

S47: Too Old for Work? Mediated Associations Between Perceived Age Discrimination and Job Search Among Older Unemployed People

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While in several countries the need of longer working lives has been acknowledged, due to accelerated demographic ageing, many older workers face particular challenges both in keeping their employment and becoming reemployed after redundancy. Due to the high prevalence of negative age-related stereotypes, a central factor that may hinder the employment prospects of older adults is the discrimination on the grounds of age, which may occur as early as age 40. In the absence of job opportunities, a considerable number of older unemployed people eventually withdraw from the labour market earlier than they would like. Job search is currently an integral part of working life, including in mid- and late-career, and there is extensive research evidence for the positive impact job search has on the likelihood of reemployment. While it is plausible that perceived age discrimination plays a significant role in older unemployed people's job search behaviour, to date this has rarely been investigated.

In this line, building partially on propositions from the social cognitive model of career self-management (applied to job search behaviour) proposed by Lent and Brown, as well as prior research, the present study aims to contribute to a better comprehension of factors and processes that are associated with job search among older unemployed people. The study investigates a parallel mediational model which proposes a negative relationship between perceived age discrimination and three job search indicators (job search intensity, job search effort and job search intentions) that is mediated by job search self-efficacy, reemployment expectations and perceived control over reemployment.

The study has a cross-sectional design and the sample comprises 176 Portuguese unemployed people (aged 40-64 years). A MANOVA examined differences in the model's predictors and outcomes in terms of age (40-54; 55+), gender, educational level (4-10; 11+ years) and length of unemployment (0-11; 12+ months). To investigate the proposed model, ordinary least squares path analyses were calculated using the SPSS macro PROCESS.

Results suggest that women, those with lower education levels and those aged 55+ are at higher risk of becoming discouraged in their job search. In times when demographic ageing has led to tightened conditions qualifying for early retirement and increased statutory retirement ages, special attention should be paid to these groups to prevent social exclusion. Job search self-efficacy and reemployment expectations were positively related to the three job search indicators and perceived age discrimination was negatively related to reemployment expectations and perceived control over reemployment. The study also found an indirect negative relationship between perceived age discrimination and job search via lower reemployment expectations.

Whilst the cross-sectional design of the study restricts firm conclusions regarding causality, the mediational model is theoretically well sustained. The findings expose the pervasive effects of age discrimination, which besides limiting the employment opportunities for older workers, has also indirect implications by decreasing job search activity through lowered levels of reemployment expectations, what may lead to premature and involuntary labour market exits. These findings may be useful for policy-makers and practitioners working with unemployed people.