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**Psychological dimensions of unemployment: A gender  
comparison between Belgian and South African  
unemployed**

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## Abstract

This study sought to compare South African and Belgian unemployed in their subjective experience of unemployment, committed towards employment and job search behaviour. We also considered gender differences regarding the psychological dimensions of unemployment between Belgium and South Africa. A cross-sectional survey design was used. Unemployed people were sampled from the Potchefstroom area in South Africa ( $N = 381$ ) and the Brussels area in Belgium ( $N = 305$ ). The Experiences of Unemployment Questionnaire was administered. While no significant gender differences were found in South Africa, significant differences were found for all three psychological dimensions of unemployment in the Belgian sample. South African intervention programmes should be developed in order to cope with long-lasting unemployment, social isolation and further financial deprivation.

**Keywords:** experience of unemployment, employment commitment, job search behaviour, gender, unemployment, Belgium, South Africa

## **Psychological dimensions of unemployment: A gender comparison between Belgian and South African unemployed**

Unemployment rates are a widespread problem worldwide and, according to Marshall (2006), overcoming unemployment will remain a huge challenge in the future. South Africa has an average unemployment rate of 23.8% (The World Bank, 2011), which is three times higher than the Belgian unemployment rate of 8.4% (Eurostat, 2010). The current average unemployment rates of 26.6% among women and 20.0% among men (The World Bank, 2011) are higher than those for Belgium, which are 8.5% for women and 8% for men (Eurostat, 2010). Additionally, South Africa is facing extreme economic inequality. For example, in 2008 nearly 48% of the South African population lives beneath the poverty line of 2 dollars a day or R524 a month per person. This is a very high level of poverty for a middle-income economy. Moreover there continues to be a substantial difference in average incomes by racial group. In 2008, median expenditure per capita for Africans was R454 a month compared to R5668 a month for white people (National Planning Commission, 2011).

The high unemployment rates among men and women in South Africa could contribute to a high economic employment need and job search behaviour among South African unemployed men and women (Fryer & Payne, 1986; Jenkins, Mitra, Gupta, & Shaw, 1998; Rantakeisu & Jönsson, 2003). We expect that these economic factors create a financial stressful situation wherein unemployed South African women experience, think and behave in the same way as unemployed South African men when it comes to the psychological dimensions of unemployment. As such we assume that there are significantly smaller gender differences on the psychological dimensions of unemployment in South African than in Belgium.

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) defined unemployed people as ‘those above a specific age who, during the reference period, were without work (that is, neither in paid employment nor self-employment) but were available for work and have taken active steps to seek paid employment or self-employment’ (ILO, 2000, p.429). Given the above definition, unemployed people should be studied in terms of subjective experience of unemployment, availability for work (employment commitment) and job search behaviour (Paul & Moser, 2006). De Witte, Hooge, and Vanbelle (2010) measured these three psychological dimensions of unemployment in a sample of Belgian unemployed. The study of De Witte, Rothmann, and Jackson (2012) is the only study testing this model outside Europe. Research has found that the interaction between the psychological dimensions of unemployment largely determines how people deal with unemployment (Paul & Moser, 2006). Experience of unemployment is determined by both employment commitment and the intensity of job search behaviour (McKee-Ryan, Song, Wanberg, & Kinicki, 2005; Paul & Moser, 2009). Conversely, the intensity of job search behaviour is determined by experience of unemployment and employment commitment (Kanfer, Wanberg, & Kantrowitz, 2001).

### **Experience of unemployment, attitudes towards employment and job search behaviour**

**Subjective experience of unemployment.** Meta-analytical studies clearly documented the negative consequences of unemployment on psychological well-being and physical health (McKee-Ryan et al., 2005; Paul & Moser, 2006, 2009). The latent deprivation theory of Jahoda (1982) is a relevant frame of reference to understand the affective experience of unemployed people. Jahoda (1982) stated that unemployment does not only have an impact on the manifest function (gaining an income) of employment, but also on five latent functions: 1) establishment of structure in life, 2) providing social contact outside the

family, 3) status and prestige, 4) opportunities for self-realization and activity and 5) the ability to deploy one's capacities to fully contribute to society. Satisfaction of these latent functions is associated with basic human needs and a psychological healthy life. Extensive empirical evidence supports Jahoda's latent deprivation model (Creed, Muller, & Machin, 2001; Creed & Reynolds, 2001; Evans & Haworth, 1991; McKee-Ryan et al., 2005; Nordenmark, 1999; Paul & Batinic, 2010). Applying Grawe's consistency theory (2004) on experience of unemployment, we can explain psychological distress and decreased life satisfaction as the occurrence of incongruence between goals and perceived goal attainment. High levels of incongruence are expected to be a leading cause of the creation and maintenance of unwell-being and psychological distress. Whilst Fryer (1986, 1997) acknowledged the impact of the latent functions on mental health; he states they could not fully explain negative experience of unemployment. Fryer's (1986) agency theory indicates that the loss of financial resources causes progressive financial hardship.

**Employment commitment.** The importance attached to employment (employment commitment) reflects the attitudes towards employment (Feather, 1990; Fryer & Fagin, 1993). Employment commitment is an attitudinal construct that refers to the psychosocial meaning or centrality of work in a person's life independently from the economic meaning of work (Kanfer et al., 2001). Employment commitment shows to be a rather stable construct. Reemployment did not enhance levels of employment commitment, nor did the unemployed display an adaptation process by lowering their employment commitment (Paul & Moser, 2006). Various studies have shown that being strongly committed towards employment but being unsuccessful in job search behaviour might cause more psychological and physical harm (Fryer & Fagin, 1993; Fryer & Payne, 1984). In line with Jahoda (1982), McKee-Ryan et al. (2005) found that employment takes a central position in life and co-determines the self-esteem of the individual.

**Job search behaviour.** Job search behaviour is a meaningful, dynamic, purposeful and voluntary sequence of actions that begins with the identification of employment opportunities and involvement in the pursuit of employment. Research on job search behaviour often uses an attitude-behaviour model. Applying the theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen, 1991), it was found that intentions to look for a job are predicted by one's positive or negative evaluations. The more favourable one's attitudes and the higher the social pressure towards looking for a job, the more likely one would develop and maintain job search behaviour. Furthermore the perceived control over one's actions affects the perception of control about one's behaviour (Ajzen, 1991; Van Hooft, Born, Taris, Van der Flier, & Blonk, 2004). Job search intention in turn acts as the immediate antecedent of job search behaviour. The unemployed that are highly committed on employment will display an intensive job search behaviour (Wiener, Oei, & Creed, 1999) because they are probably the most affected by their unemployment. An intensive search for a new job increases the chances of finding one (Kanfer et al., 2001), reduces the risk of long-term unemployment (McKee-Ryan et al., 2005), leads to higher levels of psychological and physical well-being (Feather, 1990; McKee-Ryan et al., 2005; Paul & Moser, 2006) and increases the satisfaction with the new job (Leana & Feldman, 1988).

### **Cross-national differences between Belgium and South Africa**

European and South African studies show how unemployment affects the psychological, physical and social well-being of unemployed people (Blanchflower & Oswald, 2004; Gonzo & Plattner, 2003; Kingdon & Knight, 2001, 2004; Ribton-Turner & De Bruin, 2006; Van Der Merwe & Greef, 2003). The meta-analysis of Paul and Moser (2009) showed that economic factors – such as the unemployment rate and the social security system - largely explain the

differences in experience of unemployment between countries. However, because of the interconnectedness of the psychological dimensions of unemployment (Kanfer et al., 2001; McKee-Ryan et al., 2005; Paul & Moser, 2006, 2009), experience of unemployment will also affect attitudes towards employment and job search behaviour.

The fact that unemployment rates are extraordinarily higher in South Africa than those in Belgium causes the vast majority to have no labour market experience. The social outcomes would also be different. For instance, while Belgian unemployed receive a substitute income in times of unemployment because they can rely on a social security system, this is not (yet) the case in South Africa (Nding'u, 2010). One would expect that financial hardship among South African unemployed might constitute as an incentive to search intensively for a job in order to eliminate the dissonant feelings (Blau & Robins, 1990; Jenkins et al., 1998). Therefore it is also interesting to investigate the impact of economic factors (e.g. high unemployment rates, missing social security system) on job search behaviour. Research suggests that financial uncertainty might incite purposeful job search behaviour (Jenkins et al., 1998), while receiving financial support from the government has a de-activating effect (Kong, Perrucci, & Perrucci, 1993). However, many South African unemployed might rely on the informal social security system through the extended family, which might mitigate the distress from unemployment.

### **Between gender differences in Belgium and South Africa**

Several studies showed that the employment choices men and women make are often limited by social norms and stereotypes (Livingston & Judge, 2008; Mainiero & Sullivan, 2006; Powell & Mainiero, 1992). While social norms and traditional roles expect women to take care of the family and to ensure the household (Greenhaus & Foley, 2007; Hochschild &

Machung, 2003), men are expected to enter the labour market. Among men, this might create the perception that a choice to take care of the household it is not socially accepted, while it is more accepted for women (Livingston & Judge, 2008; Sullivan & Arthur, 2006). Mainiero and Sullivan (2006) argued that social norms and stereotypes are maintained because men have few role models that have broken with these traditional norms, while women have enough role models in all walks of life that have successfully broken with traditional norms and gender roles.

Although unemployment causes a decrease in psychological well-being for men and women, men experience their unemployment in a more negative way, while women tend to have a more positive experience (Rosseel, 1982). Van Loon, Pauwels, and van Humskerke (1982) found that for 72% of unemployed men the disadvantages outweighed the benefits, while for unemployed women this was the case in 32% only. Carroll (2007) confirmed these findings by showing that unemployed women report a lower life satisfaction in 35% of the cases while unemployed men do so in 63% of the cases. While unemployed women display a faster recovery in psychological well-being, unemployed men feel significantly lonelier and experience more psychological and physical health problems (Artazcoz, Benach, Borell, & Cortès, 2004; Paul & Moser, 2006; Warr & Jackson, 1987). An explanation for these findings might be found in the fact that women more frequently choose to be voluntarily unemployed, while this is not true for men. Voluntarily choosing for unemployment is associated with a more positive experience of unemployment (de Beer, 1990).

While women are moderately committed to employment, men are highly committed to employment (De Witte & Wets, 1993; Warr & Jackson, 1987). Due to the traditional gender role expectations, less importance might be attached to economic decisions made by women causing them to miss the psychosocial functions of employment to a lesser extent (Hakim, 1991). Carroll (2007) and Hakim (1991, 1995) pointed out that the performance of



meaningful alternative activities – such as homekeeping – leads to a lower distress among women from their not being formally employed. Nordenmark (1999) found that the degree of employment commitment among unemployed people is a function of the extent to which they are able to engage in meaningful alternative activities. These activities might turn the attention of unemployed women towards the positive aspects of their lives and provide them with the latent functions of employment equally well (Jahoda, 1982).

Men search more intensively for a new job than women, who take on a more passive approach (Rosseel, 1982). De Witte and Wets (1993) found that 20.4% of unemployed women actively searched for a job as opposed to 79.6% of women, which took on a more passive approach. Atkinson and Birch (1970) reported that the motivation to search for a new job might disappear when an attitudinal shift takes place to meaningful alternative activities. This finding is consistent with the role enhancement hypothesis, which states that if any problems occur in one role, another role can alternatively provide for the latent functions (Sorensen & Verbrugge, 1987). On the other hand, men are more likely to have an autonomous motivation to search for a new job. Their high employment commitment enables them to behave in accordance with their intense desire to find a new job (Vansteenkiste, Lens, Dewitte, De Witte, & Deci, 2004; Wanberg, Glomb, Song, & Sorenson, 2005).

We expect that women experience their unemployment in a more positive way, are less committed towards employment and display less job search behaviour than unemployed men do. Although this pattern can be expected among Belgian unemployed women because they have the economic factors in their favour, we do not expect this to be a worldwide gender pattern. South African unemployed women cannot “afford” it to experience their unemployment in a more positive way or to become less committed towards employment and search less for employment because there is no substitute income to rely on in times of unemployment, depriving them from both latent and manifest functions of employment.

Additionally, high unemployment rates increase the probability that one or both partners will be unemployed, creating a prolonged deprivation of both the manifest and latent functions of employment within the family.

### **Goals of the study**

The aims of this study were to investigate between country differences (Belgium versus South Africa) in the experience of unemployment, commitment towards employment and job search behaviour. Specifically, we hypothesized that South African unemployed experience their unemployment in a more negative way (H1A), are more committed towards employment (H1B) and display more job search behaviour (H1C) than Belgian unemployed. We also sought to examine gender differences regarding the psychological dimensions of unemployment between Belgium and South Africa. We hypothesize that gender differences on the psychological dimensions of unemployment are significantly smaller in South Africa than in Belgium (H2). Information concerning attitudes towards employment and job search behaviour might assist in the development and implementation of tailor-made programmes to strengthen the coping mechanisms and job search behaviour of specific groups.

## **Method**

### **Research design**

A cross-sectional survey design was used to test the hypotheses. This research is based on a secondary analysis of data collected by De Witte and Hooge (1999) in Belgium and by De Witte et al. (2012) in South Africa.

## Participants and setting

The total sample consists of 305 Belgian and 381 South African respondents who were unemployed at the time of the data collection. The South African respondents were sampled from three racial groups, namely coloured people (54%), black people (24.1%) and white people (21.5%). A total of 65.8% of the Belgian participants were female, while 54% of the South African participants were male. In the Belgian sample, the focus lies in the age group 40 – 49 year olds (34.1%) with an average age of 39.06 years old ( $SD = 9.99$ ), while in the South African sample, 58.1% is 30 years or younger with an average age of 30.72 years old ( $SD = 10.96$ ). While in the Belgium sample 12.7% had obtained a degree from university or higher education, this is 7.7% in the South African sample. A total of 41.8% of the Belgian sample is short-term unemployed (less than one year), while this is 27.2% in the South African sample. In the South African sample, 32% is long-term unemployed (more than five years) compared to 14.8% in the Belgian sample. Also notable is the 21% that is almost always unemployed in the South African sample compared to the 7.3% in the Belgian sample.

## Measures

Participants completed the Experience of Unemployment Questionnaire (EUQ) (De Witte et al., 2010, 2012; De Witte & Hooge, 1999) in order to measure their negative experience of unemployment, attitudes towards employment and job search behaviour. The EUQ is divided in four sections. The first section gathers demographic information, while the next three sections measure the psychological dimensions of unemployment.

The negative experience of unemployment was assessed with a set of six items, each measured on a 3-point Likert scale ranging from *never* (scored 0) to *often* (scored 2). The items were developed on the basis of Jahoda's (1982) latent deprivation model (De Witte et

al., 2010; De Witte & Hooge, 1999). Examples are “There is more conflict at home since I am unemployed” and “It feels as if I am no longer part of society”. All items were combined to form one global measure of experience of unemployment (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .86$ ), creating a scale ranging from zero (minimum) to 12 (maximum). A higher score indicated a more unfavourable experience of unemployment.

Attitudes towards employment were measured with a set of six items, each measured on a 3-point Likert scale (0 = *disagree*, 2 = *agree*). The importance of work in one’s life was assessed by means of the *Employment Commitment Scale* of Warr, Cook, and Wall (1979). Examples are “I find it important to have work” and “It is better to accept any job than to be unemployed”. All items were combined to form one global measure of attitudes towards employment (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .79$ ), creating a scale ranging from zero (minimum) to 12 (maximum). A higher score indicated a higher employment commitment.

Job searching behaviour was measured with three items. Respondents were asked to indicate on a 5-point Likert scale (0 = *never*, 4 = *ten times or more*) how often they had looked for a job during the past three months (De Witte & Hooge, 1999). Examples are “Asked friends, family or acquaintances if they were aware of any work” and “Submitted applications arising from advertisements”. All items were combined to form one global measure of intensity of job searching behaviour (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .71$ ), creating a scale ranging from zero (minimum) to 12 (maximum). A lower score indicated less intense job search behaviour during the past three months.

Gender was assessed with a direct question and coded as 1 for male and as 2 for female. Country of residency was effect coded -1 for South Africa and 1 for Belgium. Within South Africa, the different racial groups were coded in three categories, starting from “*Coloured*” (coded 1) to “*White*” (coded 2) and “*Black*” (coded 3).

## **Controls**

Demographic variables such as age, education and unemployment duration have been shown to have an influence on the psychological dimensions of unemployment (De Witte et al., 2010; Kanfer et al., 2001; Kingdon & Knight, 2001; Paul & Moser, 2009). To make sure that results are not due to variance in these demographic variables, we coded these demographic variables and controlled for them. Age was expressed in years and coded in seven categories, starting from “*younger than 19 years*” (coded 1) tot “*older than 62 years*” (coded 7). Education was coded in four categories, starting from “*no school or primary school*” (coded 1) to “*university education*” (coded 4). Unemployment duration was expressed in years and coded in four categories, starting from “*1 year or less*” (coded 1) to “*5 years or more*” (coded 4).

## **Data-collection and procedure**

The Belgian study was part of the elaboration of a reintegration policy for unemployed people in Belgium. The study was conducted in one municipality (Sint-Pieters-Leeuw). From September to late November 1998, the VDAB (Flemish Service of Unemployment Mediation) was asked to invite all registered unemployed job searchers to participate in this study to fill out the EUQ collectively. In South Africa the study began in 2005 with the development of ‘The Experience of Unemployment Questionnaire’ (EUQ) based on the model and questionnaire of De Witte and Hooge (1999) and De Witte et al. (2010). A process of translation and back-translation was used to translate the EUQ into Afrikaans and Setswana (Brislin, 1970). Three fieldworkers (who speak Afrikaans, English and/or Tswana) collected data from unemployed people in the Potchefstroom area during July 2006 using a

random door-to-door selection procedure. The EUQ was administrated anonymously in both countries. Participation was voluntary. The South African and Belgian data were captured on SPSS, checked for mistakes and merged to form one dataset containing the South African and Belgian data. Finally, the dataset was prepared for statistical analysis.

### **Data analysis**

The datasets were merged and analysed using version 19.0 of the SPSS statistical package (SPSS Inc., 2011). We tested for equivalence to make sure that the obtained scores could be meaningfully compared. A two-step procedure was used to examine structural equivalence (Poortinga, 1989; Van de Vijver & Leung, 1997a, 1997b; Van de Vijver & Rothmann, 2004). Table 1 shows the principal component analysis with varimax rotation on the 15 items of the EUQ (confirmatory factor analysis), resulting in a three factor solution, with an explained variance of 57.60%. Communality values were all above .40, indicating that the items represent the factor adequately (Field, 2009).

<Insert Table 1 approximately here>

A structural equivalence test was conducted in order to meaningfully compare factor loadings and structure. In the first step, factor analyses (forced three factor solution with varimax rotation) were conducted on the three racial groups in South Africa. The agreement between the derived factors was compared between groups by means of a factor congruence coefficient, Tucker's phi. While values above .90 point to essential agreement, values above .95 point to very high agreement, which implies that factor loadings are equal to a multiplying constant and factors structures can be compared between groups (Van de Vijver

& Leung, 1997a, 1997b). A row comparison showed that structural equivalence could not be found for the attitudinal (.86) and job search (.89) constructs when comparing white people and black people. Moreover there were problems with the structural equivalence of the job search (.88) construct when comparing coloured people with white people. A column comparison revealed problems with the structural equivalence of the job search construct. Therefore, the cultural subsamples cannot unambiguously be combined. However, Banerjee, Galiani, Levinsohn, McLaren, and Woolard (2008) and Kingdon and Knight (2004) stated that apartheid and discrimination might still be strongly present in South Africa. They found that one third of the gap in unemployment differences between racial groups cannot be explained by observed variables. In this study the item “spontaneously presented myself to an employer”, had a positive loading on job search behaviour for coloured and white people, while it loaded negatively on negative experience of unemployment for the black people. It might be the case that Black South African people are still rejected more frequently based on race. One should take this into account when interpreting the results.

In the second step, a factor analysis was conducted on the pooled Belgian and South African dataset. The same factors that showed to be (partially) structurally equivalent were used. Tucker’s phi values above .95 were found for the negative experience of unemployment and attitudinal construct. For the job search behaviour construct only essential agreement between the factor solutions was found. This implies universal validity of the psychological dimensions of unemployment, allowing us to merge both files.

The hypotheses were tested using a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) with simple contrast (Field, 2009). We predicted subjective experience of unemployment, attitudes towards employment and job search behaviour based on the country of residency and gender. All hypotheses were tested on a significance level of  $p < .05$ .

## Results

### Descriptive statistics

Inspection of the Belgian sample shows the mean scores for negative experience of unemployment ( $M = 7.21$ ;  $SD = 3.49$ ), attitudes towards employment ( $M = 7.62$ ;  $SD = 3.07$ ) and job search behaviour ( $M = 5.93$ ;  $SD = 3.53$ ). Inspection of the South African sample shows the mean scores for negative experience of unemployment ( $M = 3.85$ ;  $SD = 3.35$ ), attitudes towards employment ( $M = 10.13$ ;  $SD = 2.29$ ) and job search behaviour ( $M = 8.14$ ;  $SD = 3.40$ ). Mean scores for negative experience of unemployment ( $M = 5.25$ ;  $SD = 3.79$ ), attitudes towards employment ( $M = 9.11$ ;  $SD = 2.91$ ) and job search behaviour ( $M = 7.21$ ;  $SD = 3.62$ ) were obtained when inspecting the merged dataset.

### Experience of unemployment, employment commitment and job search behaviour

We hypothesized South African unemployed to experience their unemployment in a more negative way (H1A), to be more committed towards employment (H1B) and to display more job search behaviour (H1C) than Belgian unemployed. MANOVA analysis with *simple* contrast was used to test the first hypotheses. All test statistics show to be significant for country of residence ( $p \leq .0001$ ) with a partial eta squared of .22. This result indicates that country of residence has a significant effect on the psychological dimensions of unemployment. A *simple* contrast was carried out comparing Belgian unemployed with South African unemployed on the dimensions of unemployment. Contrast estimate values are 3.35 for negative experience of unemployment, 2.75 for attitudes towards employment and 2.16 for job search behaviour. The observed estimated differences are tested to check whether a significant difference from zero can be found. Significant differences were found for negative



experience of unemployment ( $p \leq .0001$ ), attitudes towards employment ( $p \leq .0001$ ) and job search behaviour ( $p \leq .0001$ ) when comparing Belgium with South Africa. 95% Confidence intervals of negative experience of unemployment, 95% CI [2.67, 4.03], attitudes towards employment, 95% CI [2.04, 3.11] and job search behaviour 95% CI [1.49, 2.84] confirm these findings because the confidence intervals do not include zero.

<Insert Table 2 approximately here>

**Within group effects.** When investigating the ANOVA's within MANOVA, significant differences were found for negative experience of unemployment ( $p \leq .0001$ ) with a partial eta squared of .16, attitudes towards employment ( $p \leq .0001$ ) with a partial eta squared of .15 and job search behaviour ( $p \leq .0001$ ) with a partial eta squared of .07. While Belgian unemployed have a mean score of 7.24, CI [6.73, 7.74] on negative experience of unemployment, South African unemployed have a mean score of 3.89, CI [3.49, 4.28], indicating a more negative experience of unemployment among the South African unemployed (H1A). On attitudes towards employment, Belgian unemployed obtain a mean score of 7.45, CI [7.05, 7.85], while South African unemployed have a mean score of 10.02, CI [9.71, 10.33], indicating more employment commitment among the South African unemployed (H1B). Belgian unemployed obtain a mean score of 5.98, CI [5.48, 6.48] on job search behaviour, while for South African unemployed this mean score is 8.14, CI [7.75, 8.54], indicating more job search behaviour among the South African unemployed (H1C). The hypothesis that states that South African unemployed experience their unemployment in a more negative way (H1A), are more committed towards employment (H1B) and display more job search behaviour (H1C) than Belgian unemployed is supported by the evidence.

## Gender effects

We hypothesized gender differences on the psychological dimensions of unemployment to be significantly smaller in South Africa than in Belgium (H2). MANOVA with *simple* contrast was conducted to test hypothesis two. In the case of South Africa, all test statistics showed not to be significant for gender ( $p = .826$ ). However, in the case of Belgium, all test statistics showed to be significant for country of residence ( $p = .002$ ) with a partial eta squared of .07. This result indicates that gender has a significant effect on the psychological dimensions of unemployment in Belgium, while it has no significant effect in South Africa. A *simple* contrast was carried out comparing unemployed men and women in Belgium and unemployed men and women in South Africa on the dimensions of unemployment. Contrast estimate values are -.14 for negative experience of unemployment, -.22 for attitudes towards employment and -.17 for job search behaviour in the South African sample. No significant differences were found for negative experience of unemployment ( $p = .708$ ), attitudes towards employment ( $p = .391$ ) and job search behaviour ( $p = .648$ ) when comparing unemployed men and women in South Africa. Confidence intervals for negative experience of unemployment, 95% CI [-.88, .60], attitudes towards employment, 95% CI [-.74, .29] and job search behaviour 95% CI [-.90, .56] confirm these findings, because the boundaries of the 95% confidence intervals cross zero, making it possible that the true gender differences in the population might be zero. In the Belgian case, contrast estimate values are 1.47 for negative experience of unemployment, 1.34 for attitudes towards employment and 1.32 for job search behaviour. Significant differences were found for negative experience of unemployment ( $p = .004$ ), attitudes towards employment ( $p = .003$ ) and job search behaviour ( $p = .009$ ) when comparing unemployed Belgian men with unemployed Belgian women. 95% Confidence intervals for negative experience of unemployment, 95% CI [-2.46, -.49], attitudes towards

employment, 95% CI [.46, 2.23] and job search behaviour 95% CI [.34, 2.30] confirm these findings because the boundaries of the 95% confidence intervals do not cross zero, making us confident that the true value of the gender difference in Belgium will be different from zero.

<Insert Table 3 approximately here>

**Within group effects.** When investigating the ANOVA's within MANOVA in the South African sample, no significant differences were found for negative experience of unemployment ( $p = .708$ ), attitudes towards employment ( $p = .391$ ) and job search behaviour ( $p = .648$ ). However, in the Belgian sample, significant differences were found for negative experience of unemployment ( $p = .004$ ) with a partial eta squared of .043, attitudes towards employment ( $p = .003$ ) with a partial eta squared of .044 and job search behaviour ( $p = .009$ ) with a partial eta squared of .04. Mean scores and 95% confidence intervals of all three psychological dimensions of unemployment are very similar when comparing South African unemployed men and women (H2). While South African unemployed men have a mean score of 8.11, 95% CI [7.60, 8.62] on negative experience of unemployment, South African unemployed women have a mean score of 8.25, 95% CI [7.71, 8.79]. South African unemployed men have a mean score of 9.92, 95% CI [9.57, 10.27] on attitudes towards employment, while South African unemployed women obtain a mean score of 10.14, 95% CI [9.77, 10.52]. On job search behaviour, South African unemployed men obtain a mean score of 8.11, 95% CI [7.61, 8.61], while South African unemployed women have a mean score of 8.28, CI [7.75, 8.81]. In Belgium these mean scores and 95% confidence intervals are less similar. Unemployed men obtain a mean score of 5.59, 95% CI [4.81, 6.36] on negative experience of unemployment, while Belgian unemployed women have a mean score of 4.11, 95% CI [3.51, 4.72], indicating a more negative experience of unemployment among

unemployed Belgian men (H2). On attitudes towards employment, Belgian unemployed men have a mean score of 8.27, 95% CI [7.57, 8.97], while Belgian unemployed women obtain a mean score of 6.93, 95% CI [6.38, 7.47], indicating higher levels of employment commitment among unemployed Belgian men (H2). While Belgian unemployed men obtain a mean score of 6.77, 95% CI [6.00, 7.54] on job search behaviour, Belgian unemployed women obtain a mean score of 5.45, 95% CI [4.85, 6.05], indicating higher levels of job search behaviour among unemployed Belgian men (H2). The evidence supports the hypothesis that gender differences on the psychological dimensions of unemployment are significantly smaller in South Africa than in Belgium.

### **Discussion**

The aims of the present study were to investigate whether South African unemployed experience their unemployment in a more negative way, are more committed towards employment and display more job search behaviour than do Belgian unemployed, and to study gender differences regarding the psychological dimensions of unemployment between Belgium and South Africa. Significant differences were found for negative experience of unemployment, attitudes towards employment and job search behaviour when comparing South African with Belgian unemployed. No significant gender differences were found for the psychological dimensions of unemployment in the South African sample. However, in the Belgian sample, significant differences were found for all psychological dimensions of unemployment. The fact that no significant gender differences were found in South Africa, while significant differences were found in Belgium, might also be due to the fact that we did not investigate who the primary breadwinner was. South African women probably experience their income as a necessary income to make ends meet while Belgian women are more likely

to experience their unemployment in a more positive way because they might experience their income as an extra income (Van Loon et al., 1982). Warr (1983) stated that if women see themselves as the primary breadwinner, their psychological well-being decreases as a consequence of unemployment. Future research should investigate the percentage of the total household income one earns, to determine who the primary breadwinner is. Blau (2007) might provide another explanation for these results. Blau (2007) indicated that unemployment could offer the opportunity to reflect about one's future, to explore alternative career opportunities or to allow one to gain new energy. While Belgian unemployed women more often have the opportunity to (temporally) withdraw from the labour market, such an approach is less possible for South African unemployed women because of economic constraints.

### **Implications for labour market participation**

Paid employment is one of the most important distribution mechanisms in today's society, provides a sustainable base for welfare and serves as a strong instrument to combat poverty and social inequality (Jahoda, 1982). Good design of workplaces might be the best way to help people dealing with unemployment even before it happens.

At a structural level, South Africa might consider unemployment benefits to cushion the effects of unemployment. The resources for the added expense to the national budget could be met by the creation of new jobs, budget reforms, reduced tax to stimulate foreign investments, development of new companies and enhance human resources development. Moreover, the government should set wages standards for companies to pay to their employees. Kingdon and Knight (1999) state that tripling unemployment from 10% to 30% (nearly the average unemployment rate in South Africa) reduces wages by approximately

30%. The high unemployment rate causes employees to fear that they might lose their job and weakens the bargaining power of the labour unions to negotiate about higher wages.

On an individual level, interventions should teach the unemployed to cope with the negative consequences of long-lasting unemployment in order to secure psychological well-being (Mohr & Otto, 2011). This should especially be the case in South Africa, where the unemployment rate is very high. Vuori and Vesalainen (1999) propose three possible interventions based on the latent deprivation model of Jahoda (1982). Firstly, they suggest upgrading the labour market knowledge, job skills and personal abilities of the unemployed. Secondly, they propose to engage the unemployed to develop their cognitive abilities and initiative taking. However, developing such abilities and skills does not happen overnight and requires perseverance. As such, the best prevention seems to be to design jobs that allow one to develop and sustain cognitive abilities and job skills. Finally, Vuori and Vesalainen (1999) propose to develop outplacement programmes for those who are still employed but are on the verge of losing their jobs. Such programmes should help individuals to sustain psychological well-being during unemployment and help them to develop job-search techniques.

In general, these interventions appear to have a positive effect on psychological and physical well-being and are especially effective in helping unemployed people to cope with long-lasting unemployment, social isolation and further financial deprivation (Vuori & Silvonen, 2005). Moreover these programmes show to be the most beneficial for the unemployed with the worst mental health (Machin & Creed, 2003). As such there appears to be a high need to develop such intervention programmes in South Africa in order to reduce the negative consequences of unemployment.

### **Limitations of the study and recommendations for future research**

This research has various limitations. First, the cross-sectional nature of this research makes causal attributions about the impact of unemployment on the psychological dimensions of unemployment impossible. A selection effect could explain the results equally well. It might be possible that reduced psychological or physical well-being precedes unemployment (Hammarström & Janlert, 2005). These results might not simply be generalized beyond this sample. Longitudinal research is needed to ascertain the causal relationship between being unemployed and the psychological dimensions of unemployment.

Second, structural equivalence showed to be a cause of concern for some of the constructs when comparing the three South African cultural groups. Therefore, we could not unambiguously combine the three cultural groups into one pooled South African sample and our results should be interpreted with some caution. However, the small sample sizes in our study could have influenced our factor equivalence coefficients. Additionally, Banerjee et al. (2008) and Kingdon and Knight (2004) found that the still on-going discrimination against non-white people in South Africa might explain the lack of equivalence and hence the difficulty in the comparison of coloured and black people with white people. Future research should investigate the impact of discrimination upon the factor loadings and structure.

Third, cultural differences might have influenced our results. For example, Kuo (2011) argued that culture highly influences human coping behaviour. Members from collectivistic cultures (e.g. South Africa) are usually depicted as more committed to each other lives, to share more resources and to maintain intimate relationships with each other. Members from individualistic cultures (e.g. Belgium) on the other hand, tend to have a strong emphasis on autonomy and independence (Hofstede & McRae, 2004; Triandis, McCusker, & Hui, 1990). Therefore, it could be expected that South African unemployed are able to rely

more on an extended social support network allowing to buffer against the negative consequences of unemployment, which might have been less obvious for Belgian unemployed (Kuo, 2011; Masango, 2005). However, recently South Africa became an emerging economy, causing urbanization, industrialization and globalization to accelerate. Living in an industrial, urban and fast-changing environment tends to increase the level of complexity and the level of individualism within a society (Chick, 1997; Triandis, 1995). Living in such societies causes people to shift from extreme forms of individualism or collectivism towards moderation and less extreme stereotypical orientations (Van Dyk & De Kock, 2004). Nevertheless, the way cultural differences might influence the psychological dimensions of unemployment should be studied more thoroughly in future research.

Fourth, Powdthavee (2006) found – unlike our results – that people suffer less from their unemployment when unemployment rates are high. He argued that social disapproval is less prevalent if many other people are unemployed in the same region. His results however appeared only to be significant for the urban black community. Additionally, Winefield and Fryer (1996) emphasized the importance of historical and cultural background when interpreting results from unemployment research. Although unemployment is a worldwide concern, individual differences might also play a role in one's perception of the psychological dimensions of unemployment. The subjective experience of unemployment is not homogeneous within cultures. Instead it might be mediated by many personal, regional and social factors. Future research should take into account that the concept of unemployment might have a different meaning for people in other regional settings.

Fifth, the samples used in this study were not representative for the total population of the Belgian and South African unemployed because data were gathered in only one municipality. Additionally, no data were sampled among the Indian unemployed in South Africa. Future research should sample representative data and included all cultural groups.



Next, respondents were not categorized based on their duration of unemployment. However there might be a vast difference between being short-term and long-term unemployment. Several researchers found that the duration of unemployment is associated with 1) a decrease in productive coping and an increase in non-productive coping (Langens & Mose, 2006), 2) an increase in negative affect and somatic complaints (McKee-Ryan et al., 2005) and 3) impairments in emotional well-being (Harnish, Aseltine, & Gore, 2000). Future research should make a distinction between short-term unemployment (1 year or less), long-term unemployment (1 year or more) and very long-term unemployment (2 years or more).

Finally, our data were collected using a self-reported measurement. This might cause socially desirable responses and common method variance. However, by using voluntary participation and guaranteeing the confidentiality of the responses we tried to minimize such responses. In order to exclude common method bias, we conducted a Herman's one-factor test, showing evidence against common-method bias (Podsakoff & Organ, 1986).

## **Conclusion**

Our results suggest that – compared to the Belgian unemployed – South African unemployed generally experience their unemployment in a more negative way, are more committed towards employment and display more job search behaviour. This pattern showed to be the same for South African unemployed men as for South African unemployed women. The combination of being highly committed towards employment and experiencing a low to extremely low perspective of finding a job might jeopardize any future job search activities and cause serious health and well-being consequences (McKee-Ryan, et al., 2005; Paul & Moser, 2006). In sum, South African unemployed might get caught in a downward spiral of poverty, decreased well-being and long-term unemployment (Kingdon & Knight, 2004,

2006). Therefore – based on the interventions proposed by Vuori and Vesalainen (1999) – the South African unemployed should be strengthened through the empowerment of their own coping skills. Additionally the South African government could offer financial support in times of unemployment in order to alter long-term unemployment and to counter family poverty.

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Table 1

*Factor loadings, communalities ( $h^2$ ), percentage variance explained for principal factor extraction with varimax rotation on EUQ*

Step	Principal factor extraction			
	F <sub>1</sub> <sup>a</sup>	F <sub>2</sub>	F <sub>3</sub>	$h^2$
Uncertain about future	<b>.68</b>	.14	.09	.49
Feel life is empty	<b>.73</b>	.30	.10	.64
Have conflicts at home	<b>.70</b>	.19	.13	.54
Decreased self-worth	<b>.80</b>	.20	.08	.68
Lost self-confidence	<b>.79</b>	.10	.02	.64
Is no longer part of society	<b>.73</b>	.23	.10	.60
Work contributes to a meaningful life	.10	<b>.69</b>	.16	.52
Find it important to have work	-.01	<b>.69</b>	.10	.48
Work is the most important aspect in life	.26	<b>.71</b>	.07	.58
Better to accept any job than unemployment	.36	<b>.64</b>	.06	.54
Enjoy leisure time only if worked for it	.26	<b>.63</b>	-.01	.46
Have to work to be really part of society	.41	<b>.62</b>	-.05	.55
Asked anyone if work was available	.25	.13	<b>.69</b>	.56
Searched for advertisements	.13	.13	<b>.83</b>	.66
Submitted applications	-.05	.01	<b>.81</b>	.72
Percentage variance explained	35.95	11.50	10.16	57.60

<sup>a</sup> Factor labels: F1 Negative experience of unemployment, F2 Attitudes towards employment, F3 Job search behaviour

Table 2

*Results of ANOVA in MANOVA*

Test of between-subjects effects					
	Mean	Std. Error	95 % CI lower bound	95% CI upper bound	Partial Eta squared
<i>Experience</i>					.155
Belgium	4.76	.258	4.26	5.27	-
South Africa	8.11	.201	7.72	8.51	-
<i>Attitudes</i>					.150
Belgium	7.45	.203	7.05	7.85	-
South Africa	10.02	.158	9.71	10.33	-
<i>Job search</i>					.072
Belgium	5.98	.257	5.48	6.48	-
South Africa	8.14	.200	7.75	8.54	-

Table 3

*Results of ANOVA in MANOVA for South Africa and Belgium*

Test of between-subjects effects					
	Mean	Std. Error	95 % CI lower bound	95% CI upper bound	Partial Eta squared
<b>South Africa</b>					
<i>Experience</i>					.000
Women	8.25	.274	7.71	8.79	-
Men	8.11	.258	7.60	8.62	-
<i>Attitudes</i>					.002
Women	10.14	.189	9.77	10.52	-
Men	9.92	.179	9.57	10.27	-
<i>Job search</i>					.001
Women	8.28	.270	7.75	8.81	-
Men	8.11	.255	7.61	8.61	-
<b>Belgium</b>					
<i>Experience</i>					.043
Women	4.11	.306	3.51	4.72	-
Men	5.59	.395	4.81	6.36	-
<i>Attitudes</i>					.044
Women	6.93	.275	6.38	7.47	-
Men	8.27	.355	7.57	8.97	-
<i>Job search</i>					.035
Women	5.45	.303	4.85	6.05	-
Men	6.77	.392	6.00	7.54	-