Research Articles

Unemployment and Possible Alterations of Personality Traits: The Case of the General Causality Orientations

Marius Drugaş*[a]

[a] University of Oradea, Oradea, Romania.

Abstract

The investigation of the unemployment consequences is a challenging theme in current psychological research. The recent controversy on the nature of general causality orientations (GCO's) as personality traits stood as a reason for this study. Considering that prolonged unemployment is a significant life event, we investigated the stability in time (as a condition for a personality trait) of GCO's for a sample of unemployed and we compared the results to those obtained from a sample of employed individuals. The first measure took place in April 2007, the second in September 2007 and the third in November 2011. The results indicated a higher level of control orientation for the unemployed in T3 and a significant positive growth of impersonal orientation for the same sample. Among the research limits were the poor data collection about the reasons of unemployment, family structure, job search behaviors and economic status.

Keywords: general causality orientation, unemployment, personality traits

Introduction

It is clearly understood that the negative effect of unemployment goes well beyond the income loss (Winkelmann, 2009), affecting *mental health* (Reine, Novo, & Hammarström, 2004), *physical health* (Eliason & Storrie, 2009), *adaptability* (McArdle, Waters, Briscoe, & Hall, 2007), *sociability* (Burnay, Kiss, & Malchaire, 2005), *motivation* (Vansteenkiste, Lens, De Witte, & Feather, 2005), *social networks* (Price, Choi, & Vinokur, 2002), *well-being* (McKee-Ryan, Song, Wanberg, & Kinicki, 2005), etc. Given the broad area of life domains, most studies tried to identify the effects of unemployment on specific targets, virtually isolating some relevant variables.

As a result, the detrimental effect of prolonged unemployment on the individual is well documented, but the results are still a subject of debate. Many of the studies are rather descriptive, because the authors rarely succeeded to explain the psychological processes involved in the process that occurs between unemployment and its negative effects.

For example, research on the relationship between unemployment and mental health focused on a large number of variables, including vitality, social functioning, emotional stability, anxiety, depression, self-esteem etc. However, researchers often neglected or failed to draw the borderline between context dependent states or personal habits (shaving, washing, sexual behavior) and broader attitudes to life or even personality traits.

This research behavior was already identified in the late 1930's by Eisenberg and Lazarsfeld (1938), who concluded nevertheless that "there is no doubt that unemployment affects [...] personality traits, but we have little available material" (Eisenberg & Lazarsfeld, 1938, p. 363).

Starting from these observations, our research aims to investigate whether prolonged unemployment might alter personality traits, namely the general causality orientations (GCO's). The theoretical section of the article will bring arguments that GCO's are personality traits, and then we will present the results of some research on the relationship between unemployment and GCO's.

General Causality Orientations Are Personality Traits?

In search for a *personality trait* that might underpin self-determination, Deci and Ryan (1985) developed the concept of general causality orientation. According to Deci and Ryan (2008a), GCO's are motivational orientations that refer to (a) the tendency of people to switch to certain types of environmental inputs, related to the initiation and regulation of behavior, and thus (b) the extent to which they are self-determined across situations and domains.

The focus falls more on the individual differences in interpreting the events and less on the events themselves. Some people are more predisposed to experience events as sources of information for initiating and regulating their own chosen behavior; others tend to be sensitive or even search for events that have the potential to organize their behavior (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

Self-determination theory indicates that these three orientations, which are relatively stable in time, are essentially independent and that people draw upon all three in their life. However, the overall strength of each of the orientations varies among people (Lee, Sheldon, & Turban, 2003).

Causal orientation is consistent over time and doesn't vary by context, as opposed to self-determination, which is linked to a specific domain and may be influenced by individual differences and contextual factors. Deci and Ryan (1985) state that there are three different motivational orientations within an individual: autonomy, controlled, and impersonal; one or more of these are usable in making predictions about psychological and/or behavior outcomes. As such, they might be treated as *personality traits.*

The autonomy orientation refers to one's tendency to seek environmental clues that stimulate intrinsic motivation, are optimally challenging and provide informational feedback. The autonomy orientation is best developed by ongoing satisfaction of the basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2008a), thus facilitating an internal perceived locus of causality.

People with a high level of autonomy have stronger personal initiative; they seek interesting work, and they are challenging and responsible for their behavior (Lee, Sheldon, & Turban, 2003). Lam and Gurland (2008) showed that autonomously oriented individuals are more likely to interpret social environments as autonomy-supportive, thus individual differences play a key role in self-determination.

Deci et al. (1986, as cited in Deci & Ryan, 1987) showed that for a sample of 201 employees of a large corporation autonomy orientation was positively correlated with workers' trust in the corporation and their satisfaction with opportunities to make inputs.

Intrinsic motivation and identified regulation are essential for autonomy. Intrinsic motivation involves engaging in an activity that is interesting and enjoyable by itself. For example, an unemployed person may explore employment

opportunities because the discovery of a new job is satisfactory by itself. Although identified motivation is considered a form of extrinsic motivation because it is instrumental, it is also considered autonomous, because the regulation of the behavior was internalized (Deci & Ryan, 2008b). Therefore, the activity is accepted as important for the person, the causality is internal, as for intrinsic motivation. For example, unemployed people could search for a job because they consider the searching activity as an opportunity for developing new skills, for testing their competence, etc.

The control orientation reflects the extent to which individuals are willing to organize their behavior based on time limits, rewards, structure or demands from others. In other words, for them the environment is generally restrictive or allows only certain activities. The controlled orientation is best developed from some satisfaction of the competence and relatedness needs, but a thwarting of the need for autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 2008a).

Individuals with controlled motivation are dependent on some form of control and may be more sensitive to other's requests than to their own desires and preferences. The causality of the activities is perceived to be external. For example, the unemployed may look for a job because they don't want to be perceived as lazy or because they are forced by family or friends. Lam and Gurland (2008) suggested that people with controlled motivation value wealth, fame or other extrinsic factors.

In Deci et al. (1986, as cited in Deci & Ryan, 1987) study of workers, the controlled orientation was positively associated with the importance workers place on pay and benefits and negatively related to workers' satisfaction with job security.

The impersonal orientation reflects one's beliefs that the desired results are not under his control and that achievements are largely the result of luck or fate. A strong impersonal orientation results from a general thwarting of the three basic psychological needs (autonomy, competence, and relatedness). According to Deci and Ryan (2008a), the impersonal orientation has been reliably associated with poor functioning and symptoms of ill-being. It is likely that individuals with such beliefs are anxious and feel ineffective, unable to cope or face requirements.

The presentation of autonomy, control, and impersonal orientations strongly suggests that they are personality traits, and we believe that a short incursion in the history of personality psychology is appropriate for a better understanding. According to Allport (1927), for the researchers using the quantitative approach a trait is "a tendency to reaction which when measured with reliability demonstrates an independence of other variables" (Allport, 1927, p. 286). From a behaviorist perspective, a trait might be defined as "a general and habitual mode of adjustment which exerts a directive effect upon the specific response" (Allport, 1927, p. 291).

Eysenck and Eysenck (1980) defined the personality traits as *semi-permanent* personality dispositions, measurable by means of questionnaire data; together with states (which are transient internal conditions), traits are useful in explaining individual differences in behavior, to the extent that they are incorporated into an appropriate theoretical framework. GCO's fit both Allport and Eysenck & Eysenck conceptualization of personality traits.

General Causality Orientations as Context Dependent (Not Personality Traits?)

We will pay a special attention to an article published by Olesen, Thomsen, Schnieber, and Tønnesvang (2010). The authors investigated the conceptual overlap and distinction between individual differences in the Five-Factor Model and self-determination theory, using a sample of 1287 freshmen. The results of the confirmatory factor analysis revealed that autonomy items defined a factor separate from personality trait factors, whereas control

and impersonal items defined both separate factors and showed overlaps with agreeableness and neuroticism. The conclusion was that *causality orientations are conceptually distinct but related to personality traits*.

In this understanding, GCO's should belong to the personality domain of characteristic adaptations (Olesen, Thomsen, Schnieber, & Tønnesvang, 2010; Olesen, 2011). As a consequence, they should be more dependent to context alterations and less stable in time. In case of prolonged unemployment, could it be possible for autonomy and control orientations to become weaker and impersonal orientation to become stronger? That was the hypothesis of our research.

General Causality Orientations in Unemployment Studies

If recent findings show that GCO's are distinct from personality traits, we should take a look at previous research using GCO's as variables. To our surprise, the followers of the self-determination theory (including the general causality orientation subtheory) took GCO's as personality traits for granted, often using them as independent variables.

For example, Lee, Sheldon, and Turban (2003) examined the influence of personality traits (namely autonomy, control, and amotivated orientations) on performance and enjoyment. Kwan, Caldwell-Hooper, Magnan, and Bryan (2011) investigated the possibility that causality orientations for exercise may lead to more positive exercise-related affect, greater internalization of exercise behavior and more self-determined regulations to exercise.

Vansteenkiste, Lens, De Witte, De Witte, and Deci (2004) used the conceptual frame of the self-determination theory to investigate the unemployed motivation for searching for a new job. Individuals with high levels of autonomy orientation achieved the best results, and this result is supported by studies conducted in educational psychology, health psychology or organizational psychology.

In the same theoretical framework, Vansteenkiste, Lens, De Witte, and Feather (2005) showed that autonomy orientation predicted well-being during unemployment better than controlled orientation, expectancy to find a job and work value. Nevertheless, in a longitudinal research conducted a few years earlier, Wanberg, Kanfer, and Rotundo (1999) showed that controlled motivation predicted the behavior of searching for a new job, and the relationship grew stronger as the duration of unemployment prolonged.

The recent controversy on the nature of GCO's as personality traits stood as a reason for this study. Considering that prolonged unemployment is a significant life event, we investigated the stability in time (as a condition for a personality trait) of GCO's for a sample of unemployed and we compared the results to those obtained from a sample of employed individuals. The study was conducted in Romania; since in Romanian literature we didn't find any studies published in national available journals on the relationship between unemployment and GCO's, we will only present some short statistical data about unemployment in this country.

In Romania, the unemployment rate grew steadily since the 1990s, changing the lifestyles of many families. The phenomenon is not spread evenly across the country; there are heavily affected areas, while in others the rate of unemployment is quite low. According to data provided by the National Agency for Employment (2010), the national unemployment rate recorded at the beginning of the study (T1, April 2007) was 4.1%; and at the second measurement (T2, September 2007) was 3.9%. In November 2011 (T3), the unemployment rate was 5.06% (National Agency for Employment, 2011). In T1 the unemployment rate in Bihor county (where the research

samples came from) was one of the lowest in the country (1.7%), in T2 was 2.4% and in T3 it grew at 4.08% (still lower than the national level).

Method

Hypothesis

We expect to find differences in time regarding general causality orientations for the unemployed compared to the employed sample. Based on the Olesen et al. (2010) conclusions, we should find lower levels of autonomy and control orientations and higher levels of impersonal orientation for the unemployed compared to the employed sample, as unemployment prolongs [from T1 (April 2007) to T2 (September 2007) and T3 (November 2011)].

Participants and Procedure

We used two samples of participants. The unemployed (N = 45) were contacted with the help of The County Agency for Employment Bihor, Romania. The first data measurement (T1) took place between March and April 2007. The minimum age of the participants was 19 and the maximum 64 (m = 34.28; σ = 7.48). For the sampling procedure we used a preliminary interview to eliminate individuals who weren't looking for a new job and those who declared to be unemployed, but in fact they worked illegally. At the time of the first measurement, none of them has been unemployed for more than one year. The second measurement (T2) took place six months later (September 2007). The third and final measurement (T3) took place in November 2011.

The employed (N = 70) were contacted as a course requirement for psychology students. The measurements took place in the same time as for the unemployed sample. At the time of the first measurement, none of them has been working for less than one year. In T1 the minimum age was 21 and the maximum 60 (m = 33.52; σ = 7.87).

The statistical procedure was to compare the data on general causality orientations obtained in T1, T2, and T3 (within group factor) from the two samples (between groups factor), using a mixed ANOVA design.

Measure

Personality Orientation. The General Causality Orientations Scale (Deci & Ryan, 1985) measures the intensity of three motivational orientations, considered to be personality traits. It has 36 items which are assigned to three subscales: *the autonomy orientation* (evaluates if the individual is oriented towards aspects of the environment that stimulate intrinsic motivation, if he manifests personal initiative, searches for interesting activities and assumes responsibility for his actions); *the control orientation* (measures the tendency to be controlled by rewards, deadlines or others' requests); *the impersonal orientation* (evaluates if the individual beliefs that achievement is not under his control and that performance is dependent on fate or luck).

The scale has been adapted to Romanian population by Drugaş (2008).

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Descriptive statistics and correlations for GCO's are presented in Table 1. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test for normality with Lilliefors correction shows that distributions are normal, so we can use parametric statistical tests for hypothesis testing.

The Bonferroni correction for multiple correlations was applied (new alpha = .016). As a result, only one correlation was statistically significant, in the case of the unemployed sample. In T1, autonomy orientation was positively correlated with control orientation, probably due to early unemployment experience (sudden change of status and temporal status and mixed expectations from family and society).

Hypothesis Testing

Three sets of mixed ANOVA were conducted to test the possible alterations of GCO's, one for each orientation (autonomy, control, and impersonal).

In the case of *autonomy orientation*, the interaction between factors was statistically insignificant [$F_{(2,212)}$ = 1.96; p = .14]. The sphericity condition was assumed (Mauchly's W = .956; p = .09). We didn't find significant differences between samples in T1 [$t_{(106)}$ = -.74; p = .46] and T2 [$t_{(106)}$ = -.23; p = .81]. In T3 the autonomy orientation of the employed sample (m = 53.12) was significantly higher compared to the unemployed (m = 49.57) [$t_{(106)}$ = -3.17; p = .002; r^2 = .08, medium effect size].

The differences between T1, T2, and T3, tested for each sample with three series of paired *t test*s were insignificant (the Bonferroni correction was applied and the new alpha was .016).

In the case of *control orientation*, the interaction between factors is also statistically insignificant [$F_{(2,212)}$ = 1.00; p = .36]. The sphericity condition was assumed (Mauchly's W = .952; p = .09). We didn't find significant differences between samples in T1 [$t_{(106)}$ = -.47; p = .63] and T2 [$t_{(106)}$ = 1.15; p = .25]. In T3 the control orientation of the unemployed sample (m = 56.11) was significantly higher compared to the employed (m = 53.26) [$t_{(106)}$ = 2.47; p = .015; r^2 = .05, small effect].

For the within factor, we didn't find significant differences for the unemployed sample between T1-T2 [$t_{(44)}$ = -.09; p = .92] and T1-T3 [$t_{(44)}$ = -2.44; p = .019] (the Bonferroni correction was applied and the new alpha was .016). The differences were significant between T2-T3 [$t_{(44)}$ = -2.51; p = .015; r^2 = .12, medium effect size], the control orientation was higher in T3 (m = 56.11) compared to T2 (m = 53.24). For the employed sample we didn't find significant differences between T1-T2, T1-T3, and T2-T3, as tested with three series of paired *t test*s (the Bonferroni correction was applied and the new alpha was .016).

In the case of *impersonal orientation*, the interaction between factors is statistically significant [$F_{(2,212)}$ = 3.79; p = .024]. The sphericity condition was assumed (Mauchly's W = .954; p = .08). The differences between samples were significant in all time points; in T1, the impersonal orientation was significantly higher for the unemployed (m = 48.42) compared to the employed sample [$t_{(106)}$ = 2.94; p = .004; r^2 = .07 - medium effect size]; in T2, the impersonal orientation was also higher for the unemployed (m = 48.88) compared to the employed sample (m = 42.66) [$t_{(106)}$ = 6.22; p = .0001; r^2 = .26 - strong effect size]; in T3 the results were the same (m = 52.84 for the unemployed, m = 43.15 for the employed) [$t_{(106)}$ = 9.68; p = .0001; r^2 = .46 - strong effect size].

The examination of the within-subjects factor for each sample didn't show significant differences between time points for the employed sample. For the unemployed, we didn't find statistically significant differences between T1-T2 [$t_{(44)}$ = -.25; p = .79]. The differences were significant between T1-T3 [$t_{(44)}$ = -2.56; p = .014; r^2 = .12 - medium effect size], with a stronger impersonal orientation in T3 (m = 52.84) than T1 (m = 48.42). Also, the impersonal orientation of the unemployed was stronger in T3 (m = 52.84) than T2 (m = 48.88) [$t_{(44)}$ = -2.60; p = .013; r^2 = .13 - strong effect size].

Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, KS Coefficients and Correlations Between Variables, in T1, T2, and T3

			M	SD	KS	1	2
unemployed	T1	1 autonomy	51.84	10.04	.10	--	
		2 control	53.11	7.81	.10	.56*	--
		3 impersonal	48.42	10.00	.11	-.11	-.15
	T2	1 autonomy	52.13	8.21	.10	--	
		2 control	53.24	6.24	.08	.25	--
		3 impersonal	48.88	7.96	.07	-.11	.22
	T3	1 autonomy	49.57	7.32	.11	--	
		2 control	56.11	5.35	.12	.24	--
		3 impersonal	52.84	8.09	.10	.14	-.03
employed	T1	1 autonomy	52.98	5.86	.07	--	
		2 control	52.34	8.56	.08	-.15	--
		3 impersonal	43.09	8.73	.09	-.21	-.01
	T2	1 autonomy	52.41	3.81	.10	--	
		2 control	51.66	7.48	.08	-.16	--
		3 impersonal	42.66	8.82	.11	-.27	.26
	T3	1 autonomy	53.12	4.25	.10	--	
		2 control	53.26	6.22	.11	-.03	--
		3 impersonal	43.15	8.17	.10	-.09	.14

Note: all KS coefficients were statistically insignificant; the Lilliefors significance correction was applied

*p < .016. The Bonferroni correction for multiple correlations was applied

The graphical representation of GCO's for the unemployed and employed sample in T1, T2, and T3 is shown in Figure 1.

Discussion

The objective of our research was investigate the stability in time (2007-2011) of GCO's for a sample of unemployed and we compared the results to those obtained from a sample of employed individuals. If significant differences would be found between time points, then the nature of GCO's as personality traits could be questioned.

The autonomy orientation of the unemployed and the employed sample didn't register a significant evolution between the time points, but nevertheless in T3 it was higher for the employed sample, not because of an increase for this sample, but of a drop-down for the unemployed. The result might suggest that prolonged unemployment ruins personal initiative and threatens the capacity to assume responsibilities and the internal causality of behavior, while being employed keeps these variables safe. However, our study didn't find a significant negative evolution of the autonomy orientation for the unemployed sample.

Although we didn't find an interaction effect, we identified a significant increase of control orientation for the unemployed sample. This was contrary to our expectations, as we considered that time limits and focusing on external rewards would be more characteristic to the employed individuals. The higher level of control orientation in T3 might be an expression of some coping mechanisms to unemployment. Individuals may be more willing to organize their behavior on demands from significant others, as a refill of job loss. The environment became more restrictive, as the family budget and new lifestyle allows only certain types of activities, turning them into constraining habits.
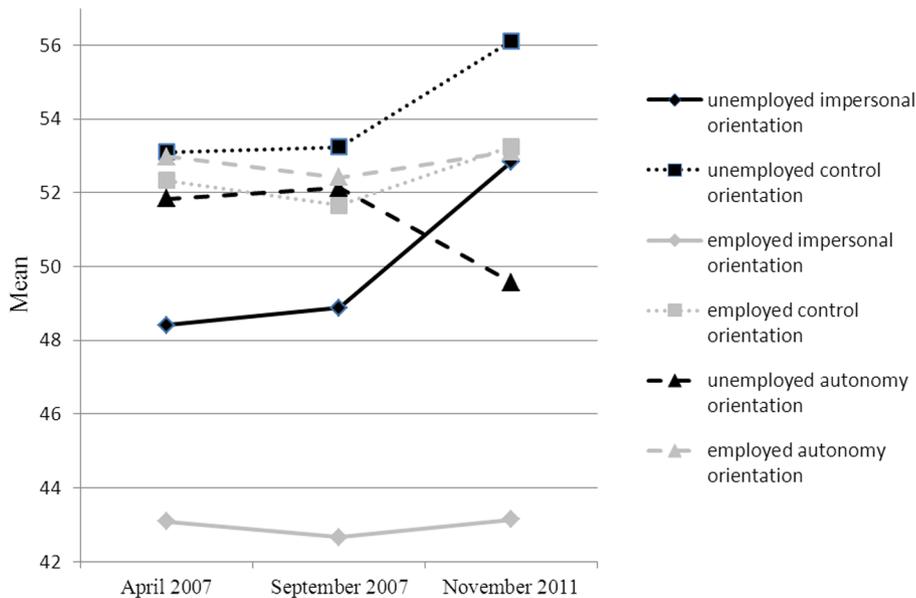
Figure 1. The evolution of GCO's in T1, T2, and T3 (line graph)

It appears that in the first years of prolonged unemployment these external pressures are stronger than for the employed. Beyond the surprising result, what matters is *the evolution of control orientation* under significant life events (prolonged unemployment).

Finally, the analysis of the impersonal orientation showed the most conclusive results. Although from the beginning of the measurements the impersonal orientation of the unemployed was higher than of the employed sample, it significantly evaluated during unemployment, while for the employed we didn't register significant evolutions. Being employed "protected" the feeling of being in control, while involuntary unemployment developed amotivation.

In conclusion, our study draws attention to possible alterations of general causality orientations due to prolonged unemployment. In this situation, GCO's cannot be considered personality traits, but characteristic adaptations of personality.

On the other hand, although Deci & Ryan (1985) speak about these causal orientations as personality traits (so they should be relatively stable), the authors don't exclude the possibility that the orientations may be influenced by diverse factors [*i.e.* domain of work; researchers are high in autonomy orientation, and engineers in controlled orientation. The results are based on a cross-sectional study, so Deci & Ryan didn't investigate whether the orientations were higher *a priori* for the samples. This is consistent with Matthews, Deary, and Whiteman (2005), who stated that although personality traits tend to be stable in adulthood, they are susceptible to alterations due to significant life events.

Among the limitations, we should mention especially the sampling procedure. Although we tried to eliminate participants who have started working illegally and those who tried to cast a favorable light on themselves, we are not confident that we fully succeeded, especially in T3, when we still had a surprisingly large sample of unemployed. Another difficult decision was whether to include or not people who initially received unemployment benefits. The decision was to include them, because we believe that money is a poor consolation for the job loss,

although they may mitigate its impact. The immediate impact of unemployment is quite high, especially for "the first timers".

We also neglected data collection about family structure, the exact reason of unemployment, and job search behavior. In this regard, the attention of researchers should focus on variables like work values and coping mechanisms.

We would like to make one final comment, connected to the limits of the research. We fully neglected the effects of the financial crisis in this analysis and the global perception on Romanian economy. At the beginning of the study, in April 2007, the financial crisis was not a reason to worry. Although we collected some data about this variable in September 2011, we preferred not to include them in the interpretation of the results.

We must also bear in mind that in psychological research we are frequently dealing with isolated traits taken out of their context, losing site of the individual as an organism or of the individual in the society.

Acknowledgements

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About the Author

Marius Drugaş, lecturer, PhD, is a member of the Department of Psychology, at the University of Oradea, Romania. Currently he is interested in research on video game psychology and organizational culture.

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