

# How Do Older and Low-Skilled Workers Cope with Unemployment?

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Picture 1: Hong Kong is glorious and flourishing in a knowledge-driven economy.

## What are the Challenges for Older and Low-Skilled Workers in Hong Kong?

- Older and low-skilled workers aged 50+ face risks of layoffs, early retirement and long-term unemployment in a knowledge-driven economy.
- They are usually stereotyped as lacking updated job skills and there is wide spread age discrimination.
- Unemployed men tend to be more psychologically vulnerable than women, probably due to their breadwinner status in Chinese society.
- In the face of an ageing population and a shrinking labour force, Hong Kong's government helps unemployed workers aged 50+ cope with unemployment through the Employees Retraining Board's retraining programmes.



Picture 2: Unemployed older and low-skilled workers are idling in a knowledge-driven economy.

## How Do Older and Low-Skilled Workers Cope with Unemployment?

- Coping with unemployment is defined as behavioural and cognitive strategies used to manage unemployment.
- Coping strategies include problem-focused coping (retraining, job search or relocation to find new jobs) and emotion-focused coping (social support, escape, relaxation and leisure activities) to maintain well-being.
- We know little about how Hong Kong's government retraining aids the process of coping with unemployment and how demographic factors affect the coping of unemployed workers.

## Research Aims

- To explore the interrelationships between Hong Kong's government retraining, latent and manifest coping strategies and psychological well-being among unemployed older and low-skilled trainees.
- To explain how demographic factors moderate the effects of unemployment and affect coping.



Picture 3: The Employees Retraining Board offers publicly funded retraining programmes for unemployed workers to find new jobs.

## Methodology

A qualitative design was utilised. The purposive sample comprised 15 Chinese security guards (aged 50 - 63), pursuing the Employees Retraining Board's retraining programmes for re-employment.

## Results

- Respondents used both problem-focused coping (Hong Kong's government retraining) and emotion-focused coping (social support, escape, relaxation and leisure activities).
- Hong Kong's government retraining facilitated unemployed older and low-skilled trainees' coping to meet their economic and psychosocial needs, and develop their job skills for better well-being.
- Men were less likely to search for social support than women to share their emotional problems with others, but relied more on relaxation and leisure activities.
- The lower educated tended to use less leisure activities than their better educated counterparts to regulate their unemployment stress, but preferred relaxation activities.
- Following re-employment, the better educated felt more underemployed than the lower educated and continued to seek a better job.
- Following re-employment, those in former high-status occupations used higher-level self-categorisation than those in former low-status occupations as a way to escape from their low-status job.
- To save face, respondents tended to be self-reliant through re-employment and seek financial support from family.
- The results of educational and occupational differences have to be interpreted with caution due to the small sample size.



Picture 4: Following retraining, older and low-skilled workers are enjoying various job tasks.

## Contributions and Implications of the Research

- This research combines three specific theoretical frameworks – latent deprivation model, agency theory and vitamin model – and aims to better understand the relationships between Hong Kong's government retraining and well-being. Features from these three frameworks were found to be related to well-being.
- Demographic factors (age, gender, education and occupation) and cultural factors (face-saving and self-reliance) were found to moderate the effects of unemployment and affect coping.
- With a good understanding of these economic and psychosocial features for the well-being of older workers, policymakers and practitioners could design effective programmes to facilitate their coping to access the latent, manifest and environmental benefits to overcome the negative effects of unemployment and enhance well-being.