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Social tourism holidays boost unemployed individuals' mental health, contributing to positive changes in their job search, and job search-related, behaviours

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Summary

New research on social tourism from Nottingham University Business School has examined the links between holiday breaks and improvements in attitudes towards unemployment and job search behaviours. The study, conducted over three years (2011-2014), amongst low-income families suffering from unemployment and related issues, found that **holiday breaks boosted psychological health, contributed to positive changes in job search behaviour, and changes in behaviours towards alternative paths to employment, such as volunteering**. These positive effects were found to last up to six months after the holidays. The study findings suggest that improvements in unemployed people's psychological health are due to the transition from everyday environments, which are typically fairly deprived, to the enabling environments and safe spaces that these holidays create. In turn, improved psychological health has a positive effect on their job search, and other related behaviours. These findings offer important insights for policy-makers as these behavioural changes comprise major determinants of finding work. In accordance to this, and contrary to what is widely supposed, social tourism is more than a pure philanthropic activity; but has meaningful societal benefits with important economic implications.

Methodology

The study was conducted among 57 unemployed adults who were supported to take a holiday break by the charity, the Family Holiday Association. The Charity has been providing 'social tourism' opportunities to low income families for 40 years. Participants in the study were, in their vast majority of cases, long-term unemployed, females, and single parents and generally live in particularly deprived areas around Great Britain. Data were collected over a seven month period, in three different time waves, once before the holidays and two after the holidays, combining a pre- post-holiday survey with semi-structured interviews.

Building upon Albert Bandura's social cognitive theory and studies on unemployment and job search behaviour, the study examined changes in unemployed individuals' psychological health - with specific reference to self-efficacy - and changes in job search behaviour, after social tourism holidays. Bandura defines self-efficacy as 'people's beliefs about their

capabilities', and it is one of the most widely studied psychological variables in many different fields, as it comprises a major regulator of human motivation and action. Self-efficacy was studied both as a generalised trait (general self-efficacy) and a domain-specific competence belief (specific self-efficacy). Job search behaviour was mainly examined in terms of intensity (frequency with which people engage in specific job search activities); however, the study went beyond intensity, capturing job searching as a process that begins with the person's decision to look for work, and also includes his/her perceptions towards work, and the job search process itself.

Results

The results showed increases in unemployed individuals' self-efficacy and job search behaviour, as well as in their behaviours towards alternative paths to employment, after the holidays:

- Increases were larger in specific forms of participants' self-efficacy, such as parental efficacy (beliefs about their ability to parent), and social self-efficacy (beliefs about their ability to engage with other people).
- Significant general self-efficacy increases were reported by younger participants (18-29 years old), and those who had low levels of baseline general self-efficacy. This is consistent with findings from earlier studies on self-efficacy, which have shown that general self-efficacy - as a personality trait - stabilises over time, and, hence, it is less malleable as age increases. In addition, it has been found that people with low self-efficacy are usually more susceptible to external influence, such as experiments and interventions, than are those with high self-efficacy.
- Participants who were active job seekers prior still reported significant increases in their job search intensity.
- Significant shifts were identified with regard to specific job search activities, that require personal contact, such as contacting employers directly (e.g. door to door, over the phone), and asking family, friends and neighbours for paid job opportunities.
- Several participants reported that after coming back from their holidays they were more determined to find work, and applied for more jobs, over a sustained period of time, suggesting that the effects was not just a short-term gain. In addition, they started

asking for feedback after unsuccessful job-interviews, another factor that has been found to improve future application success rates.

- Participants who used to feel particularly anxious about job interviews showed changes in their perception of the job interview as a threatening situation, and reported feeling more confident during the actual interview process.
- Participants, who were non job-seekers, mainly due to caring responsibilities, started searching for alternative employment paths, such as volunteering.

How do holidays bring about changes in self-efficacy?

What is clear from the post-holiday data is that the holidays played a central role in the generation of these positive changes. The physical displacement of people from their normal surroundings, which is the main characteristic of leisure travel, enabled the study's participants to **get away from the usual worries and stresses**, which are inherent in the day-to-day environments of unemployed people.

"As soon as the train pulled off it was like, phewww we're off!"

Kate, who had never been away from her home town before

Simultaneously, the breaks gave participants the chance to experience a new environment that was in sharp contrast to their, typically deprived, habitual environment, in terms of the natural and social setting, and available opportunities for relaxation and recreation. These positive changes gave unemployed people new evidence both about the external world and themselves. With regard to the former, they **realised that there is a different and better side of life** (e.g. no financial worries, better surroundings):

"I didn't have to worry about anything cause it was all inclusive,"

Anne, a single mother of two

"I will let me daughter could go and play around our van and you know she'd be all right with others. Now you can't let her out from the front door around here cause you wondering. I can't blame the broader area, I'm not blaming that, but it's rough."

Lisa

With regard to the latter, this realisation made them **feel more relaxed, which, in turn, gave them new positive evidence about themselves** (i.e. that it is possible for them to actually feel better and happier):

“You know everyday things that you doing, just broke away from that which I think we definitely needed it, cause sometimes you think that that’s it, and that’s all you gonna be doing; and then you know, you get an opportunity like that and it’s like a breath of fresh air.

It made me like realise to just keep going,”

Joanne

These positive cognitive and affective changes, together with the enabling holiday environment, created the environment for positive self-efficacy and behavioural changes.

Enactive mastery experiences

Under these optimal conditions the study's participants engaged successfully in enactive mastery experiences. These are direct experiences that individuals actively participate in. Bandura explains that these experiences provide authentic and direct evidence of the individual's capacity to master or control a situation, which results in them building robust beliefs about their self-efficacy. The enactive experiences described by participants mainly focused on specific elements of participants' lives, such as family and social relations, which had been dysfunctional, thus, diminishing their sense of self-efficacy. During the holidays they had the chance to engage with these elements, but under more positive circumstances. For instance, during the holidays unemployed parents and their children were free from their usual stresses, and **they spent quality time together, having a meal out and playing by the sea. As a result, they were ready to come closer to each other, to understand each other's problems, and to enjoy their family moments, which strengthened their relationship.**

“When we were there we were able to get that time to talk a few things through. I’ve got to find out a few little things I hadn’t really taken seriously as a parent. And that is a definite improvement I will say, in terms of listening to them, and them understand how to approach me,”

Lilly

Similarly, when unemployed individuals participated in social situations during the holidays, they had already been feeling more relaxed as a result of getting away from their habitual environment and its constraints, and they had already received some evidence that **the new environment is friendly and safe** (i.e. the people who met during the holidays were welcoming and friendly, and the physical setting was peaceful). **As a result, they were ready to exercise more sociable behaviours and to make friends.**

“Well before I went away I was feeling a little bit isolated staying at home most of the time. At first I thought ‘oh I’m gonna be sitting here and nobody will talk to me,’ and, you know, the kids go off and go to the arcades whatever, but yeah I do feel a bit more included. Towards the middle of the holiday I did start making friends cause it was all families there, so they did include me. They say ‘oh bring a chair over.’ I was a bit more open, well I think I’ve carried that back home as well thinking that not everybody is bad really”.

Jenny

In addition, through social participation unemployed people also improved their social skills, which gave them further positive evidence about their social self-efficacy. Overall, managing to deal effectively with family and social relations, gave individuals some conviction about their capabilities to exercise control over these problematic areas of their lives. This new evidence challenged earlier negative self-beliefs, boosting their parental efficacy, and social self-efficacy, respectively.

“I do feel more confident to be the parent if you know what I mean. Yes we have fun together, but I know that I’m capable, capable of, you know, capable of filling the day, capable of feeding. Do you know what I mean? Just be a better parent really”; (Anne): “It’s been since I’ve come back, I feel like, I can talk to anyone now. Yeah, and talking to people I wouldn’t normally talk to. I don’t know, before I went, I’d talk to people and be around people, but I’d rather be the one in the corner, quiet.”

Jenny

General self-efficacy was influenced, too. This is due to the fact that self-efficacy related to one aspect of life can generalise to other aspects (i.e. people who feel capable to deal effectively with their family life are more likely to feel capable to deal effectively with their life in general). In addition, parental and social identities are significant components of an individual's identity, and, hence, positive influences related to the former can affect the

latter (i.e. a people who feel that they are capable parents are more likely to feel capable individuals in general).

"The stresses are still there but I can cope with them better now,"

Dave, a father of a child with behavioural problems

How does self-efficacy influence job search behaviour?

Increases in self-efficacy are important as they determine, to a large extent, people's psychological health, and the way they function in several aspects of their lives. In addition, and as the results showed, such increases are particularly important for unemployed individuals as they have positive effects on their job search behaviour. Effects mainly concerned job search commitment and intensity. **Several participants reported that they were more focused during the job-search process, they applied for more jobs and over a sustained period of time, and they asked for feedback after unsuccessful job-interviews.** In addition, positive effects were identified in several stages of unemployed people's job search behaviour, including their attitudes towards specific job search activities, their actual behaviour while executing these activities, and their responses after job search failures.

Although different forms of self-efficacy usually operate in concert, and often overlap, making it difficult to distinguish which form is more influential with regard to a behaviour in question, **increased social self-efficacy and general self-efficacy were found to be particularly influential with regard to job search activities that require personal contact,** such as job-interviews, contacting employers directly, and asking for feedback.

"Well, obviously I still applied and still looked around, but I think I may be a little bit more focused on it now, a little bit more confident. I applied for just a couple of more weeks than I would have done maybe; but being more confident in actually applying, so um, I can pick up the phone and phone. I did go for an interview not a long ago, and I phoned up and asked if they've made their decision. Apparently I hadn't got the job, but I asked feedback. Before probably I wouldn't have."

Jenny

This is due to the fact that general self-efficacy influences the way the person approaches, and functions in, several different situations. Similarly, increased social self-efficacy in a

specific situation can generalise in different social situations. Given that the person's functioning in different social situations is based on the same set of soft skills, such as communication and interpersonal skills, when people have evidence from a specific social situation that they possess these skills, they feel more confident in other situations that require the same or similar skills. **Unemployed individuals perceived job-interviews as less threatening, and appeared more confident during the actual job-interview situation.**

"I usually used to be a little bit anxious about talking to people I don't really know, and um, being away with people who you don't know, it's just me and the children, I've started to talk to other people that I didn't know, and um, it just made me think that I can communicate a lot better than I think I can. So in terms of interview yeah I guess I won't be as anxious when talking to people I don't know."

Lilly

This is a very important benefit, considering that the job-interview is a stressful job search activity for most people, and especially for those who are long-term unemployed. Thus, focusing on social and general self-efficacy is at least as effective as focusing on job search specific initiatives – which only help specific skills but have no impact on general attitudes, which are shown to be much more effective in changing behaviour.

Similarly, feeling more confident about their interpersonal and communication skills, participants did not hesitate to contact employers directly in order to ask for feedback after unsuccessful job interviews. This activity is particularly important, especially within the context of long-term unemployment, as it shows the person's commitment to find a job, even in the face of adversity. Given that long-term unemployment reflects repeated failures on behalf of the individual to find work, job search persistence is of critical importance. Failures, such as unsuccessful job interviews are frustrating, are often accompanied by passivity and loss of motivation, and can lead to the person's withdrawal from the job-search process. In contrast, persistence and commitment in the job search process increase the likelihood of finding a job.

In addition, **participants' commitment to find a job, and job search intensity, were also positively influenced by increased parental efficacy.** Managing to take their children on a holiday and seeing them happier, together with improvements in family relations during the

holidays, made participants feel that they can successfully fulfil their parental role, and that they are better parents. As such, in order to preserve their family stability and to continue providing for their children, they felt more motivated to search for work. Indicative of this is that **many participants said that they want to find work in order to have the chance to take their children on holidays again.** This explanation was frequently reported both by participants who found a job after the holiday-break and by those who continued to search for work.

“Well it just motivated me, that maybe if I can find work I will be able to take my family on holidays. And then maybe we could do more of those kind of things like going on holiday,”

Maria, who found a job after the holiday

Vicarious Experiences

On the other hand, positive effects with regard to job search behaviour were not universal among unemployed individuals, mainly due to existing restrictions to work, such as caring responsibilities. This non-effect was counterbalanced by identified positive effects of the holiday-break on participants’ behaviours towards alternative paths to employment, such as volunteering. Alternative paths to employment are significant as from one hand they can be seen as preparatory steps towards employment, and from another hand they reflect the person’s motivation towards future employment. Positive effects were mainly resulted from available vicarious experiences during the holidays.

For instance, watching local people during their work made some unemployed people realise that they could actually do the same work, and that they would like to follow the same career path.

“I think it was just seeing people get on with it. And you know how you watch people working and their chitchat, and their smiles, and then they do something. And you know you have the abdication when you see someone doing something oh I can do that better, I can do that”

Anne

“When we were on holiday they had these sessions for arts and craft with the children and it made me really think about it a lot in terms of working with children. They were doing

painting with their feet and hands and, I just looked in and actually think I would enjoy doing that.”

Lilly

Given their current restrictions to work they decided to find relevant volunteering work. The findings suggest that vicarious experiences were influential both in terms of raising work-specific self-efficacy and shaping career aspirations. In reality, numerous such experiences had been probably available in participants' day-to-day environments, before the holiday-break; however, positive appraisals of their capabilities in relation to the attainments of others and positive influences on their career aspirations, were less likely at that time due to various reasons, such as negative psychological states and very high unemployment rates in their area of residence, respectively. Under these conditions the amount of uncertainty about a person's capabilities is higher, which makes self-efficacy appraisals particularly sensitive to vicarious information. Similarly, in deprived areas with high unemployment rates, people's career aspirations are rather suppressed as the job opportunities are very limited.

Implications of this study

Overall, the study's results are important for several reasons. First of all, and given that positive effects on unemployed people's job search behaviour and behaviours towards alternative paths to employment, increase their chances to find work, and, hence, to become more active and productive members of the society, results have implications for active labour market policies. Earlier studies have found that active labour market programmes which include psychological support are particularly effective, in terms of increased reemployment; however, in the UK, job-seekers positive mental health is overlooked, and programmes largely focus on increased job-search assistance and training. **Considering the positive effects of holidays on the supply side of the labour market, social tourism could be incorporated into existing unemployment schemes, helping them to increase their effectiveness.** Embedding social tourism in youth unemployment programmes in particular, can have great potential as positive cognitive, and consequently, behavioural, changes are more likely to manifest in younger age groups.

Second, the identified positive cognitive and behavioural effects of the holidays concern a particularly “difficult” social group, comprised of people who live in fairly deprived areas around Great Britain, and who are, in their vast majority, long-term unemployed, females, and single parents. Despite the fact that these particular sociodemographic characteristics of the population under study have been found to be obstacles in the generation of positive self-efficacy, and especially job search behaviour changes, among individuals, the holidays influence was strong enough to bring about positive changes.

Third, the duration of the holidays varied between three, four and seven nights. Two-thirds of the participants (70.2%) had a short-break between three and four nights. Although positive cognitive and behavioural changes usually need more time to manifest, the influence of the holiday experiences was strong enough to boost such positive changes in a rather short period of time.

Fourth, and in contrast to studies on job search behaviour, which are specifically organised to boost people’s job search behaviour, the holidays were not organised in a way to include elements related to work or the job search process. As a result, positive changes in participants’ job search, and job search-related, behaviours, stress the important role of the holidays in influencing individual behaviours that are not related to the holidays *per se*.

In accordance to this, the findings suggest that social tourism for unemployed individuals could be organised in a way that vicarious experiences directly linked to employment are available. For instance, day-trips in coastal and rural areas, during which unemployed people will have the chance to see local people at work (e.g. in small family businesses, agriculture, fishery and so forth) could potentially shape career aspirations and enhance their motivation to find a job. These experiences could further affect decentralisation, in the sense that some people could realise that they want to change life-style and relocate from urban centres to the countryside. In addition, short seminars designed specifically to introduce unemployed individuals to specific career options, could follow direct observation, and strengthen the influence of vicarious experiences. It is important to note that such **organised forms of social tourism can generate new jobs in the host**

communities, thus, also affecting the demand side of the labour market. Given social tourism's potential to affect both the supply and the demand side of the labour market, social tourism can be utilised as a unique tool to tackle unemployment. **Social tourism does not only hold benefits for individual participants and their families, but it also has meaningful societal benefits with important economic implications.**

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