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*Experiences of Job Loss among Migrants in Poland
during the COVID-19 Pandemic:
A Qualitative Study*

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Abstract

Theoretical background: Job loss is considered a stressful personal experience that may have a negative impact on an individual's life. The rapidly increasing unemployment rate is not only a private matter but also a public concern entailing negative socio-economic consequences.

Purpose of the article: This research aimed to provide a better understanding of the experiences of migrants who lost jobs during the COVID-19 pandemic in Poland.

Research methods: The specific research questions that guided this study were: "What was the experience of job loss for the migrants who worked in Poland during the pandemic?", "What were the coping strategies and how were they affected by COVID-19?". The interview texts were analyzed using thematic analysis. A purposeful sampling strategy was supplied with snowball sampling. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 5 participants.

Main findings: Respondents applied several coping techniques, starting with finding a new job, emphasizing positive aspects, and keeping busy with self-development activities adjusted to pandemic restrictions. The pandemic has not forced any respondent to give up any particular way of coping with job loss, even in terms of social support, despite the risk of infection and the government's recommendation to isolate. Respondents

reported also a very limited influence of pandemic on their job searching process, with the only difference to the detriment of non-EU migrants, who noted the emerging reluctance of employers to deal with visa and residence permit bureaucracy.

Introduction

The World Health Organization (WHO) has announced the COVID-19 pandemic on 12 March 2020 giving a signal to start the fight against the virus (WHO, 2020). The countermeasures differed from country to country and fluctuated over time, affecting economic sectors to varying degrees. Nevertheless, some forms of restriction of free movement were imposed in the vast majority of countries that reported COVID-19 cases. One of the most noticeable outcomes across the world was the rising number of lay-offs. Job loss is considered a stressful personal experience that may have a negative impact on an individual's life. The rapidly increasing unemployment rate is not only a private matter but also a public concern entailing negative socio-economic consequences (Huang & Huang, 2015; Lojanica & Obradović, 2020). This qualitative study focuses on the experiences of five migrants who lost their jobs in Poland during a pandemic to assess if the COVID-19 and various restrictions have affected the coping mechanism and their overall experience. The goal of this paper is to examine their experience so that employers and policymakers are aware of the influence of the pandemic and restrictions and can offer appropriate support. The results are showing that all five respondents reported a very limited influence of the pandemic on their coping techniques and a job searching process. The structure of the paper is the following: after this introductory part, the background to the research is presented, focused on job-loss coping techniques and course of pandemic in Poland, and then the methodology adopted for the present research is discussed. It follows a section of results and discussions, some final conclusions and suggestions for future research, as well as the list of cited references.

Literature review

The impact of involuntary job loss on individuals proved to be detrimental and numerous researchers seek to understand the process by which people cope with job loss. One of the first studies on coping techniques differentiated problem-focused coping from emotion-focused coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987). Coping mechanisms are affected by resources such as personal and environmental factors. The goal of coping with job loss is maintaining balance in various aspects of their lives, i.e., economic, psychological, physiological, and social. In all of those dimensions, a person is comparing the situation created by job loss with the individual goals or standards leading to a discrepancy. Hence, coping with job loss is defined as a cognitive and behavioral effort to manage the challenges of job loss (Latack, Kinicki, & Prussia, 1995).

More recently, Houssemand, Rosato, Thill, and Pignault (2021) have proposed a model of coping processes specifically following job loss, where the process of normalization is a way to regulate emotions, based on cognitive reappraisal – a notion that unemployment is a natural and inevitable stage in individuals' career path and is the result of external circumstances (Houssemand et al., 2021).

A study on coping strategies applied in the COVID-19 pandemic has found that job loss, among other distressing factors (e.g., stress, financial challenges, loneliness, etc.) triggered the following positive strategies: engaging in activities, hope, relaxation, connecting with others (Ogueji, Agberotimi, Adesanya, & Gidado, 2021). Apart from the coping strategies mentioned before, a study on internal migrant workers during the COVID-19 pandemic found that they tried numerous coping strategies such as cognitive appraisal of the issue, making oneself psychologically competent and using social support of family and friends (Srivastava, Arya, Joshi, Singh, Kaur, Chauhan, & Das, 2021). It is worth noting that some individuals opted for psychiatric help to manage the physical symptoms of stress (*ibid.*).

Research has consistently documented negative economic consequences as becoming unemployed causes financial strain (Achdut & Refaeli, 2020). Studies have shown that job loss may cause psychological distress (*ibid.*), anxiety (Eersel, Taris, & Boelen, 2020) and depression (Amiri, 2021; Posel, Oyenubi, & Kollampambal, 2021) and increases significant risk for child abuse (Lawson, Piel, & Simon, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic in Poland had not only negative impact on the economy, especially the unemployment rate, but also on travel, access to many services and institutions and social relations. Polish government has implemented COVID-19-related restrictions starting from 9 March 2020 (Gov.pl, 2020). On 11 March 2020, a decree about pandemic risk was announced, allowing to impose further restrictions pertaining to mobility: the functioning of educational system institutions had been temporarily limited, all mass events had been cancelled and numerous institutions and facilities were closed altogether (*ibid.*). The financial aid package proposed by the government at the end of March 2020 aimed to counterbalance the strain created by the restrictions and prevent bankruptcies and mass lay-offs. The aid included provisions for foreigners, e.g., extension of residence visas and temporary residence permits. Since May 2020, the restrictions were gradually being removed, only to be reinstated in October, as the number of COVID-19 cases started to rise significantly again (*ibid.*). Despite financial aid, the imposed restrictions led many companies to financial difficulties or collapse. In total, until October 2020, 515 bankruptcies were announced, and many more companies wanted to file for bankruptcy, but 57 bankruptcy petitions were dismissed (COIG, 2020). Applying for the financial aid offered by the government obliged the entrepreneurs to operate for a certain period and not declare bankruptcy, so we can expect many more bankruptcies once this period ends. Industries that were most affected by the restrictions, such as catering and accommodation, transport, and retail, had to lay off many people.

In Poland, the unemployment rate at the end of Q1 was 5.4%, it increased to 6.1% in Q2, did not change in Q3, and rose to 6.2% in Q4 (GUS, 2020). Among the people who lost their jobs were also migrants, but there is no precise data on the proportion of the unemployed among migrants. According to the latest Social Insurance Institution (*Zakład Ubezpieczeń Społecznych*) report, at the end of September 2018, the migrants' unemployment rate was approx. 0.24% in 2018 (ZUS, 2019). The regulations under which migrants can settle and obtain a work permit depend on whether they are EU citizens or not, making it much more difficult for migrants from other countries than EU Member States to remain in the country after losing the job.

Research methods

Many studies that investigated coping mechanisms regarding involuntary job loss in the pandemic were using quantitative methodology (Holder, Jones, & Masterson, 2021; von Wachter, 2021). However, this qualitative study focuses on the experiences of people who lost their jobs during the pandemic, how they perceived this experience, and which coping mechanisms they applied under lockdown restrictions, and that is why using a thematic analysis approach was the most appropriate. It helped in presenting an account of the lived experiences of migrants at the time of job loss.

The study was carried out in one of the biggest cities in Poland where the influx of migrants has been remarkable – many of them found a job in one of multiple shared services centres. The study used a purposeful sampling strategy supplemented by a snowball sampling method to suit the research question and the specific needs of the study. The criteria of participants' selection were: being a migrant in Poland and having become involuntarily unemployed during the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants were four men and one woman, aged 27–37, born in five different countries (EU and non-EU). Prior to the interviews and after receiving information about the study background and objectives, the respondents were given assurances of confidentiality and were asked about their oral consent. The interviews were in English, lasted between 27 and 70 minutes and were recorded. The interviews were based on a semi-structured interview guide with thematic open-ended questions about experiences of unemployment, influence of the pandemic, mental and physical health, and relations with friends and family. The analytical tool chosen in this article is thematic analysis to form and organize meaningful themes that reflect the data and its complexity. The thematic analysis consisted of transcribing and reading the data, initial coding, searching for topics, examining the themes, and comparing them with the codes and the whole set of data to refine and name each theme. Finally, examples linked to the research question were found.

Results

The analysis revealed four different themes from the interviews: (I) disillusionment with a former employer, (II) positive aspects of job loss, (III) unemployment during the pandemic leading to self-development activities, (IV) negative influence of pandemic and being migrant on the job searching process. Overall, job loss was described as something that was not completely unexpected, due to the knowledge about the worsening state of the economy and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the company's performance. The news of the dismissal evoked a sense of betrayal. Respondents expressed their disappointment with the system:

Of course, because you are feeling like betrayed (...) it's a company – doesn't care about a single person in the long run (pause), I know that everyone is pretty much dispensable. (Respondent 2)

The respondents also described how they appreciated more positive aspects of the job loss:

Anyways we are going to work most of the times 60 like most of our life – 60 until 60 years yeah maybe – if I was younger maybe twenty-one, twenty-two, it would affect me negatively. I saw friends who are just younger, and they are like "It's the end of the world so long time not working", but they don't understand that they – most of the time – they are going to work and when you're old you will not regret working less. You'll regret spending more time with the things you do so I knew sooner or later I find the job, so that's why I was just using every day productively. (Respondent 1)

As I was thinking this was great opportunity for me to actually start doing something that I think that I have umm better options of being more satisfied. (Respondent 4)

After losing the job, due to the pandemic and additional free time, the respondents had the opportunity to focus on their own development. The fact that many institutions were closed, encouraged them to take up activities that can be done at home.

I love reading books in the coffeehouses but I can't do this so I'm making coffee at home turning on relaxing music and reading book like I can't go to the gym, so I started doing workouts. (Respondent 5)

I started to exercise, and I started running in (...) of course and doing bars and riding bicycle but mainly yes it helped me a lot running and doing meditation I started doing meditation. (Respondent 4)

While the respondents claimed that they did not see any decrease in the number of job offers that they could apply for, some noticed reluctance of recruiters who seemed to anticipate additional problems with visas due to the pandemic.

The problem – okay – the problem was that I was getting offers, a lot because of my background, but once companies knew they had to do (...) that reside and work permit (...) I'm not a citizen of EU or Poland they were like "Ohh we stopped doing that due to COVID". I remember first two

months every week I was getting lots offers. Offers was calling, calling, calling but once I was telling... They were like "When you can start" once I was telling about this document they do "Oh due to COVID we don't do it". Aah so yeah but so in six months I constantly get offers but once they learned they have to do this document... so there's lots of job opportunities (...). (Respondent 1)

Due to the negative influence of the pandemic on the global economy, the company's performance was visibly affected, leading the respondents to the conclusion that their position at the company may be at risk. Despite claims that in most cases a lay-off was almost expected, respondents still reported feelings such as shock, betrayal, and sadness upon hearing the news. The dismissals caused disillusionment with the former employer. After the layoff, all respondents included elements of problem-focused coping strategy (by actively applying for a new job in Poland) and emotion-focused coping by emphasizing the positive aspects of the situation, such as leaving the company in "good moments" (before the atmosphere soured) or reevaluating career choices. They also tried to normalize this experience saying that it is a part of any career. The respondents reported that the important aspect of being unemployed in the pandemic was focusing on self-development activities and staying productive by reading, taking up online courses, exercising, meditating which also helped to create the routine that work had previously ensured. At the beginning of the pandemic, they had to focus on activities they could do at home as most facilities were closed proving to be very flexible. Meetings with friends were also adapted to the pandemic reality and were moved to homes from public spaces. Since most of the respondents did not have any family in Poland, support from friends, not only emotional but also practical, was acknowledged. Looking for a job during the pandemic was not affected by the pandemic according to the respondents, mainly because the application process remained the same (online) and the number of offers in the sector they were interested in did not seem to decline. However, non-EU migrants have reported a significant shift and reluctance to tackle work permit issues by potential employers since the pandemic began. Nonetheless, all respondents declared they intended to remain in Poland or look for a job in another country, instead of going back.

Discussion

In line with previous research on coping mechanisms, the actions taken up by the migrants fall into problem-focused and emotion-focused categories (Latack et al., 1995). According to the migrants' accounts, the process of normalization based on cognitive reappraisal, as described by Houssemand et al. (2021), was also adopted, as some respondents emphasized their feeling that unemployment is an inherent and inevitable stage in individuals' career path and it did not depend on them or was not a result of their work performance.

Conclusions

The limitation of this study is the modest size of the sample, so the findings should be interpreted carefully. However, the sample can be regarded as representative of a migrant population employed as office workers in one of the biggest cities in Poland. Generally, job loss proved to have a detrimental influence on individuals' lives, yet respondents in this study in most cases remained unemployed for a relatively short time and had savings or additional income that mitigated the financial strain caused by the job loss. As a consequence, the negative effect of lack of income did not become severe in most cases and allowed respondents to remain in Poland according to their plans. The pandemic showed limited influence on the experience of job loss and subsequent actions – respondents adjusted their coping strategies to pandemic restrictions to various degrees. Even though non-EU migrants reported more difficulties with finding a job due to COVID-19, 4 out of 5 respondents were hired already at the time of interview.

The respondents' experiences can be illuminating in similar contexts. The climate change and growing political unrest in many countries will only add to the current migration trends, so the work environment will become more culturally diverse. That is why this study focused on migrants helps to understand how they react in a challenging time, i.e. job loss, and what assistance they may need from employers or policymakers. Additionally, the newest COVID-19 reports are suggesting that the pandemic is not likely to be over in the nearest future and the restrictions from the first wave such as lockdown may be repeatedly coming back. That is why it is so crucial to fully understand the influence of such measures on the people, so that the next time appropriate and effective steps can be taken, that will not prove to be harmful to mental health in a long run.

To sum up, the research should be continued with bigger samples in order to establish what other factors may be crucial in job loss-related coping techniques, with particular focus on personal resources (like emotional intelligence), and to examine whether migrants representing other professions would share the experiences of the respondents.

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