react to challenges in the workplace. Specifically, although demanding circumstances take individuals outside their comfort zone, individuals may learn from and seek feedback about such situations (McCauley, Van Velsor, & Ruderman, 2010; Preenen, De Pater, Van Vianen, & Keijzer, 2011). These mechanisms have been described in the literature with respect to adapting in general to job loss (e.g., Latack et al., 1995), yet our data spotlight more how these adaptations are useful in reacting specifically to job search demands. Our data also highlight how context-related demands lead job seekers to self-reflect and learn, resulting in changes in their job search content (i.e., improving their job search quality), intensity, and persistence. The conceptualization as a learning process has received insufficient attention in the literature. A few excellent exceptions exist (Barber, Daly, Giannantonio, & Phillips, 1994; Saks & Ashforth, 2000; Steel, 2002; Wang et al., 2007). For example, as a means of explaining behavior change in job search, Barber et al. (1994) proposed three models, one of which was a "learning model." This model suggests that, early in the process, job seekers have unrealistic expectations

as well as uncertainty about their searches. Yet, the examination of job search from a learning perspective has not yet found a solid footing in the literature. Instead, job search is rarely depicted as a learning process, and the studies noted only scratched the surface with respect to recognizing that learning is involved in job search.

Our study extends available conceptualizations of job search as a learning process by delineating a new class of factors that stimulate self-reflection and learning (i.e., job search demands, and specifically those appraised as challenges) and outlining in greater depth what it is that individuals learn. The role that reflection and learning plays in the job search experience suggests exciting new directions for research. It is interesting, for example, to explore whether some job seekers are less apt to learn and improve their job search approaches over time, perhaps because they are unable to self-reflect or because they are high in self-deception or low in self-efficacy (Lee & Klein, 2002).

Another major contribution of our study is its focus on both employed and unemployed job seekers. Previous research on job seeking typically examined either unemployed or employed job seekers. Relatively few attempts have been made to compare the job search process across these populations (Kanfer et al., 2001; Van Hooft et al., 2004). Our results indicate that context-related demands associated with the job search are highly similar across both types of job seekers. Nevertheless, some aspects of job search specific to employment status need attention. For example, with respect to employed job seekers, we posit that, in situations where the reasons for turnover are not too strong, job search demands may tip the scale in favor of staying at one's current job. Current work in the turnover arena recognizes that obstacle-related job demands may push an individual into job search (Bingham, Boswell, & Boudreau, 2005). We propose it is also possible that individuals may simply find that job search itself is too much hassle, that job search demands may push an individual out of the job search. This speculation may contribute to current explanations of why job search activity on the part of employed job seekers does not always lead to turnover (Holtom, Mitchell, Lee, & Eberly, 2008). Although turnover literature has indeed recognized there are "costs" of search that may reduce an individual's drive to stay active in job search (e.g., Bretz et al., 1994), available research of employed job seekers (or unemployed job seekers) has not delineated the job search demands portrayed in our study.

Practice Contributions

Our findings highlight the daily irritations and frustrations that job seekers encounter in their job search, providing value to job seekers and job search professionals. We suggest it would be valuable to alert

job seekers to the daily demands (both challenges and hindrances) they may face. A simple realistic preview of the process may be helpful for some individuals, making job search demands feel less random, personal, uncontrollable, and important. Fleig-Palmer, Luthans, and Mandernach (2009) argue that resilience can be boosted in unemployed individuals as a means of helping them cope with difficult situations and events. Our theorizing suggests that job seekers should appraise the obstacles and difficulties they face in their job search as challenges rather than hindrances, as challenge appraisals are more likely to induce adaptational responses. Similarly, inducing a focus on learning goals can be helpful in coping with the difficulties and setbacks of the job search process (Van Hooft & Noordzij, 2009).

These findings are useful for authors of popular job seeker advice books to compliment advice provided to job seekers. Our study also provides insights that should be useful for company and external recruiters. Job seekers mentioned frustrations with respect to the lack of response from recruiters and company representatives in the search process as well as late and even rude behavior. Company representatives clearly cannot be expected to have one-on-one conversations with every job seeker who is interested in a position. Yet, an investment in ensuring autoreplies are sent out to candidates who apply for positions on online interfaces would be beneficial, and it would be appropriate for companies to notify individuals who have received interviews when the position is filled. Practices such as failing to communicate well with applicants may harm company reputation and success in recruiting (Rynes, Bretz, & Gerhart, 1991). Based on our findings and extensive other research that describes older job seeker concerns with finding jobs, it would be beneficial for companies to also train interviewers and managers about issues related to age perception and discrimination. Finally, recruiting companies should work on submitting clear job postings. Based on complaints from the job seekers in our sample, it is a waste of time on both sides when companies do not clearly delineate in the job posting what they are looking for.

Strengths, Limitations, and Future Research

Our study focuses on a job seeker population that has received little attention and also compares the experience of unemployed and employed job seekers, something that is rarely done. Although it is understood that job search is challenging for unemployed job seekers, it is interesting and valuable to depict these challenges more clearly and to learn that employed job seekers also face many challenges in the job search. It is possible that our results may not generalize to all high earner job seekers because of the inherent small sample nature of qualitative research and because our

invitation to participate noted that our interview would inquire about job search challenges. High earner job seekers in the United States represent only a small proportion of the population of job seekers worldwide. Future research should explore how job search demands and their outcomes differ for other types of job seekers (e.g., students, lower income, disabled, long-term unemployed, retirees, homemakers returning to the workplace, job seekers in other cultures). For the most part, we expect that the job search demands (e.g., insistence on a perfect match, lack of professionalism, vague/dated advertising, demographic discrimination, social networks, depersonalization, etc.) that we delineate in Table 1 would also be present for other types of job seekers, given the same economic environment. We expect, however, that additional job search demands would be present or more important for other types of job seekers. For example, issues such as transportation to interviews and affordability of interview clothing may be more salient for lower income job seekers.

Despite the limitations of qualitative research, it is exciting to delve deeper into the job search experience than quantitative research allows us to do. There has been a call for qualitative research to bring new ideas and the proximal job seeker experience more strongly into the unemployment research (Fryer, 1992; Pernice, 1996). The process model that we put forth in Figure 1 will be valuable to guide future research. First, it will be valuable to assess the prevalence and relative importance of the demands identified for professional job seekers (and other types of job seekers) through quantitative methods using larger samples. It will furthermore be helpful to quantitatively examine the mediational relationships proposed by our process model and to examine the complex interrelationships between the layers of context that we identified. For example, it may be of interest to examine whether the effects of broad layers of context on emotions are mediated by the lower levels of context. In addition, our data revealed a variety of (negative) emotions evoked by context-related job search demands (e.g., frustration, embarrassment, discouragement, worry, loss of control, enjoyment). Future research is needed to gain more insight into what specific demands lead to which emotions. Future research may distinguish between job search demands that are appraised as challenges and those that are appraised as hindrance, and examine the effects on affect, adaptational responses, and job search outcomes (including other distal outcomes such as employment speed and quality).

Another potential direction for future research is to seek to understand how the perceptions of the search process differ for the job seeker, recruiter, and company. As noted by Lee (1999), a central advantage of qualitative research is that it tells the participants' story, delineating their point of view, perceptions, assumptions, and evaluations. The information provided by the interviewees is of interest because it is what they saw or

believed. However, it would be valuable to compare job seeker, recruiter, and company perspectives on some issues. One example is on the issue of not being considered for a job because of overqualification. From the job seeker perspective, this was a heartfelt, genuine stressor—they felt it was a big barrier to be limited from taking a job they felt they could do well. From the employer perspective, however, there is the concern that either the job seeker will leave once the economy improves for a better job or they will get hired and then want more pay soon after because they have higher qualifications (Galagan, 2010).

Conclusion

Our study extends theory by delineating five categories of context-related job search demands that are encountered by both employed and unemployed job seekers, and the process by which these factors impact job search related affect and outcomes. It highlights the importance of factors encountered on a daily basis during the job search to the search experience and provides a new spotlight on the role of context as well as learning and reflection during job search. Our findings are useful in providing a realistic preview of the search experience to job seekers and in expanding comprehensive models of the unemployment experience.

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APPENDIX

Interview Protocol

1.	Let me first ask a few basic questions: (a) What is the reason for job search? (b) How many hours per week are you looking for a job? (c) In your last job, what was your salary level?
2.	Now I would like to have you tell me about challenges or barriers you have faced in your job search. What have you found most challenging about the process of looking for a job? (a) What have you done to manage/deal with this challenge? Was this effective? (b) What have you learned from this situation? Do you have any advice to give to future job seekers?
3.	Tell me about the last time you felt "stuck" with what to do next in your job search. (a) What did you do to get "unstuck? What did you do to manage/deal with this situation? (b) To what extent were your actions effective in dealing with the situation? (c) What have you learned from this situation? Do you have any advice to give to future job seekers?
4.	What mistakes do you feel you have made in your job search? (a) In hindsight what should you have done to prevent the mistake and/or to control the negative outcome(s)? (b) Regarding this mistake, do you have any advice to give to future job seekers? (c) Are there other mistakes that you feel you have made in your job search?
5.	Tell me about last time you got frustrated or angry regarding your job search. How did you cope? Do you feel your way of coping was effective?

APPENDIX (continued)

6.	How about the last time you felt discouraged or depressed about your job search? Tell me what prompted it, how long it lasted, and how you made yourself feel better.
7.	Have there been any dilemmas or tough choices you have faced as part of your job search? How did you manage or resolve these dilemmas?
8.	Where do you feel you have the most need for help in terms of your job search? Have there been resources you have found particularly helpful?
9.	Do you have any areas of conducting a job search that you are unsure you are doing well?
10.	Thinking about your job search on a day-to-day basis, what have you found to be irritating? Are there aspects of the search that you have enjoyed?
11.	Have there been any surprises?
12.	What have you found challenging, if anything, about networking?
13.	Describe a typical day in your job search. Is there anything that you do in terms of routine or organizing your search that you think works really well?
14.	Overall, what major lessons have you learned over your job search journey, or what suggestions do you have for other (unemployed/employed) job seekers?
15.	Are you the sole breadwinner in your family? How is the job search affecting the family?
16.	Is there anything else you would like to share about your job search?