

Examining the effect of co-op non-employment and rejection sensitivity on subjective well-being

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A growing body of literature suggests the need to better understand the subjective well-being (SWB) of students enrolled in cooperative education (co-op) programs. Some co-op students will be unsuccessful in securing employment, yet there is a scarcity of existing quantitative research outlining the impact that this will have on students, particularly first work-term students who are engaging in the job-search process for the first time. Using an integrated framework of SWB, this paper seeks to address the negative effect of co-op unemployment on SWB and the potential moderating effect of students' rejection sensitivity. Two self-report surveys were analyzed (n=82). These were taken before and after first work-term students were informed of their employment results. The results showed a significantly negative main effect on SWB after discovering they were not employed, compared to their employed peers. Rejection sensitivity was found to be a moderator of the effect. These findings imply that consideration should be given to ways to support this group of co-op students to ameliorate effects of non-employment on well-being. (*Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education*, 2017, 18(3), 213-224)

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Subjective well-being (SWB) is defined as a person's cognitive and affective evaluations of his or her life as a whole (Diener, Oishi, & Lucas, 2009). SWB tends to be related to other important measures such as physical and mental health (Diener & Chan, 2011). Unsurprisingly then, research interest in SWB has grown in many disciplines. Recent studies in the context of higher education have shown that SWB is associated with student academic performance (see Pavot & Diener, 2008; Schimmack, Diener, & Oishi, 2002) and the likelihood of their graduation (Eisenberg, Gollust, Golberstein, & Heffner, 2007). These studies bring to light the importance of understanding students' SWB in higher education.

The student experience can be very difficult or stressful, particularly among first year students (The JED Foundation, 2015). Students are under immense pressure to perform well academically, as well as to make decisions that will have profound impacts on their lives. Consequently, such challenges may result in lower SWB. These challenges tend to be exacerbated by additional pressures present in certain programs, such as those offering cooperative education (co-op). Co-op involves alternating periods of academic education and work experience (Declou, Peters, & Sattler, 2013). Students in these programs deal with the pressures of applying for positions, and then transitioning from academic terms to the workplace and back again. Integrating job applications and interviews into students' already time-constrained academic schedule may create tensions that have an effect on SWB. More than that, the critical importance of the interview outcome – getting a job or not – may greatly influence co-op students' positive and negative feelings about their position in co-op and their life in general. Additional research is required to explore the cognitive and emotional responses to such experiences for this group during this vulnerable time (see McKee-Ryan, Song, Wanberg, & Kinicki, 2005).

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The purpose of this study was to examine how not being matched with a co-op job influenced students' subjective well-being (SWB) and the potential moderating effect of students' rejection sensitivity during this experience. This study was guided by an integrated model of subjective well-being (Brief, Butcher, George, & Link, 1993). Traditionally, theories of SWB have been divided into two categories: top-down and bottom-up. Top-down theories are characterized by global personality dimensions directly influencing SWB, while bottom-up refers to SWB being directly influenced by many objective life experiences (Diener, 1984). An integrative framework that incorporates both schools of thought posits that both global personality dimensions and life events interact to influence cognitive and emotional responses to life events (Brief et al., 1993).

Following this perspective, we suspect that students' life events shape their SWB, but may be impacted by their individual personality traits. The events that transpire in students' lives have the power to influence positive and negative feelings, and their cognitive appraisals about life in general. Within this framework, we are particularly interested in understanding the influence of individuals' rejection sensitivity on the interpretation of events and emotional responses. This interest is informed by earlier research that suggests that unpleasant experiences decrease well-being more from some individuals and less for others (Stoeber, Kempe, & Keogh, 2008). One factor that may increase the effect of non-employment on subjective well-being is the degree to which students are sensitive to rejection. Rejection sensitivity refers to a tendency to "anxiously expect, readily perceive, and overreact to rejection" (Downey & Feldman, 1996). We expected that students high in rejection sensitivity would experience particularly negative consequences after failing to secure co-op employment. In comparison, students who are bolstered against rejection may not experience the same drop in SWB (Ayduk et al., 2000; Ayduk, May, Downey, & Higgins, 2003). We, therefore, predicted that these students low in rejection sensitivity (rejection insensitive) would report a smaller negative change in SWB after failing to secure co-op employment compared to their peers high in rejection sensitivity.

These considerations have led us to predict that first work term students who are unmatched with a job will have a significant decrease in their subjective well-being compared to their matched peers. We also hypothesize that this direct effect will be moderated by individual levels of rejection sensitivity. See Figure 1 for a conceptual model of our hypotheses utilizing an integrated framework.

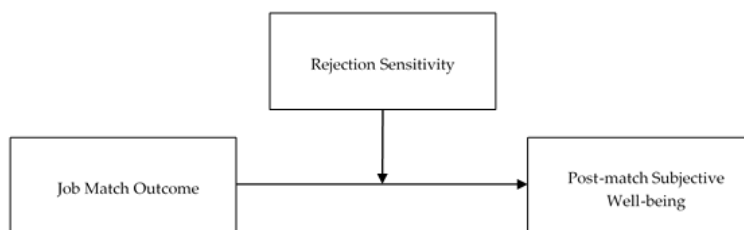


FIGURE 1: Conceptual model for the hypothesized effect of co-op job match on SWB as moderated by individual levels of rejection sensitivity

This study is important for a number of reasons. As cooperative education is expanding, it becomes increasingly important to examine the experiences of students enrolled in co-op as they progress through the hiring processes. By examining the co-op employment process we will better understand how non-employment influences students' subjective well-being.

Furthermore, by examining the potential moderating role of students' rejection sensitivity, we may identify students who are at risk of experiencing lower subjective well-being, and who might benefit from early intervention strategies. Ultimately, this will inform co-op practitioners as to how, and for whom, services can improve the student experience, and may inform on-campus health practitioners' strategies for improving students' well-being and enjoyment in their education

LITERATURE REVIEW

Co-op Jobs, Unemployment, and Subjective Well-Being

Employment in co-op is a requirement for the successful completion of a degree. Many programs that offer co-op opportunities require that students complete a designated number of work experiences by the time they graduate. Nowhere is the non-employment for co-op students as problematic as it is in students' first work term experiences. Students in their first work terms are considerably less experienced than their more senior peers. There are cases where co-op students preparing for their first work terms have not had previous employment experience, nor have they gone through the processes (e.g., applications, interviews) of a job search. Consequently, 'first work term students' are of particular interest to the study of non-employment, rejection, and SWB.

There is a line of literature that investigates the experiences of unemployment, including the potential consequences of failing to secure employment. In their meta-analytic review of unemployment literature, McKee-Ryan et al., (2005) noted that our understanding of individuals' interpretations of such events, and the mechanisms through which these events are related to well-being is lacking. However, we do know that unemployment is associated with poor mental health outcomes (Butterworth, Leach, Shazdius, Oleson, Rodgers, & Broom, 2011; Fergusson, McLeod, & Horwood, 2014) and with lower life satisfaction (Frey & Stutzer, 2000, 2002; Helliwell, 2003; Lelkes, 2006; Stutzer, 2004). Unemployment can have a downward spiral effect on future employment as well. Unemployment leads to lower mental health, and lower mental health in turn makes securing future employment less likely (Gielen & van Ours, 2014). This body of literature suggests that failure to secure a co-op job may inherently be linked with decreases in SWB.

Experiences of Rejection and Subjective Well-being

Not being hired for a job, particularly when a student's peers have been hired for a job, may not only be seen as a failure, but potentially as a rejection. This perception may lead to increased negative feelings as a result of remaining unemployed. Previous research has investigated the behavioral and emotional outcomes of those who have experienced social rejection compared to social acceptance, and have found that there tends to be a difference between the two groups. Studies have shown that rejection may increase aggression, negative affect, and hurt feelings, while also decreasing positive affect (Buckley, Winkel, & Leary, 2004; Twenge, Baumeister, Tice, & Stucke, 2001). Rejection may also lead to emotional and physical numbness (DeWall & Baumeister, 2006). Those who have been rejected may also exhibit more self-destructive behaviors, including more thoughtless risk-taking and unhealthy choices (Twenge, Catanese, & Baumeister, 2002).

Bourgeois and Leary (2001) posited that rejection poses a threat to people's individual identities. This may put further stress on the student if they feel their value as a person, or at least as an employable member of the co-op workforce. People who experience rejection

have been shown to display a decline in self-esteem (Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995). In a laboratory study, participants who thought they were chosen last for a team felt more rejected than those who thought they were chosen first, and also experienced less positive affect and more negative affect, including lower self-assurance (Bourgeois & Leary, 2001). It may be the case that students who perceive being unemployed as a rejection experience report a greater decrease in subjective well-being compared to students who do not see an unfavorable match outcome as a rejection.

Rejection Sensitivity as a Moderator

Some research has identified a construct called rejection sensitivity (Downey & Feldman, 1996; Downey, Feldman, Khuri, & Friedman, 1994) that describes the tendency to readily anticipate, respond negatively or overreact to experiences of rejection. Individuals high in rejection sensitivity may react with hostility to others after experiencing rejection (Ayduk, Gyurak, & Luerssen 2008), but may also react to rejection in ways that threaten their own well-being, by lowering self-esteem and causing psychological distress (Breines & Ayduk, 2013). Similarly, Ayduk, Gyurak, and Luerrson (2009) reported that people high in rejection sensitivity reported lower self-concept clarity (clear definition and perception of one's own personal characteristics) after experiencing a rejection compared to people low in rejection sensitivity. A series of studies have shown that rejection sensitivity is negatively related to aspects of positive mental health (e.g., Ayduk, Downey & Kim, 2001; Zimmer-Gembeck & Vickers, 2007; Zimmer-Gembeck & Wright, 2007). Moreover, rejection sensitivity may create a self-fulfilling prophecy in that those with high rejection sensitivity may be more likely to be rejected (Downey, Freitas, Michaelis, & Khouri, 1998).

METHODS

Participant Recruitment and Procedure

Participants were full-time undergraduate co-op students at a large Canadian university across a variety of programs, as part of a larger longitudinal study. Students who were seeking employment for their first work term were invited to participate. Recruitment occurred via email. Students received nominal remuneration for participation in each survey. Participants completed the pre-test questionnaire (survey 1) measuring their initial subjective well-being and rejection sensitivity at the end of the co-op interview period that had taken place during the second month of the semester. One to three days following the pre-test, students received the outcome of the co-op main round job match. Students were informed by the university system that they had been hired by an employer or that they had not been hired by an employer. Students who were hired were immediately removed from the job search process. Students who were not hired proceeded into an additional job search process. Participants then filled out a second survey (survey 2) immediately after receiving those results, where they were asked questions regarding their subjective well-being as a result of their employment outcome.

In total, approximately 2,700 invitations were sent. The initial response rate was 5.6% ($n = 152$). While this response rate was low, it was not unexpected given that participation required commitment to a larger longitudinal study. However, only 84 participants provided complete responses to the first survey (completion rate = 55.3%). Of those participants, a total of 82 individuals provided complete responses to the second survey (attrition rate = 2.4%). This left 82 participants who provided complete data at both time

points to be included in analyses. Exactly half of these participants were employed ($n = 41$) and the other half were not employed ($n = 41$) during this study.

Measures

Two instruments were used in a single questionnaire to measure students' subjective well-being and rejection sensitivity. These instruments were self-reported by students and were completed electronically. The instruments (see below) include the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule, and the Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire. The questionnaire also contained information about students' demographic profile (e.g., term of study, age, sex).

Consistent with previous research (e.g., Diener et al., 2009), subjective well-being (SWB) was operationalized as both positive and negative affect. As such, SWB was measured using Watson, Clark, and Tellegen's (1988) positive and negative affect schedule (PANAS). PANAS is a 20-item scale that measures positive and negative feelings. The scale consists of words that describe different feelings and emotions. Specifically, ten positive (interested, excited, strong, enthusiastic, proud, alert, inspired, determined, attentive, active) and ten negative (distressed, upset, guilty, scared, hostile, irritable, ashamed, nervous, jittery, afraid) words are presented. Participants are instructed to read each item and indicate the extent to which they felt that emotion/feeling on a five-point scale (1 = very slightly or not at all, 5 = extremely). Participants' positive affect scores were calculated by finding the mean of all positive affect items, and negative affect scores were calculated by finding the mean of all negative affect items. Higher scores indicate higher positive and negative emotions, respectively.

Rejection sensitivity was measured using Downey and Feldman's (1996) rejection sensitivity questionnaire (RSQ). The RSQ asks participants to imagine themselves in eight different scenarios typical of college students' experiences. An example scenario is "After graduation, you can't find a job and ask your parents if you can live at home for a while". Following each scenario, participants were asked to rate (1) how concerned or anxious they would be about the outcome on a five-point scale (1 = "very unconcerned", 5 = "very concerned"), and (2) how likely they thought the other person in the scenario would be to respond positively. The extent to which participants are concerned represents the level of concern they typically have with being rejected, and the degree to which participants believe others respond favorably represents the expectancy they have for being accepted. The rejection concern and the reverse of the acceptance expectancy score for each scenario are multiplied to form a rejection sensitivity score for each scenario. The total rejection sensitivity score is calculated by finding the mean score across all eight scenarios. Higher scores indicate a tendency among participants to be more sensitive to rejection. Because rejection sensitivity is a continuous variable, a median split was performed to study RS as a categorical variable to simplify interpretation, with all responses below the median being considered "low RS" ($n=39$) and all responses above the median being considered "high RS" ($n=43$).

Participants also self-reported demographic and employment data. They were asked to answer questions related to their age, sex, term of study, faculty, and program, GPA, as well as the number of applications they had submitted and interviews they had attended in the main round of co-op interviews. On the second survey, participants indicated whether they had been employed (coded as 1) during the main round application process or had not (coded as 0).

RESULTS

Bivariate Analyses

Participants were on average 19 years of age ($SD = 1.41$) and were predominantly female (67%). Their academic average was 80%, and they were from all faculties across campus, including STEM disciplines (math, science, and engineering), environmental studies, arts and humanities, and applied health sciences. Participants reported submitting an average of 34 job applications ($SD = 14.67$) during the job search process and attended roughly three interview ($SD = 2.38$). Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations and correlations for each measure. in the study.

TABLE 1: Means, standard deviations, and correlations for positive and negative affect and rejection sensitivity (time 1 only)

	M	SD	Pearson Correlations			
			(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
(1) T1 Positive Affect	3.55	.63	--			
(2) T2 Positive Affect	3.02	.93	.255**	--		
(3) T1 Negative Affect	2.45	.69	-.321**	-.155	--	
(4) T2 Negative Affect	2.48	.93	-.200	-.293**	.380**	--
(5) Rejection Sensitivity	.51	.50	-.204	-.193	.101	.024

Note: **Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Repeated Measures Analysis of Variance

Two repeated measures ANOVAs were run to assess the change in participants' SWB from time 1 (pre-match) to time 2 (post-match) as a result of their match results and rejection sensitivity. One analysis was conducted for negative affect as the outcome variable, and one for positive affect as the outcome. In each model, time is the within-subjects factor with two levels (time 1 and time 2), and rejection sensitivity (0 = low, 1 = high) and employment outcome (0 = not matched, 1 = matched) are the between-subjects factors.

For negative affect, results (Table 2) reveal a significant between-subjects effect of employment outcome, $F(1, 78) = 6.492$, $p < 0.05$, and a significant time by employment outcome interaction effect, $F(1, 78) = 17.392$, $p < 0.01$. Results show that participants who were matched reported a decrease in negative affect while those participants who were not matched reported an increase in their negative affect. The increase in negative affect for non-matched participants was consistent between those who were high or low in rejection sensitivity.

TABLE 2: Results of repeated measures ANOVA for rejection sensitivity, employment outcome, and time predicting negative affect (n=82)

	F	df	p
Time	.101	1	.751
Rejection sensitivity	1.180	1	.913
Employment Outcome	6.492	1	.013
Time x Rejection sensitivity	1.296	1	.258
Time x Employment	17.392	1	.000
Rejection sensitivity x Employment	.285	1	.595
Time x Rejection sensitivity x Employment	.679	1	.413

Table 3 shows the results of the repeated measures ANOVA analysis for positive affect. There was a significant within-subjects effect of time on positive affect, $F(1, 78) = 23.051$, $p < 0.01$. There was also significant between-subjects effects of rejection sensitivity, $F(1, 78) = 6.47$, $p < 0.05$, and employment outcome, $F(1, 78) = 32.038$, $p < 0.01$. There were significant interaction effects of time by employment, $F(1, 78) = 22.83$, $p < 0.01$, and for rejection sensitivity by employment, $F(1, 78) = 4.409$, $p < 0.05$. These results suggest that positive affect is generally high prior to the match, and does not change dramatically for those who were employed. Positive affect decreased for those who were not employed, but there is no significant difference in this decrease between those who are and are not sensitive to rejection. This suggests that the non-match experience is generally negative for students regardless of their sensitivity to experiences of rejection.

TABLE 3: Results of repeated measures ANOVA for rejection sensitivity, employment outcome, and time predicting positive affect (n=82)

	F	df	p
Time	23.051	1	.000
Rejection sensitivity	6.457	1	.013
Employment Outcome	32.038	1	.000
Time x Rejection sensitivity	0.430	1	.836
Time x Employment	22.830	1	.000
Rejection sensitivity x Employment	4.409	1	.039
Time x Rejection sensitivity x Employment	2.920	1	.091

Discussion

There remains an overwhelming gap in the literature regarding the emotional experience of students who are struggling throughout their co-op job search. This study sought to examine the changes in student well-being following news that they were not initially hired for a co-op job. Specifically, we were interested in the potential moderating role of rejection sensitivity on reports of subjective well-being after a non-match. Such a focus helps to establish the psychological effect of unemployment and to help identify a potential buffering mechanism.

Results suggest that remaining unmatched with a co-op job has a significant direct effect on both positive and negative affect. Those who were unemployed after the first hiring period experienced a significant decrease in their positive feelings and a significant increase in their negative feelings. That is, not only did it cause students to feel sadder, it also caused them to feel less happy. It may be the case that students are perceiving this experience as a failure, which then in turn leads to a loss of positivity. These findings are consistent with previous failure literature, which lists depression and negative feelings as the outcomes of failing to achieve a goal (Lewis, 2000; Stoeber, Kempe, & Keogh, 2008). Furthermore, these findings are consistent with an integrated model of subjective well-being, in which unpleasant life experiences contribute to low subjective well-being, but are influenced by individual personality traits (Brief et al., 1993). In this model, experiencing a failure to be matched with a co-op job would directly impact subjective well-being, but particularly people who are sensitive to rejection would have a greater loss of positive affect. As such, students who are unmatched will be less happy.

The results of this study also revealed that the effect of being unmatched with a co-op job on subjective well-being was significantly moderated by rejection sensitivity. The decrease in

positive affect for those who were not employed appears to be slightly tempered for those who are less sensitive to rejection, relative to those who are high in rejection sensitivity. This result is consistent with previous research that suggests individuals who are sensitive to rejection (e.g., tend to anticipate and overreact to rejection) experience a greater change in affect when experiencing rejecting incidents (Downey & Feldman, 1996). On the other hand, the role of rejection sensitivity in understanding participants' reports of subjective well-being at time 2 was smaller than anticipated. This could indicate that the non-match experience is significantly negative enough to affect students' thoughts and feelings regardless of their resilience to rejection in a general sense. Indeed, anecdotal evidence tells us that there are few events more important than the match to co-op students seeking employment. This result speaks to the need to further investigate and address the emotional responses to co-op hiring outcomes.

Limitations

This study has some methodological limitations. We relied on self-report data for all of our constructs. Self-report data lends itself well to subjective well-being as it is personal in nature, but accuracy could be improved by incorporating observer-report data in future versions of this study. Another limitation in this study was the small sample size. Although there was a large population of first work term students in the Fall 2015 term when the study was conducted, the response rate was lower than expected which reduces the external validity of the results. This is likely due to the time of the semester, as all students who were invited to participate were in class full time at the time the survey was administered. For example, the study may have overlapped with deadlines for academic classes. We acknowledge too that the limited window of opportunity provided to students may have limited responses. To measure students' immediate reactions to the match, surveys needed to be completed within 24 hours of the match. Some individuals may have been unable to provide responses during that time. Together, and given that the response rate was low, there is potential self-selection bias in the students who did volunteer to participate in the study. It may be the case that students who were more likely to find employment were more likely to fill out the surveys, possibly due to personality traits that result in time management, organization, or conscientiousness. Finally, categorizing rejection sensitivity as high or low removed students who reported having a neutral level of rejection sensitivity, which reduced our sample further. Future research should incorporate a greater sample size, possibly by inviting students from other similar academic institutions, or by pooling a sample from multiple terms.

IMPLICATIONS

These findings have relevant implications for co-op programs and services available to students who are seeking employment. Employment outcome greatly influences subjective well-being (Tay, Kuykendall, & Diener, 2015). Therefore, it is clear that academic institutions offering co-operative education programs should be concerned with the subjective well-being of those students who are not employed, particularly if they are already sensitive to rejection.

From a co-op practitioner perspective, we might aim to implement rejection sensitivity-related interventions for this population. For example, self-serving responses to rejection, served to buffer against the negative emotional impact of the rejection (Bourgeois & Leary, 2001). While it would not be logical for a co-op program to encourage students to derogate

the employers who had chosen to hire other students, it stands to reason that there are other strategies that could be discovered that would serve the same purpose. Rejection-sensitivity interventions could be implemented into professional development curriculum programs that students take while they are seeking their first work term. In this way, it would be interesting to see if exposing these students to interventions that may reduce their rejection sensitivity before they go through the interview process has a buffering effect against further decreases in subjective well-being upon being unemployed following the first hiring period. Future research should investigate the effectiveness of such an intervention. Further research should also look at other factors that might moderate low well-being in a non-match situation, or buffer against decreases in subjective well-being, such as self-efficacy or goal commitment.

Research should look to see what things we can do to prevent the direct effect on subjective well-being caused by the employment outcome with the intention of improving co-op student employment, academic performance, and reducing the likelihood of developing a serious mental illness. For example, different personality variables have been known to influence perceptions of situations and the subsequent feelings that occur (Lyubomirsky & Layous, 2013). Researchers should seek to address which personality factors, other than rejection sensitivity, play a role in negative perceptions of co-op unemployment which may lead to lower subjective well-being. In addition, future research could examine the role of certain psychological interventions in the experience of non-employment given research that suggests such interventions to protect against negative thoughts and feelings (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005).

Researchers should also prioritize investigating what co-op students can do to recover once they have suffered a blow to their subjective well-being upon their failure to be hired. Strategies that prove effective in increasing subjective well-being after non-employment could also be implemented into professional development course curriculum after the job match and directed specifically to students who are still searching for employment. For example, providing a student with specific coping strategies that target feelings of rejection after a rejection has occurred or incorporating reframing techniques into the curriculum to promote positive thoughts related to the job search outcome rather than negative self-directed thoughts. Such a program could be targeted to all students who are enrolled in the professional development course as a way of giving them the buffer against a failure or rejection experience should they be left unemployed after the initial hiring round, or it could be a subsection of the already existing course, with extra help regarding coping strategies directed specifically toward students who are still seeking employment after the main round match.

Finally, co-op institutions should consider increasing the levels of social support available to co-op students seeking employment. Research on rejection and maintaining psychological health has pointed towards social support as a way to promote and maintain self-esteem, and therefore mental health, in a stressful situation (Taylor & Brown, 1988). Many universities have psychological and mental health counseling services located on campus, which could be marketed more towards these students who have been left without a job. This may serve to remind the population that such supports do exist, and encourage these vulnerable students to seek help when they feel considerable negative affect.

CONCLUSION

Co-op students' subjective well-being is well worth addressing. Incorporating suggestions presented here into co-op practice, thereby improving student well-being, could have a positive impact on student employability and student success. Practitioners may want to design and implement intervention materials for students who may be highly sensitive to rejection and who were not employed through the job search process. This may involve supports from professional development courses or other social supports (e.g., peers). Researchers should continue to investigate co-op student well-being, particularly other moderating factors not addressed in this article, or tools that can promote well-being for students in the job search process, in the event that they are unsuccessful.

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