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## Assets and Barriers to Finding Employment

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### ABSTRACT

In this intact-groups, quasi-experimental study, 115 unemployed job seekers who utilized federally funded labour market interventions were compared on program usage (long- or short-term), personality, personal meaning, employability skills, job search length, and pain and suffering. Results did not find significant differences in program usage or job search length, though employability skills were found to correlate positively with education level, extraversion, openness, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and personal meaning, and inversely with negative emotionality. Further analysis found those of Non-Western ethnicity had longer job search lengths and higher levels of pain and suffering while simultaneously scoring higher in meaning and employability skills.

### RÉSUMÉ

Dans cette étude quasi-expérimentale sur des groupes « intacts », 115 chercheurs d'emploi en chômage qui ont utilisé des interventions sur le marché de l'emploi financées par le gouvernement fédéral ont été comparés quant à leur utilisation du programme (à long ou court terme), leur personnalité, leur signification personnelle, leurs compétences améliorant l'employabilité, la durée de leur recherche d'emploi et leur souffrance. Les résultats n'ont pas trouvé de différences importantes dans l'utilisation du programme ou la durée de la recherche d'emploi. On a cependant trouvé que les compétences améliorant l'employabilité entretenaient une corrélation positive avec le niveau d'éducation, l'extraversion, l'ouverture, le caractère agréable, le souci du travail bien fait et la signification personnelle, et une corrélation inverse avec l'émotivité négative. De plus, une analyse plus poussée a découvert que les personnes à ethnicité non occidentale avaient des durées de recherche d'emploi plus longues et des niveaux plus élevés de souffrance, tout en obtenant des scores plus élevés en signification et en compétences améliorant l'employabilité.

Current employees are burdened with managing their own career plans, while also facing more transitional employment in an increasingly mobile labour market (Rudisill & Edwards, 2002). Increased job insecurity and movement have been caused by substantial decreases in public sector employment and corporate downsizing (Rose, Chaison, & de la Garza, 2000) and an employment market with companies increasingly focused on competition and profit margins (Holm & Hovland, 1999). These trends impact the world of work directly with more investment in advanced technology and a changing social psychology of work comprising permanent industry workforce reductions, new concepts of career, increased educational requirements for occupations, increased job mobility, and a shift from career maturity to career adaptability (Niles, Herr, & Hartung, 2002). Savickas (1994) adds that new socio-historical conditions are developing that embrace more multicultural perspectives. According to Rudisill and Edwards, effective job transition intervention programs are required more than

ever to assist job seekers in coping with the demands of a changing landscape of work.

In Canada, this transition from job to job is often supported through a variety of federally funded labour market initiatives. Broadly, these employment supports may be divided into active and passive policies. Passive policies include providing a living supplement such as Employment Insurance, while active initiatives are expressed in Canadian policy as long- or short-term interventions (Human Resources Development Canada [HRDC], 2000). Short-term interventions include employment support services, group services, and employment counselling (résumé workshops, career decision-making workshops, job search workshops and the like), while long-term interventions include sponsored training, supported job placement, and job creation projects. Roughly, as one moves from a short-term intervention to a long-term one, the costs per participant escalate quite rapidly (HRDC).

Many challenges may be faced in the implementation of these kinds of programs. Indeed, in her discussion on one type of long-term intervention, a wage subsidy intervention, Robertson (1994) identifies some common impediments to program success: (a) inappropriate groups being referred for the subsidy, (b) displacement of existing employees (substitution effect), and (c) using a subsidy to hire employees who would have been hired anyway (deadweight loss). These criticisms have been aimed equally at other types of labour market initiatives (Nicaise et al., 1995). Robertson identifies that a key way to strengthen program utilization begins with an appropriate referral based on a proper assessment of the needs of the job seeker.

#### PERSONALITY, MEANING, AND EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS AS ASSETS AND BARRIERS

One way of matching job seekers to services is through barrier identification. Indeed, all of the HRDC funded employment assistance services are based somewhat on the following action plan formula: “1) identify the employment difficulty (barrier), 2) clarification of the employment difficulty, 3) develop an action plan, and 4) implementation and evaluation” (Beauchesne & Belzile, 1995, p. 182). Employment barriers vary widely, and a brief overview of some of those cited include introversion and disorganization (Caldwell & Burger, 1998), low self-efficacy (Regenold, Sherman, & Fenzel, 1999), psychiatric symptomatology, diagnosis, intelligence and aptitude (Anthony & Jansen, 1984), low intention to seek work (Wiener & Oei, 1999), perceived loss of control (Joseph & Greenberg, 2001), lack of effective coping mechanisms (Prussia, Fugate, & Kinicki, 2001) and lower levels of education, increased age, and lack of work experience (van Ham, Mulder & Hooimeijer, 2001). Beauchesne & Belzile, within the action plan model identified above, distinguish four broad areas of potential intervention to address these barriers: career decision making, skill enhancement, job search, and employment maintenance. Following the tradition of trait-and-factor theories such as Holland’s (1992) person-environment fit,

more accurate matching of barriers to interventions may lead to more effective intervention outcomes.

Specific to the Canadian context, Chui and Zietsma (2003) discuss employment barriers impacting recent immigrants. These immigrants are experiencing lower labour market participation rates and lower income levels, are taking longer to integrate fully into the Canadian mainstream, and are having difficulty getting their foreign training and skills recognized (Wright & McDade, 1992). The trend toward lower incomes for recent immigrants is supported by analysis of the 2001 Canadian census results (Picot & Feng, 2003). Additionally, Henry and Ginzbert (1985) identify that visible minorities are much more likely to experience racial discrimination when seeking employment. Indeed, in a recent Statistics Canada (2003) release it was found that one in five of those who are of visible minority status report discrimination in the last five years, and that race or colour was the most often cited reason for the discrimination. Savickas (1994) comments on how individuals who are trapped by social or cultural oppression are often overlooked by current career theory.

Finally, employment barriers seem to increase the longer one is unemployed. Borgen and Amundson (1987) portray the dynamics of unemployment as an emotional roller coaster followed by a brief period of enthusiasm in the initial stages of job search which, if unsuccessful, then leads to a period of stagnation, frustration, and finally, apathy (Borgen & Amundson). This is supported by Kulik (2001) who, on a study of 559 jobless Israelis, found that job search intensity rose steadily during the first three months of unemployment and subsequently began to decline as unemployment continued.

Identifying personal employment assets may counteract some of these employment barriers, and would also be of benefit in the referral process for transitional supports. Measuring undergraduate students seeking employment, Caldwell and Burger (1998) found that scoring high on the Big Five personality traits of extraversion and conscientiousness led to more second interviews, while those who received more job offers scored higher in openness and agreeableness, and lower in neuroticism. De Fruyt and Mervielde (1999), measuring an unemployed Dutch job-seeking population, found that persons scoring high on extraversion and conscientiousness were more likely to be employed than unemployed.

Employability skills may be another asset to finding employment. The Conference Board of Canada's Employability Skills 2000+ program (Conference Board of Canada, 2003) cites the following key groupings of employability skills: fundamental skills (communicate, manage information, use numbers, think and solve problems), personal management skills (demonstrate positive attitudes and behaviours, be responsible, be adaptable, learn continuously, work safely), and teamwork skills (work with others, participate in projects or tasks). Proper identification of their own skills by job seekers may lead to more effective marketing of one's own skills, as well as more accurate identification of one's own shortfalls. In today's rapidly changing market (Herr, 1999), job seekers are more pressured

than ever to identify and promote their proficiency to employers in strategic and flexible ways.

A third asset to finding employment may be that of meaning. Using Wong's (1998) theoretical conception of meaning (achievement, relationship, intimacy, self-acceptance, self-transcendence, religion/spirituality, and fair treatment), higher levels of personal meaning have been found to lead to lower levels of perceived stress, better coping behaviours, and a positive impact on well-being (Kalkman, 2002; Wilk, 2000). Higher personal meaning has also been linked to higher levels of job satisfaction (Giesbrecht, 1997).

Finally, theorists such as Savickas (1994) and Mitchell, Levin, and Krumboltz (1999) emphasize that the future of career practice lies not so much in matching a particular set of traits with a future job, but rather with identifying and promoting underlying skills and abilities that may be transferred from one domain of work to another. This is not to say that matching skills with a particular program or intervention would not be of benefit, as these authors are referring to a future job, not a particular program. Furthermore, Krumboltz (1996) emphasizes that people need to prepare for changing work tasks and not assume that stable occupations will continue to exist. This is developed in the theory of planned happenstance—where “the counselor's job is to facilitate the learning of skills, interests, beliefs, values, work habits and personal qualities that enable each client to create a satisfying life in a constantly changing work environment” (Mitchell et al., p. 17). In order to empower job seekers to take action and control of their futures in such an environment, underlying skills, such as those of employability, must be identified to assist in negotiating this tumultuous and rapidly changing work environment.

In summary, more appropriate program usage begins with the accurate identification of a job seeker's assets and barriers, prior to the referral. Barriers can vary widely, while some potential assets identified include select personality traits, a higher overall sense of meaning, and more employability skills. These, then, are the research questions this study is attempting to address: Are personality traits, personal meaning, and employability skills related to finding employment? Additionally, are referrals to short- or long-term Canadian labour market interventions reflecting some of the underlying traits of personality or meaning?

## METHODS

### *Participants and Procedure*

Approximately 510 previously unemployed job seekers, who had found work within the previous two years, were contacted to discuss possible participation in the study. They were recruited through three federally funded employment assistance programs in the Coquitlam, BC, area (North Fraser Wage Subsidy in Action,  $N = 125$ ; THEO-BC's Avenue for Capturing Employment,  $N = 60$ ; Douglas College's Career Builder,  $N = 6$ ). Of those contacted, 191 participants

agreed to fill out the research package. Of the 191 recruited participants, 115 (62%) actually completed and returned the package which included a confidentiality form, a demographics and background questionnaire, a NEO-Five Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI) personality form, an employability skills self-assessment form (Assets for Employment), a copy of the Personal Meaning Profile (PMP), and a self-addressed return envelope. All candidates were also given a one-page information and confidentiality agreement.

Participants were grouped into one of three age categories: 18–29 years ( $N = 21$ ), 30–44 years ( $N = 44$ ), 45 years+ ( $N = 50$ ). Fifty-three were males and 62 were females ( $N = 115$ ). Ethnicity was mixed and reported as the following: Canadian (54), Arab/West Asian (12), Chinese (10), Western European (7), Eastern European (5), Filipino (5), Latin/South American (5), Other Southeast Asian (4), Aboriginal/First Nations (2), African (2), Central Asian (2), Hong Kong (1), Japanese (1), Korean (1), Russian (1), South Pacific (1), Taiwan (1), Other (1). In order to compare potential ethnic differences, as well as the potential barrier of not being part of the dominant culture, those who identified as primarily Canadian or Western European were classified as Western and all others were classified as Non-Western.

*NEO-Five Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI).* The NEO-FFI, based on the Big Five model of personality, is a well-documented research tool in the area of personality and purports to measure five major personality domains: negative emotionality (N), extraversion (E), openness (O), agreeableness (A), and conscientiousness (C) (Costa & McCrae, 1992). This instrument was chosen as it is a useful and comprehensive model of personality (Rust & Golombok, 1999). Test-retest reliability data for the five domains are reported by Costa and McCrae as ranging from .79 to .83 and internal consistency is estimated at .86 (N), .77 (E), .73 (O), .68 (A), and .81 (C). Internal reliability coefficients and descriptive statistics for the current use of the instrument were as follows ( $N = 114$ ): negative emotionality ( $\alpha = .84$ ,  $M = 1.71$ ,  $SD = .62$ ), extraversion ( $\alpha = .76$ ,  $M = 2.42$ ,  $SD = .51$ ), openness ( $\alpha = .64$ ,  $M = 2.26$ ,  $SD = .45$ ), agreeableness ( $\alpha = .75$ ,  $M = 2.79$ ,  $SD = .50$ ), and conscientiousness ( $\alpha = .77$ ,  $M = 3.06$ ,  $SD = .44$ ).

*Personal Meaning Profile (PMP).* The PMP consists of seven domains measured by 57 items: achievement striving, religion, fulfillment, relationship, transcendence, intimacy, self-acceptance, and fair treatment (Wong, 1998). This instrument was chosen because it was accessible; has cross-cultural validity with Korean (Kim, 2001), Chinese (Lin, 2001), and East Indian populations in both Canada and India (Kalkman, 2002); has good standardization; and provides a good index of overall meaning (Wong). Alpha measures for the respective scales are as follows: achievement striving ( $\alpha = .91$ ), religion ( $\alpha = .89$ ), relationship ( $\alpha = .81$ ), self-transcendence ( $\alpha = .84$ ), intimacy ( $\alpha = .78$ ), self-acceptance ( $\alpha = .54$ ), and fair treatment ( $\alpha = .54$ ) (Wong). Internal reliability coefficients and descriptive statistics for the current use of the instrument were as follows ( $N = 114$ ): achievement ( $\alpha = .92$ ,  $M = 5.34$ ,  $SD = .88$ ), relationship ( $\alpha = .90$ ,  $M = 5.47$ ,  $SD = .95$ ), religion ( $\alpha = .91$ ,  $M = 4.71$ ,  $SD = 1.54$ ), self-transcendence ( $\alpha = .84$ ,  $M = 4.84$ ,

$SD = 1.09$ ), self-acceptance ( $\alpha = .69$ ,  $M = 5.20$ ,  $SD = .89$ ), intimacy ( $\alpha = .86$ ,  $M = 5.24$ ,  $SD = 1.43$ ), fair treatment ( $\alpha = .57$ ,  $M = 4.84$ ,  $SD = 1.00$ ), and PMP total score ( $\alpha = .96$ ,  $M = 5.13$ ,  $SD = .83$ ).

*Assets for Employment (AE)*. No psychometrically sound, self-report measure of individual employability skills was found to be available in Canada or listed in *The Fourteen Mental Measurements Yearbook* (Buros Institute of Mental Measurements, 2001). This variable was identified as important based on extensive review and documentation produced by the Conference Board of Canada (2003), in consultation with an extensive list of Canadian employers. For the present study, a 30-item instrument, the Assets for Employment (AE) questionnaire, was designed based on employability skills as defined by the Conference Board of Canada. Broadly, this instrument proposes to measure three domains: fundamental, personal management, and teamwork skills.

It is important to emphasize that very little psychometric data is known about the AE scale and this is a very preliminary version. Items were derived by generating statements that based on professional experience, appeared to reflect the skill identified in the Conference Board of Canada (2003) document. One statement was derived for each skill. Orthogonal and oblique rotation was done on the completed questionnaires through varimax and promax factor analysis. Six items that did not load above .4 on any one factor on the rotated component matrix or that did not differentiate well between the three factors were dropped. The final 24 questions explained 39.45% of the variance with eigenvalues of 5.05 (factor 1), 2.56 (factor 2), and 1.86 (factor 3). Internal reliability coefficients and descriptive statistics for the revised 24 items were as follows ( $N = 115$ ): fundamental skills ( $\alpha = .77$ ), personal management skills ( $\alpha = .75$ ), teamwork skills ( $\alpha = .61$ ), and total score ( $\alpha = .81$ ). As the overall study was not utilizing specific subscales, the total 30-item scores were still used for calculations in the formal hypotheses.

*Job search length (JSL)*. As part of the background questionnaire, participants were asked to identify the most recent period of time when they were unemployed and seeking full-time employment. Job search length was chosen as it is one way of measuring the difficulty a job seeker faces in accomplishing the task of finding new work. If these figures were missing or unclear, the participant was contacted by phone to clarify the information whenever possible ( $N = 112$ ,  $M = 8.46$  months,  $SD = 4.64$ ).

*Pain and suffering*. A final measure is a ratio scale measure of perceived pain and suffering while unemployed. This question was part of the background questionnaire and was chosen to provide a qualitative measure of the participant's perception of the difficulty of the job-finding task. Participants identified a number between 1 and 10, with 1 meaning "you experienced no pain at all" and 10 meaning "the experience was severely painful." Results were as follows:  $N = 110$ ,  $M = 6.20$ ,  $SD = 2.43$ .

### Initial Analysis

The data were screened for missed or incorrect entries through an analysis of frequency tables on all major variables. Not all participants completed all questionnaires, so in some calculations the *N* size fluctuates based on actual completions. For missed entries on raw scale scores, the mean of that particular subscale was substituted. Additional analysis included the identification of outliers, estimates of homogeneity, skewness, and kurtosis for parametric data. No scales were found to be unusable.

*Correlational analysis.* To gain an overall sense of the relationships between the key variables, Pearson product-moment correlations were calculated (see Table 1). Of note, there was a negative correlation between negative emotionality and extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, employability skills, and personal meaning level. Employability skills, as measured by AE scores, also correlated with education, extraversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness. Job search length was positively correlated with pain and suffering and ethnicity (Western versus Non-Western) and negatively correlated with agreeableness.

Table 1  
*Intercorrelations Among Predictor and Moderator Variables (N = 115)*

|                          | 1     | 2     | 3    | 4      | 5      | 6     | 7    | 8     | 9     | 10    | 11    |
|--------------------------|-------|-------|------|--------|--------|-------|------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| 1. Education             | —     |       |      |        |        |       |      |       |       |       |       |
| 2. Job search length     | -.00  | —     |      |        |        |       |      |       |       |       |       |
| 3. LMI                   | .17   | .04   | —    |        |        |       |      |       |       |       |       |
| 4. Pain and suffering    | .17   | .32** | .15  | —      |        |       |      |       |       |       |       |
| 5. Negative emotionality | -.06  | -.08  | .04  | .31**  | —      |       |      |       |       |       |       |
| 6. Extraversion          | .13   | -.03  | .01  | -.02   | -.39** | —     |      |       |       |       |       |
| 7. Openness              | .19*  | -.02  | .04  | -.00   | .04    | .11   | —    |       |       |       |       |
| 8. Agreeableness         | .04   | .20*  | -.12 | -.25** | -.35** | .32** | .04  | —     |       |       |       |
| 9. Conscientiousness     | .03   | .19   | .01  | .19    | -.31** | .32** | -.05 | .34** | —     |       |       |
| 10. AE total             | .28** | .17   | -.03 | .07    | -.50** | .48** | .19* | .29** | .57** | —     |       |
| 11. PMP total            | .31** | .06   | .17  | .04    | -.33** | .33** | .16  | .26** | .40** | .63** | —     |
| 12. Ethnicity            | .48** | .18   | .06  | .33**  | -.10   | .15   | -.03 | -.07  | .05   | .18   | .27** |

*Note.* LMI = Labour Market Intervention; AE = Assets for Employment; PMP = Personal Meaning Profile.

\* $p < .05$  (two tailed). \*\* $p < .01$  (two tailed)

### Major Analyses

To address the question of whether short- or long-term Canadian labour market interventions were reflecting some of the underlying traits of personality or meaning, Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) was conducted with all five NEO subscales and the PMP total score as dependent variables, and the two labour market intervention groupings (long-term wage subsidy vs. short-term job and career search) as independent variables. The multivariate result was nonsignificant for

Labour Market Intervention (LMI), but the power level was unacceptably low for this analysis, Wilks'  $\lambda = 0.93$ ,  $F(1, 113) = 1.34$ ,  $p = .25$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.07$ , observed power = .50. All the univariate effect sizes were below 3%, and none were significant. A separate analysis was completed to assess the relationship between the AE measure and labour market interventions, and found no significant relationship.

To address the question of how personality traits and personal meaning are related to finding employment, job search length (JSL) was regressed simultaneously on the personality variables (C, E, O, A, N) and the PMP total score as predictors. Three participants were not included in this analysis due to missing data. The overall regression was found to be nonsignificant,  $F(6, 105) = 1.298$ ,  $p = .264$ ,  $r^2 = .07$ . Again, a separate analysis was completed to assess the relationship between the AE measure and JSL, and found no significant relationship.

Follow-up analysis looked at possible moderator effects for ethnicity. Using hierarchical regression, the PMP total score and the five NEO variables (N, E, O, A, C) were entered on the first step, followed by an ethnicity variable on the second step, and interaction terms in a third step. Ethnicity was defined by those who solely identified as Western (Canadian and Western European) and all other ethnic self-descriptions (Non-Western) were designated in a second group. Ethnicity yields a significant main effect reflecting the longer job search length of the Non-Western ethnicity category, and its inclusion in the overall regression clarifies the relationship between personality and job search length. Specifically, both agreeableness and extraversion became statistically significant when ethnicity was factored into the overall regression.

Next, the relationship between employability skills (AE), JSL, total number of interventions (AI), and education level was explored. To calculate the relationship between AE, JSL, and AI, a Pearson product-moment correlation was conducted. Total number of interventions was found to be positively correlated with job search length and statistically significant ( $r = .34$ ,  $p < .01$ ). As education level was collected ordinally, in five ascending categories, a Spearman's-rho correlation was conducted and education had a positive, statistically significant correlation ( $r = .28$ ,  $p < .01$ ) with the AE measure.

Using independent sample  $t$ -tests, post hoc analyses were done on gender, age, and ethnicity. For gender, the only significant difference was for agreeableness ( $N = 114$ ,  $p < .05$ ), with females scoring higher ( $M = 2.90$ ,  $SD = .49$ ) than males ( $M = 2.68$ ,  $SD = .47$ ). Age was positively correlated with length of unemployment ( $r = .14$ ) and pain and suffering ( $r = .14$ ), PMP total ( $r = .14$ ), conscientiousness ( $r = .32$ ), and employability skills ( $r = .22$ ). However, using a Pearson product-moment correlation matrix, only the employability skills are statistically significant with this population sample, suggesting that these skills do increase with age ( $N = 115$ ,  $r = .23$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

Though this study was not aimed specifically at identifying ethnicity and job-seeking behaviours among immigrants, 61 job seekers self-identified as Canadian or Western European (dominant Western cultural background), and 53 job seekers self-identified with a wide variety of other nationalities (Non-Western). If self-



identification is accepted as a measure of acculturation and identification with the dominant culture, then some meaningful comparisons may be made between those who describe themselves in terms of dominant Canadian culture and those who self-identify with other cultures.

When a Pearson product-moment correlation was done on agreeableness as it compared between the two ethnic groups (Western and Non-Western), and their relation to JSL and pain and suffering, differences in the strength of these relationships were found, and these relationships were statistically significant for the Non-Western group and not for the Westerner's ( $p < .05$ ). These differences suggest ethnicity is acting as a moderator on agreeableness, JSL, and pain and suffering.

Using independent samples  $t$ -tests, significant differences were also found on the employability skills scale and JSL ( $p < .05$ ), as well as the PMP total score ( $p < .01$ ) and perceived level of pain and suffering while unemployed ( $p < .001$ ). Notably, those of Non-Western ethnicities rated themselves as having higher levels of employability skills ( $M = 3.83$ ,  $SD = .41$ ), as well as having higher levels of personal meaning ( $M = 5.37$ ,  $SD = .80$ ) than those of Western ethnicity, yet took longer to find employment ( $M = 10.01$ ,  $SD = 5.91$ ) and had higher levels of pain and suffering ( $M = 7.04$ ,  $SD = 2.16$ ) while looking for work. Using a Pearson product-moment correlation, pain and suffering was also found to be highly correlated with job search length ( $r = .29$ ,  $p < .01$ ) as well as with negative emotionality ( $r = .32$ ,  $p < .01$ ). The ethnic comparisons are graphically depicted in Figure 1.

#### DISCUSSION

The goal of this research project was to identify underlying individual personality traits, personal meaning, and employability skills that may be associated with the use of short- and long-term labour market interventions, as they are defined by the Canadian government, and length of job search. This is important as, in an increasingly volatile job market, identifying such factors would be potentially useful for more accurate and precise selection of participants, decreasing deadweight loss, decreasing job search length, and increasing program success. The primary factors chosen for the formal hypotheses were the NEO-Five Factor Inventory personality variables, Personal Meaning Profile total score, and a new self assessment of employability skills: Assets for Employment.

No significant differences were found for the comparison between short- and long-term interventions, so it does not appear that these factors are impacting program selection and referral in this population. Consequently, this study was unable to clarify how or why participants are being selected for more expensive long-term interventions. Certainly it does not appear that an underlying personality trait, overall sense of meaning, or employability skills (as measured by the AE) would have any predictive merit for program utilization. This result was somewhat surprising, as one would intuitively expect that job seekers with lower levels of employability skills and higher levels of negative emotionality would gain access to more

expensive, long-term interventions. As no such relationship was found, perhaps some other factor may be playing a role in gaining access to these programs.

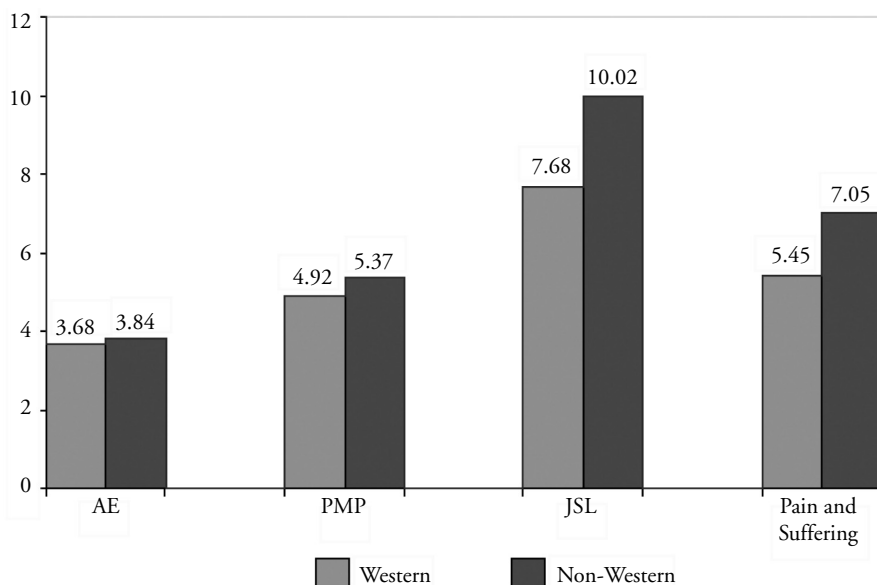
Equally mystifying is that none of these major variables appears to be impacting job search length in a significant way. This is quite surprising, as previous research appeared to suggest that negative emotionality would act as a barrier, and that extraversion and conscientiousness would act as an asset in the job search experience (Caldwell & Burger, 1998; De Fruyt & Mervielde, 1999). Employers have also identified employability skills as an important factor they are seeking in potential employees. Perhaps these personality, meaning, and general employability factors are not as important as the specific set of skills required for a specific job.

#### *Support for the Assets for Employment Employability Skills Measure*

One of the noteworthy findings was some support for the new employability skills measure: Assets for Employment. Though not significantly associated with decreased job search length, the scale was significantly correlated with all five NEO-FFI personality domains and, of special importance, very strongly correlated with extraversion, conscientiousness, and PMP total score and strongly negatively correlated with negative emotionality. Through factor analysis, reasonable support

Figure 1

*Ethnicity and t-tests on selected significantly different variables ( $p < .05$ )*



*Note.*  $N = 115$  with exception of Pain and Suffering where  $N = 110$ .

AE = Assets for Employment, 5 point scale ( $p < .05$ ); PMP = Personal Meaning Profile, 7 point scale ( $p < .01$ ), JSL = Job Search Length, scale in months ( $p < .05$ ); Pain and Suffering, 10 point scale ( $p < .001$ )

was also found for the three domains it purports to measure: fundamental skills, personal management skills, and teamwork skills.

Reflecting on some of the overlap with the NEO-FFI personality variables, some insight may be found into what kinds of personality traits employers may identify as assets. If this scale is proven to be valid in other populations, then it seems as if employers have identified that, at least in part, the type of employees they prefer are highly extraverted and highly conscientiousness, have high coping skills, have high levels of personal meaning, and do not experience many negative emotions. Further research is needed to support these findings.

### *Ethnicity as a Significant Factor in Unemployment*

One of the major findings concerned the role of ethnicity in job search length and perceived pain and suffering while unemployed. When ethnicity was divided into two groups, Western and Non-Western, a couple of important trends resulted. First, the Non-Western group had higher levels of employability skills, skills identified as very important when hiring by a large pool of employers interviewed by the Conference Board of Canada, and yet had much longer job search lengths. One important caveat is that this may be more a difference of cultural perception rather than an actual difference in skill performance, if it was measured by an objective third-party observer. Second, this Non-Western group reported much higher levels of meaning and pain and suffering while looking for work—even though meaning has been linked to higher levels of coping in previous research.

Some of the barriers this study proposed to uncover (personality and employability skill levels) may not apply in the same way to these ethnic groups, as they appear to be facing much larger systemic barriers such as racial discrimination, lack of recognition of their foreign credentials, and cultural and language barriers to the workplace. These environmental systemic barriers may be eclipsing some of the more personal barrier effects. This may also be why this study failed to replicate previous findings on the NEO-FFI personality construct and its relation to job search length and success. Certainly, judging by the high reported levels of pain and suffering relayed by the Non-Western group, more employment supports are necessary and critical to ensure this subgroup of job seekers is adequately served.

### *Limitations and Future Research*

A number of limitations are present in this study. First, this project is very preliminary and studied only a small subset of a population in one particular city in Western Canada. External validity may be extremely limited due to local economic, demographic, and labour conditions. Second, the referral process that is in place in the Coquitlam, British Columbia, region may be unique and may account for a significant amount of the variance as to why certain job seekers are accessing certain labour market supports.

Regarding the instruments utilized, three areas are of some concern. First, as the AE and PMP are new instruments with only limited reliability and validity data, their utilization as primary instruments still needs to be treated with some caution.

Second, as sense of meaning is somewhat of a developmental phenomenon—that is, something which changes and develops over time—it may not be a reliable measure over time and hence may fluctuate fairly significantly. As such, it may not be a trait in the same way that NEO-FFI subscales have been identified. Additionally, the loss of work has been associated in other research with a loss of meaning, as well as self-efficacy (Amundson, 1994; Jahoda, 1982; Regenold et al., 1999), and hence may be skewing the results during a period of unemployment. There may also be cultural differences in the personal assessment of one's own employability skills.

Finally, one major assumption behind the study is that all job seekers are equally motivated to find employment. As Borgen and Amundson (1987) found different job searching patterns for primary and secondary wage earners, as well as youth, this may be a significant confound, depending on the specifics of the population, when length of job search is used as the primary dependent variable. One way to control for this in future studies may be to include a motivational ratio scale of some sort, as well as the identification of wage earner status.

#### CONCLUSION

This project identified potential assets and barriers for the unemployed as a way to help minimize program deadweight loss. Two specific contributions present themselves as most important. First, in a time of increased public scrutiny and accountability for labour market effectiveness, more accurate, systematic, and psychometric identification of a person's assets and barriers need to be developed and used in the referral process. Employers have identified the core employability skills they desire when hiring, but job seekers seem to be having difficulty conveying those skills to employers. In this regard, the preliminary AE scale is a positive step, as it is built on the Conference Board of Canada definitions and appears to be reflecting the underlying employability skill constructs as used by career development professionals.

Finally, those who are of Non-Western ethnicity are experiencing systemic barriers while trying to integrate into Canadian society and, according to these findings, are experiencing higher levels of pain and suffering as their need to find work is frustrated. Agreeableness may also function as a barrier for this Non-Western group more than is true for the Western ethnic group. These barriers need to be identified and addressed through public policy in a more targeted fashion, and there needs to be recognition of these barriers in current career theory. In an economy where there is increased demand for knowledgeable and skilled employees, much is being lost, and many unemployed people are hurting in a very real and felt sense, as this Non-Western group is overlooked, discriminated against, or generally misunderstood by mainstream Canadian employers.

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