

Mental health and individual experience of unemployed young adults in Japan

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Abstract: This study focused on the subjective experiences and mental health of young, unemployed adults in Japan. We explored how individuals describe their experiences of becoming unemployed and how these experiences influence their mental health within the current Japanese sociocultural context, using a social constructionist approach. We collected data from October 2012 to January 2013. Participants were 25 young unemployed Japanese job seekers (15 females), who were recruited using a purposive sampling strategy including snowball sampling. We conducted semi-structured interviews focusing on participants' previous work and job search experience, their lifestyle and health, the social support they considered necessary, their future job-seeking plans, and their demographic characteristics. Using thematic analysis, we identified four key themes from the interview data: stress relief, re-energization for future work, new job skills acquisition, and lifestyle change. The findings indicate that unemployment is sometimes experienced as more beneficial than employment. This might be because of the poor working environment in Japan, the financial support participants received, and the experience of short-term unemployment. The findings suggest that intervention is necessary to help young adults in Japan find high-quality jobs and that we must promote fair employment and decent working conditions for them.

Key words: Japan, Unemployment, Young adult, Mental health, Work-related stress, Career development, Social exclusion, Social constructionism

Introduction

Work is an important aspect of daily life and personal development. It affords not only financial security, but also personal well-being and a meaningful life^{1, 2}. However, neoliberalism, market fundamentalism, and the recent global economic recession have meant that work environments have changed, and unemployment and its related problems, especially for young people, are now social concerns worldwide^{3, 4}.

In Japan, the unemployment rate in 2012 for young adults aged 15 to 34 was slightly higher than for all other groups (6.3% and 4.3%, respectively)⁵. Young people with less education are more likely to lose a job than those with more education^{5, 6}. The unemployment rate in Japan is relatively lower than the average unemployment rate of Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries (7.9% in 2012)⁷. Jackson and Warr argue that unemployed people's levels of distress are higher in circumstances where prevailing levels of unemployment are lower because unemployment is more stigmatized in such settings⁸. While the unemployment rate is relatively low in Japan, the ratio of non-regular workers to overall workers is relatively high, and has been increasing recent-

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ly. In 1985, the ratios of non-regular workers aged 15 to 24 and those aged 25 to 34 were 6.7% and 9.8% respectively, but the ratios increased in 2010 to 31.5% and 25.5%, respectively⁹⁾. Non-regular work causes several problems, such as insecure employment, low wages, little chance for career development, and an inadequate safety net¹⁰⁾. This trend was initially interpreted by Japanese media and researchers as an indication of changes in young adults' attitudes toward working; for example, lower motivation for work or changing work preferences¹¹⁾. However, in recent years, the cause of the increase in non-regular work has been attributed to changes in social structure rather than to young people's attitudes¹⁰⁻¹²⁾. Although some young people choose non-regular work, there is now a social concern about young people who unwillingly become non-regular workers. This problem is more serious for men: 53.7% of male workers aged 25 to 29 are now non-regular workers because they cannot find regular employment⁹⁾. Moreover, there has been a bipolarization of work hours between regular and non-regular workers, with a shift in heavy workload to regular workers¹³⁾. However, some non-regular workers also overwork as low wages necessitate long working hours¹³⁾. Because of the difficulty of finding secure employment, many young people experience financial instability and find it difficult to live their own lives^{11, 12)}. They have no choice but to live with their family or a partner for financial support. Furthermore, young people who give up the search for employment constitute a social concern in Japan. They are called NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training), which often has a negative meaning in Japan¹⁴⁾. They are not considered part of the working population and not calculated in the unemployment rate. Japanese young people are less likely to believe that long-term employment and a secure system will be guaranteed in the future. They have lost confidence in their ability to pursue a traditional life course that includes getting married and starting a family¹²⁾.

Even if individuals are employed, they tend to be exposed to stress in Japan. A 2012 government survey on the state of employees' health in Japan reported that 60.9% of workers experienced some stress from their occupational life or work¹⁵⁾. Analysis of the sources of stress revealed that 41.3% of workers experienced stress related to personal relationships at work, 33.1% experienced stress related to job quality, and 30.3% experienced stress related to workload. Additionally, the number of claims for workers' accident compensation for mental disorders in 2013 was 1409¹⁶⁾, which is the highest number of claims for mental disorders ever reported. Of these claims, 20 were

from workers in their teens, 277 were from workers in their twenties, and 428 were from those in their thirties; more than 50% of the claims were from people in their teens to their thirties. As younger workers usually have greater physical strength and energy than older workers, these figures are sobering. Indeed, this substantial number of claims might even underestimate the problems experienced by young workers, because young people are less likely to know how to claim workers' accident compensation or more likely not to claim it because of a lack of evidence⁶⁾.

There are several types of resources and interventions to support unemployed young people in Japan. National interventions for unemployed young people tend to focus on enhancing individual attitudes and skills and increasing their chances of finding employment; for example, they focus on training in basic job skills, career counseling and guidance on how to search for a job, write a résumé, or prepare for job interviews^{10, 17)}. Additionally, Japan has an unemployment insurance system, although there are several limitations regarding benefit period and recipient qualification¹⁰⁾. For this reason, about 77% of unemployed people did not receive unemployment benefits in 2006¹⁸⁾. Figures also show that over three-quarters of people less than 30-yr-old who received unemployment insurance did not receive unemployment benefits for more than 90 d in 2009 and 2010⁶⁾. Among people less than 35-yr-old, 50% experienced unemployment for over six months and 35% experienced unemployment for over one year in 2012⁵⁾. This suggests that the Japanese unemployment insurance system might not adequately support unemployed young people^{6, 10)}.

Unemployment influences individuals in several ways. Recent studies indicate that unemployment tends to have a negative impact on individual health and health-related behavior. Compared with working people, unemployed people tend to experience depression^{19, 20)} and lower psychological and physical well-being²¹⁾. Unemployed people are more likely than working people to smoke, drink excessively, and use psychoactive drugs^{22, 23)}. For young adults, mental health should be of greater concern than physical health because mental health problems in early adulthood can hamper psychological, social, academic, and career development²⁴⁾. Furthermore, unemployment is associated with suicide²⁵⁾, which is the leading cause of death among people in their twenties and thirties^{26, 27)}. In Japan, the youth suicide rate associated with work-related problems such as unemployment, job search fatigue, and anxiety at work has been increasing²⁸⁾. Therefore, it is

important to consider the mental health of unemployed young adults in Japan.

Several theories of unemployment mention its impact on mental health. For instance, Jahoda's latent deprivation model²⁹⁾ proposes that employment provides manifest benefits, such as income, and latent benefits, such as time structure, social contact, sharing of common goals, status, and activity. While unemployed, individuals are deprived of these benefits and, as a result, experience lower psychological health. Warr's vitamin model³⁰⁾ proposes nine different categories of experience that unemployed people may find inaccessible. These categories are physical security, valued social position, availability of money, externally generated goals, variety, environmental predictability, control, interpersonal contact, and opportunity for skill use. He argued that just as vitamins are necessary for physical health, even minor deprivation of these experiences leads to intense adverse effects on mental health³⁰⁾.

Although the previous theories and studies provide insight into the mental health of unemployed young adults, they have several limitations. For example, most previous studies consider unemployment as just a demographic characteristic and do not seek a deeper understanding of young people's unemployment experience^{20, 25)}. A few studies suggest that voluntary and involuntary job loss have different effects on mental health status. One study showed that the mental health status of people who were involuntarily unemployed was worse than that of people who were voluntarily unemployed³¹⁾. Another previous study suggested that people who had predicted that they would be unemployed in the future were better prepared to cope with unemployment, while people who unexpectedly lost their jobs might have spent more energy and resources on overcoming the initial shock of job loss³²⁾. However, these studies have not explored the experiences of unemployed young people in any depth^{20, 21, 25)}. Additionally, previous studies have largely considered mental health as merely the absence of a mental disorder or symptoms and have assessed it quantitatively^{20, 25)}. Quantitative research reflects a positivist perspective. As it is modeled on the natural sciences, the positivist approach relies on standardized and repeatable methods that test pre-existing hypotheses. This perspective attempts to remove or prevent interpretation from influencing the research process in order to ensure objectivity^{33–35)}. However, mental health is not just the lack of a mental disorder, but rather a state of well-being in which an individual can realize their own potential, cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and contribute to

their community²⁷⁾. Mental health refers to an individual's emotional and mental well-being, their ability to function in society, and their capacity to meet the demands of day-to-day life²⁵⁾. Thus, mental health should be understood from a more subjective perspective, within the context of an individual's personal experience.

A few studies have focused on the subjective experience of unemployment^{32, 36)}, but these have featured older adult participants. There is a lack of in-depth research on the subjective experience and mental health of unemployed young people. Most previous quantitative studies on the relation between mental health and unemployment do not conclude that the mental health of young adults is worse than that of other age groups; middle-aged individuals in particular experience more financial strains and role pressures to support their family²⁰⁾. However, unemployment can affect the lives and mental health of young adults. Young adulthood is an important and special stage in a lifespan that involves a separation from childhood family, identity formation, major decision making about education and career, and parenthood^{26, 37, 38)}. Previous research indicates that, because of a lack of experience, young adults cannot manage unemployment as well as middle-aged people³⁹⁾. Regardless of whether or not young people's mental health is better than that of middle-aged people, it is important to investigate and understand the specific mental health issues of young people so that we can consider appropriate interventions for them.

Almost all previous studies on unemployment and mental health have been carried out in Western societies^{20, 25, 32, 36)}. In Japan, studies on unemployment tend to be conducted from an economic perspective and focus on middle-aged individuals⁴⁰⁾. Thus, a review of the literature provides little information about the mental health of young adults in Japan. The meaning of experience and mental health can be considered from a cultural perspective²⁷⁾. Cultural differences influence the effect of unemployment on mental health²⁰⁾. Western societies are generally characterized by individualistic cultures, while Japan is considered a more collectivist culture. The Japanese working environment has been historically influenced by Confucianism and has featured distinctive systems, such as lifetime employment and ranking by seniority¹²⁾. Because Japanese workers were protected by stable employment, the development of public assistance was not necessary¹²⁾. However, the Japanese work environment has recently become much more individualistic and has introduced performance-related pay¹²⁾. This contemporary, distinctive Japanese culture might influence the unemploy-

ment experience of young people.

The present study explored the subjective experiences of becoming unemployed and the mental health of unemployed young adults in Japan. We had two research questions: “How do Japanese unemployed young adults describe their experiences of becoming unemployed?” and “How do the experiences influence their mental health in the recent Japanese sociocultural context?” Because we sought a more in-depth understanding of subjective experience, we used a qualitative method, which can provide deeper insights into a research area^{33, 34}. To address the limitations of previous studies, we used the theoretical framework of social constructionism to inform and underpin this research^{33, 34, 41}. This framework informs most qualitative research³³. We drew upon a broad interpretation of social constructionism, which emphasizes the sociocultural context and assumes that our understanding and perceptions of the world are shaped by cultural and social constructs³³. Specifically, the present study adopted a social constructionist approach to explore the subjective experiences of unemployed young adults and the relation of such experiences to mental health within the current Japanese sociocultural context.

Methods

Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted to collect qualitative data on unemployment experiences. We chose this method because it can examine the subjective meaning of a participant’s experience, which cannot be observed directly from the outside³³. Additionally, we chose individual interviews instead of group interviews because unemployed people rarely belong to organizations and are likely to be too busy with job searches to have time to attend a group, factors that make it difficult to convene group interviews with unemployed people. Additionally, the experience of unemployment may lead some individuals to feel sensitive and not want to share their experiences with other focus group members.

Before we conducted the study, we sought to identify and manage our own bias about the mental health issues and social implications of unemployment among youth in Japan through the method of bracketing⁴². Our respective backgrounds are as follows. The first author (AK) is a clinical psychologist, vocational counselor, and psychiatric social worker, and has experience of counseling young adults and job seekers who might have mental illness. The second author (TU) is a psychiatrist, industrial physician, and professor who lectures in psychiatry at the

university. Based on our experiences, literature reviews, and the abovementioned definition of mental health^{25, 27}, we assumed that the experience of unemployment might be detrimental for mental health. AK’s background and occupational experiences influenced our method of conducting the interviews; our aim was for interviews to be more like counseling sessions than research interviews. To minimize possible bias, we involved other researchers with considerable experience of qualitative analysis (but not necessarily knowledge and occupational experience of unemployed young adults’ mental health) during the data analysis process. Additionally, before conducting the interviews, AK conducted several training role-play interviews with a graduate student and a researcher who had unemployment experience. The role play was supervised by the researcher experienced in qualitative research. Our occupational backgrounds and professional training helped us to understand the subjective meaning of individuals’ stories.

Setting and participants

The setting was a large city in the northern region of Japan where the unemployment rate for young people was higher than the Japanese average during the study period (6.3% and 4.3%, respectively)⁵. The ratio of job openings to applications in this area was lower than that of other areas in Japan during the study period (0.59 and 0.80, respectively)⁴³.

To select the study field, we first contacted staff in the prefectural office, city hall, and public employment security office. In each institution, we explained the aim of the study and collected information on possible fields to recruit unemployed young people as study participants. We also researched possible fields using the Internet. Among these, one private company and two institutions agreed to cooperate with the study. All three institutions provide slightly different career exploration and job search services for job seekers. The private company provides mainly job offer information, career counseling services, career guidance, and joint company information sessions for job seekers of all ages. One public institution supports only young job seekers and offers help with finding employment, such as career counseling and career development seminars. The other public institution supports not only active young job seekers but also young people who want to work but have a history of social withdrawal. This institution provides such people with career counseling and guidance, job search seminars, and activities such as lunch meetings and physical programs to communicate

with other users.

We collected these data from October 2012 to January 2013. We selected participants by using a purposive sampling strategy, including snowball sampling to expand the number of participants. The following selection criteria were used: participants were to be at least 18-yr-old but no older than 34 yr, unemployed, looking for a job, a non-student, and with some work experience. Staff in each of the settings distributed flyers about the study to unemployed young adults; interested individuals contacted us to participate. We continued to collect data until little new data emerged³⁵. In total, 25 unemployed Japanese job seekers (15 females) participated in this study.

Procedure

Participants first received a verbal explanation of the study purpose, recording, and presentation of the results and signed an informed consent form. Then, one-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant (mean interview time, 77 min; range, 41–151 min). The interviews were carried out in a private room in one of the participating institutions or at the university. All interviews were conducted using an interview guide developed as suggested by Patton³³; this referred to the literature review and was revised after pilot interviews with four unemployed young adults under supervision by the researcher experienced in qualitative research. The interview guide provided a framework within which an interviewer could develop questions and make decisions about what information to pursue in greater depth³³. The guide consisted of the following topics: previous work and job search experience, lifestyle and health, social support (as considered necessary by the participant), future job search plans, and demographic characteristics. Examples of questions were “What was your previous work like for you?”; “What is your current job search activity like for you?”; “How is your current life during unemployment?”; “What kind of social support do you consider necessary?”; and “What are your future plans to find a job that you like?” At the end of the interview, the participant was given a chance to discuss any other issues. During the interviews, the interviewer wrote memos to aid recall of key words and to note their observations of the participants. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Ethical approval for this research was obtained from the Ethical Review Committee of the Hokkaido University Graduate School of Medicine.

Data analysis

We analyzed data using thematic analysis⁴⁴. We chose this method because it can identify, analyze, and report patterns or themes within data and is suitable for examining the meaning of subjective experience. Thematic analysis is a flexible method that is compatible with the assumptions of a social constructionist approach⁴⁴. Thus, we felt that the characteristics of this type of analysis suited the study’s aims and research questions.

We analyzed the data as follows: First, we read and re-read the transcribed interviews, and recorded initial ideas. Second, we coded interesting features of the data independently by writing notes on the transcript. Then we discussed and extracted data that were related to the research questions. We grouped the different codes into potential themes. Third, we checked whether the themes worked, and we refined them by reviewing the entire data set, the codes, and the memos the interviewer wrote during the interviews. We then defined and named the themes. We discussed any differing ideas on data analysis until we agreed with one another. The first author (AK) mainly performed the data coding, extracted data, grouped the themes, and checked the findings under supervision of an expert. AK was trained in qualitative analysis at university and graduate school. The second author (TU) mainly checked and discussed the findings and interpretation of the themes and ideas related to mental health during the data analysis process. To ensure the trustworthiness of the process, the qualitative research expert supervised our analysis. These analysis steps constituted a recursive rather than a linear process. We held a research meeting to discuss and check the findings. The members of the meeting included two researchers who had considerable experience in qualitative analysis and the authors of the present study (AK, TU). Based on the discussion, we reviewed and refined some of the themes.

Results

Characteristics of participants

Participant background information is presented in Table 1. The median age of the participants was 27 yr, and the range was 19 to 34 yr. The median duration of unemployment was 3.5 months, and the range was 3 d to 24 months. Seventeen participants had left their jobs voluntarily; six participants had previously been regular workers and nineteen participants had previously been non-regular workers; eight participants had left their jobs involuntarily, all of whom had been employed in non-reg-

Table 1. Sociodemographic profiles of participants

Participant	Age	Gender	Education completed	Marital status	Type of unemployment	Unemployment duration (months)
1	26	Female	High school diploma	Single	Voluntary	6.0
2	33	Female	Technical school	Divorced	Voluntary	4.0
3	28	Male	Bachelor's degree	Single	Involuntary	1.5
4	23	Male	Technical school	Single	Involuntary	7.0
5	26	Male	Technical school	Single	Involuntary	1.0
6	24	Male	Bachelor's degree	Single	Involuntary	1.0
7	33	Male	High school diploma	Single	Involuntary	<1.0
8	34	Male	Bachelor's degree	Single	Voluntary	6.5
9	27	Male	High school diploma	Single	Voluntary	2.0
10	34	Female	Technical school	Single	Voluntary	4.0
11	27	Male	Bachelor's degree	Single	Voluntary	1.0
12	31	Female	High school diploma	Divorced	Voluntary	3.0
13	27	Female	Two-year college	Married	Voluntary	7.0
14	25	Female	High school diploma	Single	Voluntary	1.0
15	25	Female	Technical school	Single	Involuntary	3.0
16	33	Female	Bachelor's degree	Married	Voluntary	8.0
17	24	Female	High school diploma	Single	Voluntary	3.0
18	34	Female	Technical school	Single	Involuntary	7.0
19	33	Female	High school diploma	Single	Voluntary	6.5
20	23	Female	Technical school	Single	Voluntary	12.0
21	19	Female	High school diploma	Single	Involuntary	8.0
22	28	Female	Bachelor's degree	Single	Voluntary	5.0
23	33	Male	Technical school	Single	Voluntary	24.0
24	23	Male	Junior high school graduate	Married	Voluntary	3.5
25	23	Female	High school diploma	Single	Voluntary	3.5

ular work; twenty-three participants lived with family or a partner and two participants lived alone; eleven participants received unemployment insurance; all participants were supported financially by their family or a partner. With regard to medical history, 14 participants experienced some illness: alopecia areata, type 1 diabetes, Hashimoto's disease, allergic conjunctivitis, congenital cataract, asthma, cerebral palsy, depression, gastritis, Basedow's disease, backache, bipolar disorder, shingles, atopic dermatitis, or insomnia. Among those, seven participants had the disease during employment. Nine participants recovered from the illness or improved enough that it did not affect work, but five participants were still receiving treatment at the time of the study.

Subjective experiences of unemployment

By performing thematic analysis, we identified four key themes: stress relief, re-energizing for future work, new job skills acquisition, and lifestyle change. We identified sub-themes for the stress relief and re-energizing for future work themes. We explain each theme in detail in the following sections.

Stress relief

For some participants, unemployment was a coping strategy for release from stressful work. Participants tended to explain how stressful and frustrated they were when employed. There were several patterns of relief and types of stressors identified as sub-themes: relief from job stress, relief from stress related to working conditions, relief from stress related to personal relations in the workplace, and relief from stress related to the work-life balance, which was mentioned only by female participants. Each sub-theme is described and explained in the following sections.

Unemployment was experienced as a process of release from job stress. For example, participant 8 explained why he gave up his career as a systems engineer:

I experienced more stress than fun when I was working. I often had thoughts of killing myself. Seven years after I entered the company, my ability reached a limit. I could not use difficult programming languages anymore. So I talked with my boss, and then I decided to resign.

Similarly, participant 20 experienced unemployment as a release from job stresses. She had worked part-time at a call center after she graduated from a technical school. Because she found the job so stressful, she became depressed and resigned. She explained the situation at that time:

I had been working at a call center for 3 months. One day, I fainted at work and I stopped working and went back home. Since then, my hands have trembled when I answer the phone. I could not control the tremor. So I went to a doctor. The doctor told me that I suffered from moderate depression. I asked the doctor what I should do. He said, "You cannot recover from the depression without removing the stressor." Because of that, a few days later, I resigned from my job.

Another unemployed woman, participant 22, lost her job as a sales clerk at a convenience store when the store closed. She had stayed in her job at the store for approximately 5 yr simply from force of habit. The job was not very enjoyable, and she was tired of it. She had a slight desire to find a new job because she wanted to be more involved with customers, but she had not yet been able to plan a specific future career or find an opportune time to resign from work. When she heard she would lose her job, she felt a little "surprised" but also felt relieved. She said,

When I was working, I wanted to change my job. But I did not know what I wanted to do, and I could not quit my job. So, while I wanted to quit my job, I continued to work. Then the store closed and I felt it was good timing to resign. I could quit my job with a reason.

Unemployment was also experienced as a process of release from insecure working conditions. Participant 2 experienced several part-time jobs after she divorced. She no longer had a partner who supported her and realized that living alone was difficult. Gradually, she became unsatisfied with her insecure job. She said,

I had worked part-time for a long time. I realized this working condition was insecure. I am already over thirty years old. Soon, I will reach the age when I will be applying for jobs that require younger staff than me. I want to work full-time and make more money.

Because of this, this participant left her job. For her, unemployment meant a release from insecure working conditions. Participant 19 also experienced unemploy-

ment as a process of release from stress related to working conditions. She was a non-regular sales employee at a confectioner's shop. Although she had to work as hard as the regular workers, her salary was lower than regular workers' and had gradually decreased. She was not satisfied with her working conditions. Therefore, she resigned from her job and was released from the stress of poor working conditions.

Unemployment was also experienced as the process of release from stress associated with human relationships in the workplace, especially relationships with the boss. For example, participant 1 had worked as an office clerk for about 7 yr. She felt she could not respect her boss very much and had a very stressful relationship with him. She suffered from alopecia areata when she was working with him. She said,

I did not like my boss very much. I could not get along with him; it was so stressful that I resigned. I could not respect the boss very much because he spoke ill of others. He especially spoke ill of others' appearances. I was not abused by my boss directly, but he often abused other coworkers by using bad words and phrases like "fatty," "baldness," or "fall into a river." It was so unpleasant to hear such words. He did not know my job very well, but he scolded me for what I did. That made me unhappy. Also, he was a moody person. When his mood was good, he was smiling. However, when his mood was bad, he was easily irritated even by things that he was not usually angry at, and he even said "Quit your job." I could not tolerate that, and I resigned.

This participant explained that she felt relieved to resign from her job. Similarly, participant 24 who worked at a real estate company reported,

My boss embezzled from our company. Also, he was a moody person and often said unreasonable things to us. I did not want to work with such a boss, and I resigned from work.

This sub-theme of stress relief was also identified in the accounts of participants who had left a job involuntarily. Participant 7 was dismissed because the business conditions of his office had deteriorated. His coworkers informed him that he was about to be dismissed; he felt a little shocked but accepted the situation. He expressed his feelings by saying, "There is nothing that can be done." He recalled that, "continuing with the job would not have

allowed me to grow.” He complained that his boss did not work very hard and that any small mistake he (participant 7) made was noticed by others. These factors made him feel stressed and unemployment released him from that stress.

Unemployment was also experienced as stress relief related to the work-life balance, but only by female participants. For example, participant 14 worked as a telephone operator at a call center. She resigned because she could not commit herself simultaneously to her job and to her hobby, sewing. It was so stressful for her that she decided to resign and concentrate on sewing. Participant 13, who was a married woman, worked as a childcare worker. She also experienced stress related to the work-life balance. She said,

I had a lot of things to do, and I was so stressed, and continued to be stressed even after I returned home. I thought this situation was not good for my life and my family. So I quit my job, and I am looking for a new job that will offer a better work-life balance.

Re-energizing for future work

Participants experienced unemployment as an opportunity to re-energize themselves for future work. This key theme contains two sub-themes: re-energizing by resting and re-energizing by spending free time on personal interests. The latter sub-theme was identified only in female participants’ data. We explain each sub-theme in the following sections.

Participants experienced unemployment as an opportunity to re-energize themselves by resting. Some participants had been employed in difficult, stressful work. In such cases, unemployment provided an opportunity to rest and recharge. Participant 20 left her job because she was so stressed by it that she suffered from depression, as previously described. She took a break and gradually recovered from the depression. Likewise, participant 19 remarked,

This was my first experience of unemployment. This was a chance for me to have some free time, so I wanted to take a short break.

Participants also experienced unemployment as an opportunity to recharge by spending free time on personal interests, but this was only the case for female participants. For instance, participant 15 liked dancing and was taking dancing lessons daily while she was unemployed, which she could not do while working. Participant 16 went

abroad for a week with her sister after she left her job. When she was working, she was too busy to take a vacation, but she could enjoy her time while unemployed by traveling abroad. Moreover, participant 22 said, “I wanted to spend time for myself for about a month. So I went traveling.” During the interviews, participants reported that they did not have enough free time and rest when they were employed; this was particularly the case for regular workers.

Acquiring skills for a new job

Almost all participants felt that they did not have the appropriate skills to find a new job and they tried to acquire them. For instance, participant 8 remarked, “I am studying English, and will try to take the TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication) test.” He wished to work abroad and was preparing for that prospect. Participant 11 said, “I am studying hard to pass the IT Passport Examination.” He wanted to be a systems engineer and thought that he would increase his chances of a job by passing the exam. Participant 5 wanted to work in social work and acquire relevant skills. He said, “I want to try for a job training at a nursing home.” The participants felt that finding employment was very difficult; therefore, they felt they had to make an effort to get a desirable job. For example, participant 4 felt that job search activities were very hard because he could not obtain a desirable job offer and despite applying for jobs, he had not been hired. For this reason, in relation to the social context, he said, “I have to make much more effort (to acquire skills for a desirable job) than other people.”

Change in lifestyle

Unemployment changed the lifestyle of young adults in Japan. This change was influenced by an increase in free time, change in activity, and loss of income rather than by anxiety or shock owing to unemployment. This lifestyle change was characterized by both positive and negative aspects. For instance, participants mentioned that they started to live a well-regulated life. Participant 11 described a change in his eating habits:

Eating habits...were maybe improved. When I had a job, I skipped breakfast and went to work because I was too busy. But now, I have enough time to have a meal three times a day.

Another unemployed young adult, participant 2, stated that she chose to ride a bicycle more often, even though she

had a car, because the fuel for the car was expensive. As a result, she exercised more than before. These are examples of positive lifestyle changes during unemployment.

However, some lifestyle changes were negative. For instance, participant 11 remarked,

Maybe...I think I am smoking more often than before. When I was working, I did not have enough time to smoke. But I can smoke whenever I want now.

Similarly, participant 1 said that she could not sleep well while unemployed. She slept better when she was working because she worked so hard that she was tired. While unemployed, she was less exhausted and believed this was why she could not sleep well.

Discussion

The present study focused on the subjective experiences of becoming unemployed, exploring the meaning of this experience in relation to the mental health and work-related concerns of unemployed young adults in Japan, and highlighting the complexity of unemployment in the current Japanese sociocultural context. In the present study, young people reported stress related to their job, working conditions, personal relations in the workplace, and the work-life balance. In this context, unemployed young people experienced unemployment as a release from stress, and they used this time to recharge their energy and attempt to acquire skills for new jobs. These experiences of becoming unemployed improved the mental health of young Japanese people and led to changes in lifestyle. Although positive lifestyle changes might be expected to promote mental health, negative lifestyle changes are likely to lead to poorer mental health. The data indicate that the state of mental health at work had an important impact on mental health during unemployment. That is, the findings suggest that the impact of unemployment on mental health depends on an individual's previous mental health at work, and their emotional reaction to the prospect of unemployment. In the following sections, we discuss the study findings and limitations and their implications for future research.

Our findings revealed that Japanese, unemployed, young people described the unemployment experience as a release from stress. This finding is in contrast to previous quantitative research^{20, 21, 25)} that suggests that unemployment degrades mental health. However, some previous studies have described a similar sense of freedom

that may be experienced upon job loss^{32, 36)} and suggest that this sense of freedom is dependent on participants having access to financial resources. The participants in the present study were supported financially and their survival needs were met, which might explain why they experienced a sense of relief while unemployed. However, there are some differences between the findings of previous studies^{32, 36)} conducted in Western societies and those of the current study. While previous studies^{32, 36)} reported that proactive coping strategies, such as reframing to overcome unemployment, resulted in a sense of freedom, the current study revealed that becoming unemployed was experienced as a coping strategy for release from stressful work, resulting in stress relief. That is, relief and a sense of freedom emerged through somewhat different mechanisms. The feelings and experiences of the participants in the present study were more related to their mental health status during their previous employment.

Our results also indicated that Japanese young people described unemployment as re-energizing them for future work. Unemployment permitted them an opportunity to rest and recharge. As previous studies and surveys suggest^{10, 13, 15, 16)}, the current Japanese working environment is characterized by problems such as heavy workloads and insecure employment; participants described the fatigue, stress, and frustration they felt during work. This might exhaust young workers and prevent them from having sufficient opportunity to rest and re-energize; this explains why they might feel that a period of unemployment is a good time to recharge their energy.

Participants also described unemployment as an opportunity to acquire skills for a new job. A period of unemployment can be a good opportunity for Japanese young adults to reconsider their career and improve their skills, and may facilitate personal growth. Previous studies^{32, 36)} have suggested that some participants view their job loss as an opportunity for professional or personal growth. However, the participants in the present study seemed more focused on improving their skills than those of previous studies^{32, 36)}. One reason might be that the participants in previous studies^{32, 36)} were older and were more likely to have professional careers; therefore, they might not need to improve their skills, unlike participants in the present study, who were younger and relatively unskilled. Additionally, this finding reflects the difficulty of finding secure employment in Japan and the recent changes in Japanese working environments. The study site was an area of low employment, and participants described the difficulty of finding employment during the interviews.

Moreover, companies in Japan do not currently tend to support and train young employees because of cost reductions; in particular, non-regular workers cannot improve their skills during employment¹⁰⁾. Thus, young adults have to acquire skills for a new job by themselves and a period of unemployment might be a precious opportunity to improve their skills for future work.

Furthermore, we revealed that unemployed young people experienced lifestyle changes, such as an increase in free time, which can impact mental health positively despite the loss of income. Participants had time to take care of their health during unemployment, and although they lost their income, they were able to maintain a healthy lifestyle. One possible reason for this might be financial support by their family or a partner. This prevented them from becoming excessively poor, which is a social determinant of health⁴⁵⁾, and consequently damaging their mental health substantially. We also found that participants experienced negative lifestyle changes related to an increase in free time and decrease in activity because of unemployment. These findings support the latent deprivation model²⁹⁾, which proposes that loss of latent benefits, such as time structure and activity, degrades psychological health.

Our findings indicate gender differences in participant experiences. Only female participants described their experiences as a release from stress related to the work-life balance and as an opportunity to re-energize for future work by spending free time on personal interests. Japanese society still expects women to undertake housekeeping and childcare as part of their gender role. This might be difficult for women who work, leading to feelings of stress in the workplace. In contrast, men in Japan are expected to earn enough money to support their family. Because of this, men may experience more stigma and social pressure to find secure employment than women⁴⁰⁾ and may be unable to afford to devote themselves to personal interests during unemployment. This gender difference in attitudes to unemployment emerged from the data and was not an original focus of the research. Therefore, we were unable to explore it in further depth in this study. In qualitative research, the design of a study evolves throughout the data collection process, and unanticipated themes can often emerge. Further research is needed to fully investigate the influence of gender on unemployment experiences.

This social constructionist research indicates that in the current Japanese sociocultural context, unemployment can sometimes be a better, more positive experience than employment with respect to the mental health of young adults in Japan. Our findings show that the experiences of be-

coming unemployed can function as a coping strategy that enables stress relief during employment, and in some cases permits rest, personal growth, and an improved lifestyle, all of which benefit mental health. The present study also revealed that even young people who were involuntarily unemployed experienced release from stress and did not regret losing a previous job. This may be because all the participants who were involuntarily unemployed had been employed in non-regular work and were able to predict the possibility of future unemployment. Therefore, their mental health while unemployed was no worse than when at work³²⁾. These paradoxical findings could be explained by social construction theory³³⁾, which assumes that all individual subjective experience is socially constructed and is meaningful only within that context. The context for the young participants in this study was the current poor Japanese working environment, which might negatively affect their mental health. As Warr's vitamin model³⁰⁾ suggests, there are positive effects of resigning from oppressive work and negative effects of becoming employed in dissatisfying work. This suggests that in Japan, young people who are unemployed might not always experience poorer mental health than those who are employed.

This study has several limitations. First, participants were recruited via institutions that support unemployed people. The unemployed young adults who visit these institutions may be healthier and more actively seeking work compared with unemployed individuals who do not visit such institutions and withdraw from job search activity. Additionally, the participants received financial support, and they were not unemployed for long periods. Thus, the findings might not be generalizable to unemployed young adults who are not supported financially and experience long-term unemployment. Furthermore, the present study was carried out in a large Japanese city; the results might not extend to other areas of Japan and to other countries with different cultures. Another possible limitation is that this study lacks a longitudinal perspective. As most previous quantitative studies suggest^{20, 21, 25)}, long-term unemployment can often damage mental health. Long-term unemployment among young people leads to social exclusion⁴⁾. Further research examining longitudinally unemployment among young adults in Japan might provide new insights.

Despite these limitations, this study has some strengths and the findings indicate a useful framework for conducting future research and evaluating the practical implications of unemployment experience. For instance, we used a qualitative method that enables a deeper understanding

of subjective experience, thus contributing to the understanding of unemployment in young adults in Japan. Additionally, we adopted the theoretical framework of social constructionism to inform and underpin the current study. This approach helped to reveal that participants' experiences of becoming unemployed were better than their experiences of employment; these findings are somewhat paradoxical and have not been explored in detail in previous quantitative studies. Additionally, most interventions for unemployed people in Japan are aimed at reducing unemployment rates; consequently, they focus on helping people to find any job as soon as possible. However, this study suggests that those with a job are not always better off than those without. It suggests that only high quality work makes people healthier. Interventions should be designed to help unemployed young adults find high quality jobs that suit their personal needs. The results of this study could also be used to design a larger research program, although obtaining a sample size large enough to perform the essential statistical analysis is a challenge. Nevertheless, such research would improve our understanding of the mental health of unemployed young adults in Japan.

Conclusions

We have described the subjective experiences and mental health of unemployed young adults in Japan. The study findings suggest that Japanese young people experience unemployment as a meaningful experience that in some cases has a positive effect on their mental health. This might be because of the poor working environment in Japan, the difficulty of finding employment in the study setting, and participant characteristics such as the receiving of financial support and short-term duration of unemployment. Although unemployment might sometimes be a more positive experience than employment for young adults, it can have negative effects on lifestyle, and long-term unemployment is likely to damage mental health. Significant unemployment in this generation would be a great loss for the nation. We need to help young adults to find high quality jobs, and promote fair employment and decent working conditions.

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