Handling the Stress of Looking for a Job in Law School: The Relationship between Intrinsic Motivation, Internal Attributions, Relations with Others, and Happiness

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A study was conducted to examine how law students cope with the stress of looking for a job. We argue that effective coping is exhibited by the capacity to keep stress in one domain of life from spreading to and contaminating other, unrelated areas of life. Certain situations may be undeniably stressful; however, individuals who can maintain positive feelings about their life as a whole despite this stress may cope well. We hypothesized that three social psychological variables might be associated with this phenomenon: motivation (intrinsic versus extrinsic), attributions (internal versus external), and relations with others. The results indicated that students with intrinsic motives for being a lawyer were happier with their lives in general than were students with extrinsic motives. Likewise, students who attributed the ability to find a job to internal attributes were happier than were those who did not. Relations with others did not relate to happiness. Implications of these findings for career counseling are presented.

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Stress seems to be an inevitable component of human experience. Numerous definitions of stress have been developed. For the purposes of this paper, Baum, Singer, and Baum's (1981) definition of stress as a "process in which environmental events or forces, called stressors, threaten an organism's existence and well-being" (p. 4) is adequate. Virtually everyone must at some point cope with both minor stressors like traffic jams or difficult roommates, and major stressors like bereavement or job loss. Consequently, research directed at determining how people manage to effectively deal with stress is of value.

The study described in this paper represents a modest attempt to examine this issue by studying how law students experience the stress of looking for a job. This study was conducted at the request of the Dean in charge of placement at a prestigious Chicago-area law school. He was concerned about the anxiety and unhappiness he encountered among students looking for jobs. Although it had been relatively easy for law students to obtain jobs in the past, in recent years obtaining a job was becoming more difficult and stressful, due to the large increase in the law student population (Beck & Burns, 1979; Taylor, 1975; Watson, 1968). Not only are the stakes high, but for many students at prestigious schools this is the first time they have ever experienced the uncertainty, anxiety, and frustration that applying, interviewing, waiting, and being rejected involve. Lazarus and Folkman (1983) argue that the magnitude of the stress individuals experience depends in part on their appraisal of how much is at stake. They suggest that when the stakes are high, distress is high even if individuals believe they can ultimately succeed, because potential failure is so costly. Thus, these students' past history of success, the importance associated with finding a good position, and the bad job market all combine to make the job search process particularly stressful (Edmonds, 1976).

One possible indicator of effective coping in general, and for law students in particular, is the ability to keep stress in one area of life from spreading to and contaminating other unrelated areas of life. Certain situations, like looking for a job, may be undeniably stressful. However, if while suffering job stress individuals can obtain satisfaction from other domains in their lives, for example from their families and hobbies, then they should still be able to maintain positive feelings about their lives as a whole. If, however, this job stress spills over into other domains, then positive feelings about life as a whole will be even more difficult to maintain.

What factors influence whether people view job stress as an isolated aspect of their experience, or as something generalized across domains? Based on past research, we considered three social-psychological factors: intrinsic and extrinsic motives for becoming a lawyer, internal and external attributions for success or failure in job-seeking, and relations with others.

Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation

Intrinsic motivation is an inner resource that can help individuals cope with stress. According to Deci (1975), "intrinsically motivated activities are ones for which there is no apparent reward except the activity itself. The activities are ends in themselves rather than means to an end" (p. 23). Kruglanski (1978) suggests that individuals are intrinsically motivated when they engage in an activity because of its inherent qualities. It has been proposed that intrinsically motivated actions satisfy internal needs for competence and challenge (Csikszentmihalyi, 1978; Deci, 1975).

Students who chose a career in law primarily for extrinsic reasons (e.g., high pay, prestige, or the belief that it would be easier than medical school) should have an extremely difficult time when they do not obtain a job offer, because their primary reason for pursuing a legal career has been threatened. Conversely, students who chose law because of an intrinsic reason (e.g., an inherent interest in the field of law or a desire to help others via law) may cope better with setbacks because they can satisfy their personal motivations for pursuing a legal career in a variety of possible settings. For intrinsically motivated students, law is an end in and of itself; it is worth pursuing in spite of difficulties. However, for extrinsically motivated students, law is just one of several means to an end. Difficulties can cause these students to reevaluate their choice of law and chastise themselves for choosing a means that turned out to be a dead end.

Koch (1956, 1961) suggests that while performing an intrinsically motivated activity, individuals become fully absorbed in the activity and committed to it (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). More recently, Brickman (in preparation) argues that intrinsic motivation is a critical aspect of the commitment-building process. He suggests that part of the process of building a commitment is that intrinsic value is created and strengthened. Commitment is defined by Brickman (1977) as "whatever it is that makes a person stay with a course of action or a relationship when the going gets tough, when sacrifices are required, or when other courses of action or relationships seem more promising" (p. 3).

One might hypothesize that being committed to law would make being a lawyer a critical aspect of one's identity. Thus, difficulties in finding a job would be more stressful since these difficulties threaten one's identity. However, we would argue that commitment and intrinsic motivation reduce perceptions of stress and unhappiness because committed students can view the troublesome job search as an unpleasant but necessary stage in the process of becoming a lawyer. The value and meaning intrinsically motivated students find in the law can help them endure the hardships and accept its...

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1Clearly, factors like financial status would affect an individual's ability to maintain overall life satisfaction despite job stress. This paper, however, focuses primarily on the social psychological factors that affect satisfaction and adjustment.
Research indicates that times of stress people want and need the support of others (Caldan, 1978; Cobb, 1976; Gottlieb & Moos, 1979). Silver and Wortman (1980) argue that perceiving social support is a major predictor of better adjustment. For example, Brown, Brolin, and Harris (1975) found that women who had experienced a major life event (e.g., illness, bereavement, and rape) were more likely to develop a psychiatric hospitalization if they did not have an alternative, confiding relationship with a sympathetic listener. By doing so, they may be able to discuss their feelings, one might hypothesize. Schuler and Wortman (1982) note that in cases where the individual is not able to discuss their feelings, they might experience feelings of frustration and interpret this emotion as due to the person's failure to understand them. By acting as a sounding board, significant others can help individuals comprehend their own emotions and bring them to the forefront. However, it is important to note that the individual's understanding of the situation will also play a role in their overall well-being. In this case, understanding the situation and being able to discuss their feelings with friends or family could make a significant difference in the individual's well-being. The ability to discuss feelings with others can provide support and help individuals to deal with stress more effectively. This is particularly true for those who have experienced traumatic events. In summary, we hypothesized that students who were intrinsically motivated and who attributed their job search status to intrinsic causes would be more likely to maintain their sense of control and feeling of self-efficacy, which would lead to better job search outcomes. Factors such as job search skills, time management, and motivation are important predictors of job search outcomes. Therefore, providing students with strategies to improve these areas can help them in their job search efforts.
addition to these social psychological variables, some more obvious, objective factors are also likely to influence students' feelings about the job search process and thus, indirectly, their level of happiness. Students with a high class rank or publication experience are more likely to be offered a job. Knowledge of this should influence their perceptions of how difficult the job search process is.

METHOD

Subjects and Procedure

This study was conducted in late November, a time chosen because it was a critical period in the job search process. Students looking for a job typically interview in the fall and are contacted by December 15 by any firms that wish to offer them a job. Of course, some students already had accepted positions (e.g., from firms they worked for during the previous summer), but for most students this is a critical stage in the job search process. Juniors are searching for summer jobs, which are viewed as an important step towards obtaining full time jobs, while seniors are searching for permanent full time jobs.

The Dean of the law school contacted us in the late fall and requested that we conduct a survey on this topic. At that time we observed that to study how law students dealt with job stress, it was important to collect the data before the December 15 notification date. Due to this consideration, there was little time to develop and pretest measures. This disadvantage was balanced by our perception that this was a unique opportunity for investigating an interesting problem—job seeking in a tight market. Consequently we decided to proceed, but the survey is seen as preliminary and primarily of value in generating hypotheses and directing future research.

Subjects were juniors and seniors from a prestigious Chicago-area law school who agreed to complete the questionnaire. A table was set up in the law school commons that was staffed by law students for one day. Students who walked by were asked to fill out the questionnaire. The table was not labeled, so students were not aware of the focus of the questionnaire until they had agreed to participate. Only a handful of students who were late for class refused to participate. Every student who started the questionnaire completed it, although two students' questionnaires were discarded because they left a large number of questions unanswered. Eighty-five students comprised the sample.

Questionnaire

Subjects completed a two-page questionnaire that contained items designed to examine their intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, commitment, their inter-
with their family and nonlaw student friends about their job situation, if talking with them helped, and in what ways it helped. Responses to the two questions about why talking was helpful or unhelpful were coded into two categories: socio-emotional and task-instrumental. Inter-rater reliability between two trained coders was .87 for family and friends and .88 for fellow law students. Additional social comparison information was obtained by asking students which specific groups of fellow law students they spoke with: males, females, those of higher rank, those of lower rank, minority students, and students who wrote for a legal publication.

Students were also asked to describe the type of job they wanted, and their hardest job-related decision. Although we had no specific hypotheses regarding these variables, we wanted to know if any of these law-related decisions and circumstances affected their perceptions of how difficult their job search was or how happy they were overall.

Dependent measures. There were two primary dependent measures. To measure subjects’ perceptions of the amount of stress they were experiencing, they were asked how rough looking for a job was on them right now. In other words, this was a measure of how difficult the job search process was for them. To measure their ability to maintain overall positive affect despite this stress they were asked how happy they were “in general.” Ratings were made on 7 point Likert-type scales ranging from 0 for “not at all” to 6 for “extremely.”

RESULTS

Description of Sample

Although the sample used in this study was not selected at random, the distribution of this sample on several demographic variables is comparable to that of the law school as a whole except that it had proportionately more juniors. Of the 85 students in the sample, 61% of the students were juniors, whereas 39% were seniors (there were 178 students in the senior class and 182 in the junior class). In our sample 65% of the students were male, whereas 28% were female (6 students did not answer this question). In the junior and senior classes as a whole, 31% of the students were female. The majority of the students in our sample were unmarried (74%). Nine percent of the students in our sample identified themselves as racial minority students. In the junior and senior classes, 15% of the students were members of a minority group.

According to their self-reports, the sample was skewed in favor of the top performing students. Sixty-five percent of the students reported being in the top 25% of their class, 27% reported being in the 25-50% range, while only 8% reported being in the lower 50% of their class. Research that indicates that individuals overestimate their own abilities suggests that these ratings may be somewhat exaggerated (Codol, 1975; College Board, 1977; Myers, 1980). However, 45% of the students reported writing for a legal publication, a fact which is unlikely to be misrepresented. In the population, 34% of each class wrote for a publication. In sum, the sample examined in this study seems fairly comparable to the junior and senior classes at this law school as a whole, except perhaps for the class rank variable.

The results will be discussed in the following order. First descriptive information regarding students’ expectations and concerns will be described as background information. Then the relationship between the independent variables (motivation, attributions, and relations with others) and students’ perceptions of how difficult their situation is will be examined. Finally, the relationship between the independent variables and overall happiness will be described.

Students’ Expectations and Concerns

Students had definite opinions about the type of law they hoped to practice. Thirty-four percent of the students planned on practicing corporate law, the most popular choice. Twenty-nine percent wanted to be involved with litigation, 9% with individual law, and 7% with governmental law (the rest were either undecided or gave an uncodable response). Seventy-one percent of the students expected to obtain the type of job they wanted now, while only 5% thought they would never obtain the type of job they wanted. Almost all of the students, therefore, were basically optimistic about their chances of obtaining a desirable job at some point in the future.

Students were asked to describe what was the most difficult decision they currently faced regarding their law career. Twenty percent were most concerned about where their job would be located. Sixteen percent found it hardest to decide what type of job to take. For example, one student responded, “whether to work for a large, prestigious firm or to go into a more public interest oriented position with the government—both are appealing for different reasons.” Thirteen percent were most concerned about lifestyle or personal values. For example, one student’s most difficult decision was, “resolving the conflict between my social consciousness and representing the wealthy.” Similarly another wondered, “will I be able to avoid being lured by big money corporate law?” Another responded, “whether I will be able to totally fulfill myself both as a woman and as a lawyer—kids are very important to me . . .” Nine percent indicated it was deciding whether to continue with law school; as one student put it, “deciding if this is what I want to do—sometimes I feel the whole thing is a
Two of the three measures of intrinsic motivation were significantly associated with levels of happiness. Students who reported that their current job was not of high prestige and that their incomes were low were significantly more unhappier than students who did not report these reasons. The remaining one was not significantly related to happiness.

Interestingly, there was a significant relationship between students' type of motivation and their difficulty in telling others that they were unhappy. Students who reported that their current job was not of high prestige and that their incomes were low were significantly more unhappier than students who did not report these reasons. The remaining one was not significantly related to happiness.

Attractiveness. The measure of internal attributions and the measure of external attributions were negatively correlated (\( r = -0.13 \), n.s.). As predicted by the control perspective, students who felt that effort and ability (attributions) were necessary to obtain a desired job were happier than students who did not make these internal attributions. However, the external attribution of difficulty did not relate significantly to happiness.

Predictors of Students' Perceptions of the Overall Happiness. Students' responses to the two dependent measures were correlated, indicating that the more difficult the job search process, the less happy the student felt (\( r = -0.31 \), p < 0.002). While this correlation is significant, the variance accounted for was less than 10% of the overall happiness variance.

Motivation and commitment. The measures of motivation and commitment were weakly related to each other (average \( r = 0.20 \)). This was not surprising, because these were new measures devised to tap diverse aspects of the underlying construct.
relate significantly to perceptions of difficulty or happiness. This may have been due to the fact that 30% of the students either left the question blank or gave unclear responses. In the question block, respondents were asked to provide students with a list of the intrinsic and extrinsic motives for working on a job search project that were rated on Likert-type scales for every approach. All students provided at least one response. The most commonly mentioned intrinsic motive in the study was to have an impact on society, to do interesting and challenging work. The most commonly mentioned extrinsic motive was money. Some students also mentioned extrinsic motives, such as the need to earn good pay (2,6% of students), to pay back student loans, to have social connections, and to feel appreciated. The majority of students mentioned one of these motivations. The comments about money concerned the need to make enough more money to pay off student loans and to have a comfortable lifestyle. The comments about social interaction concerned the need to have a social, collaborative environment to work in. The comments about appreciation concerned the need to be appreciated for the work that students do.

Younger students (those under age 26) felt their job search was more difficult looking for a job than did older students. This may be explained by the finding that younger students were more likely to be in high school or college. The older students (those over age 26) felt more difficult looking for a job than did younger students. After working for several years, the older students were more likely to be in high school or college. In the longer run, they were likely to be more important in professional settings in which they had probably been well thought out and were more likely to be able to make financial decisions in higher education settings. One student observed, "In my opinion, it is not surprising that individuals who make this decision have strong intrinsic motives.

Perhaps the research on this topic that would offer more stimulation and enjoyment. As one student stated, "I was achieving a relatively high level in my work. I wanted things that would offer more stimulation and enjoyment."

The results of this study provide some tentative support for the initial hypotheses. Unexpectedly, students with high grades in law school and published articles and students who were part of the research team or who had participated in research in the past were less happy than other students. This finding supports the idea that students who feel they are not making progress in their career may feel less happy than others. This finding also supports the idea that students who are not making progress in their career may feel less happy than others. This feeling enhances their ability to remain happy even under difficult conditions.

Unfortunately, the measures of social relations that were used in this study were somewhat limited. Social relations were assessed only in terms of talking about the job situation rather than in terms of talking about other issues or providing positive affect, affiliation, and aid to others.
tonucci, 1980). Several students reported that talking to friends and family was not helpful because these people could not really understand what they were going through. Past evidence suggests that in many cases people try to help troubled loved ones but that the things they do are ineffective and sometimes make things worse (see Abbey, Holland, & Wortman, 1980; Coates & Wortman, 1980; Dunkel-Schetter & Wortman, 1981; and Wortman & Dunkel-Schetter, 1979 for reviews of this literature). The social comparison which inevitably occurred through discussions with fellow students appeared to be a double-edged sword (cf., Brickman & Bulman, 1977). Sometimes individuals learned that they were doing better than others, sometimes they learned they were doing worse. For some, talking reduced anxiety, for others, it seemed to heighten it. These forces may balance each other out so that talking had no overall effect on perceptions of how difficult it is to find a job or on overall happiness. In future research, it would be interesting to use a wider range of social relations measures in order to gain greater insight into this aspect of job-seeking stress.

**IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS**

The results of this study, although preliminary, were predicted from previous research and theory in social psychology and would seem to have important implications for individuals who must deal with stress, especially that involved in finding a job. Attributions and motivation may not be easily altered, but to the extent that they are, there appear to be advantages in believing that outcomes are both personally controllable and inherently valuable.

After conducting this study we participated in a workshop at the law school designed to help students cope with the stress of looking for a job during which there was an interesting exchange between some first and third year law students. The first year students described only intrinsic motives for pursuing law, whereas the third year students seemed cynical and focused on earning enough to repay their loans and live well. However, at the end of the session, a few of the third year students expressed their appreciation to the first year students for reminding them of their original (intrinsic) reasons for being lawyers. In general, individuals and counselors who wish to help people deal with the stress of finding a job might want to encourage the elements of intrinsic motivation and internal attribution that already exist within the individual—provided that the individual still has some realistic prospect of obtaining the goal in question (cf., Janoff-Bulman & Brickman, 1982).

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