

“Not Joblessness but A Job I Dislike Scares Me”: Exploring Employment Anxiety

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ABSTRACT

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An important development task for university students is to complete their education and join the labour market. Therefore, understanding and exploring students' concerns about getting a job seems to be a noteworthy area in supporting their career development. The present study aims to explore the concerns of university students about employment. Semi-structured focus group interviews were conducted with 16 third- and fourth-year Turkish university students (8 females and 8 males) from various departments. The participants responded to questions such as what they thought about finding a job after graduation and how individual and contextual factors affected their concerns. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis in accordance with the Ecological Theory Framework and The Systems Theory Framework of career development. Consequently, employment anxiety appeared in the factors that were individual, close-circle, labor market, and systematic. Further, findings showed that participants also had concerns about underemployment as well as unemployment. In light of the findings, implications and recommendations regarding career counseling and career development were discussed.

"İşsizlikten Değil Sevmediğim Bir İşe Girmekten Korkuyorum": İstihdam Kaygısının Anlaşılması Üzerine Bir Araştırma

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Üniversite öğrencilerinin önemli bir gelişim görevi eğitimlerini tamamlayıp iş gücü piyasasına katılmalarıdır. Bu bağlamda, öğrencilerin iş bulmaya ilişkin endişelerinin anlaşılması, kariyer gelişimlerini desteklemede önemli görünmektedir. Bu çalışma, üniversite öğrencilerinin iş bulma ve istihdam edilme konusundaki endişelerini araştırmayı amaçlamaktadır. Katılımcılar üniversitelerin çeşitli bölümlerinde okuyan 3. ve 4. sınıf 16 üniversite öğrencisinden (8 kadın ve 8 erkek) oluşmaktadır. Katılımcılar ile yarı yapılandırılmış odak grup görüşmeleri yapılmıştır. Odak grup görüşmelerinde, katılımcıların mezun olduktan sonra iş bulma konusunda ne düşündükleri ve bireysel ile bağlamsal faktörlerin bu endişelerini nasıl etkilediği gibi sorular yer almıştır. Elde edilen veriler, Ekolojik Kuram ve Kariyer Gelişiminin Sistem Teorisi çerçevesinde tematik analiz kullanılarak analiz edilmiştir. Araştırma sonucunda, katılımcıların istihdam kaygısının bireysel, yakın çevresel, işgücü piyasasına ilişkin ve sistematik faktörler ile çerçeveselendiği görülmüştür. Ayrıca, bulgular katılımcıların işsizliğin yanı sıra eksik istihdam konusunda da endişeleri olduğunu göstermiştir. Bulgular ışığında, kariyer danışmanlığı ve kariyer gelişimine ilişkin çıkarımlar ve öneriler sunulmuştur.

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INTRODUCTION

Every young person faces a serious task, which is to find a suitable job and start working. During this stage, some university students struggle to find employment after completing their education (Shin, 2019; Yasar & Turgut, 2020; Yi & McMurtrey, 2013). In the 21st century's unstable, uncertain, and dynamic labor market, finding a suitable job becomes more critical for youth with the increasing competition. University seniors and recent graduates have to cope with the stress and pressure of employment. Employment-related stress can be an obstacle to young people's career development and well-being. Recent studies indicated that employment or job-seeking anxiety was related negatively to variables such as career decision-making (Zhou, 2021), life satisfaction (Shin, 2018), and self-confidence (Chen & Zeng, 2021), but it was related positively to variables such as internet addiction (Jang & Kyoung, 2013). Therefore, examining the employment concerns of young people may be important for their career development, especially in economically challenging conditions.

The COVID-19 Pandemic began with increasing unemployment rates and ended with the threat of underemployment. Although there are worldwide improvements in unemployment rates after the pandemic (OECD, 2021b), new problems for young people have begun to appear. OECD (2021a) points out that underemployment has become a threat in the new century. Underemployment refers to working in jobs that are below an employee's skills, or with low-paid jobs or fewer hours (Friedland and Price, 2003). Therefore, young people may face issues not only of being jobless but also of finding unsuitable jobs. In this regard, there is a need for a more comprehensive redefinition of youth employment anxiety.

Research on employment anxiety is mostly examined with concerns about unemployment. Some studies defined employment anxiety by state anxiety symptoms (Belle et al., 2021; Shin, 2018). However, measures of state anxiety often exclude the personal meaning of anxiety or stress and coping mechanisms, although the process of stress includes triggers and causes (Lazarus, 1990). Embracing an approach that encompasses complex systems may be beneficial to understanding employment anxiety. Some previous studies attempted this direction and defined employment anxiety with contributing factors such as the economic conditions, the pressures of their relatives, and their individual characteristics (Eş & Durak, 2018; Demir, 2016; Lim et al., 2018; Tekin-Tayfun & Korkmaz, 2016). Although these studies included systemic factors, they did not mention systemic approaches.

Theory-based anxiety explanations can avoid ignoring important aspects of employment anxiety and can guide researchers (Lazarus, 1990). As a result, a systems approach to career development may aid in comprehending these challenges. This study adopted the Systems Theory Framework and Ecological Systems Framework to explore employment anxiety.

The Systems Theory Framework of Career Development

The systems theory framework is a meta-theoretical framework that explains career development in interrelating systems (Patton & McMahon, 2015). This approach is based on a systematic origin that considers the whole with its parts (McMahon & Patton, 2018; Patton & McMahon, 1999). Accordingly, career development comprises the individual system, social system and environmental-societal system. The individual system includes personal features such as gender, age, personality, interests, and values. The social system includes social environments such as family, workplaces, and the labor market that surround individuals. Finally, the environmental-societal system embraces macro-level factors that are socioeconomic, cultural, and geographical. McMahon and Patton (2018) suggest that working forms its own systems. Therefore, they underline that career counseling practices involve promoting research in the environment as well as self-awareness. Accordingly, we can argue that career counseling is actually a systemic intervention.

Ecological Systems Framework

Bronfenbrenner (1977) described human nature as an ecological system that includes different systems, both individual and environmental, simultaneously, and together throughout human life. These systems, such as the micro, meso, and exosystems, change, develop, and interact with one another over time, reflecting the human being's dynamic nature. Several studies in career development have used and benefited from ecological systems theory to better understand the complex processes of career development (e.g., Sun & Jang, 2021; Tao & Jiang, 2021). Ecological theory also contributed to a study to suggest that the problem of neither in education nor in employment (NEET) appears to be part of the integration of complex systems rather than being merely an individual issue (Lőrinc et al., 2020). Similarly, we consider

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that employment anxiety is to be more than an individual problem. In this regard, the exploration of the content of the systems comprising employment anxiety may contribute to the understanding of this issue. Moreover, taking a systems perspective provides to develop interventions for each system (Williams, 2016).

According to The Systems Theory Framework and Ecological Theory, employment anxiety may consist of the interaction of factors that are individual, close-circles, and society and the world. Although there is limited research on employment anxiety from a systematic perspective, components revealed in these studies can be categorized in line with the theory. In this regard, the micro level of employment anxiety may be related to skills and interests reported in previous studies, while the expectations of family and friends may compose the mesosystem (Eş & Durak, 2018; Demir, 2016; Lim vd., 2018; Pisarik et al., 2017; Tekin-Tayfun & Korkmaz, 2016). At the macro level education and business policies and economic conditions may impact employment anxiety. The COVID-19 pandemic and its effects on education and the labor market can be evaluated in this context.

The Present Study

Employment anxiety is examined narrowly in the literature, but it will appear more and more in the changing world. Further, the employment anxiety context needs to be expanded due to the current conditions. Since finding a job can be complicated due to the individual, environmental, and interdependent factors, employment anxiety may have a complex structure rather than be a single issue. Therefore, systematic perspectives can help to understand this problem and contribute to our current knowledge. Furthermore, career practitioners and professionals may benefit from this perspective in developing employability and employment interventions. We hope that more research focusing on youth employment concerns may support young people, career practitioners, and also the literature, especially in the post-pandemic new world. Therefore, we aim to explore the concerns of university students about finding a job by using a qualitative model.

Context

Turkey is among the countries, such as Japan, China, and South Korea, that apply for national exams to enter public and private universities. In 2022, approximately 3 million students took the university entrance exam, but only a third were acknowledged (OSYM, 2022). The number of students taking exams has increased every year. The process of entering university is quite challenging and stressful for many Turkish youth due to the increasing competition. On the other hand, the employment rates of university graduates have also decreased. Unemployment rates among Turkish university graduates are higher than the OECD average (OECD, 2022b). As of 2021, 29.7% of Turkish graduates were reported to be NEET (TURKSTAT, 2022). However, higher education policies in Turkey promote university graduation. The goal of "one university for every city" has been implemented since the 1980s, and this policy may lead to a form of youth unemployment called "academic inflation" (Yalçıntaş & Akkaya, 2019). While the number of university graduates are growing, job opportunities are not, making it difficult to find a job. This is especially experienced in the public sector. Many university students in Turkey choose to find a position in the public sector as it provides better conditions and job security (Bardakçı et al., 2020; Mutlu et al., 2019). Turkey is also a country that applies nationwide exams for recruitment to the public sector. The interest in the public sector increases the recruitment scores. Thus, university students begin to prepare for a new exam before they get a degree.

Young people in Turkey have faced serious competition both while entering university and after graduation. Moreover, they have limited opportunities to receive career support during higher education. However, there are efforts to increase accessibility to career services. In this regard, the Presidency of the Republic of Turkey Human Resources Office recently proposed the inclusion of a career planning course in all programs of the higher education curricula to develop the career competencies of the students. Despite these efforts, the development of career services in higher education is still preliminary in Turkey.

METHOD

The present study aims to explore university students' concerns related to their future employment status. Therefore, this study follows the qualitative research methodologies. Qualitative research has an exploratory, developing, and receptive nature rather than beginning with predetermined hypotheses (Creswell, 2015). Since this study aims to improve the existing literature on employment anxiety, qualitative research would help understand the concept's structure.

Participants

The participants of this study consist of undergraduate students in the 3rd and 4th grades from different faculties. We excluded 1st and 2nd-grade students because of career interest and awareness expected to increase with graduation. After the university entrance exam, 1st and 2nd-grade students may focus on relieving stress and adapting to university life. We used one of the purposive sampling methods, maximum variation sampling, to select the participants. The goal of the maximum variation method is to make the participants vary each other in terms of certain characteristics. Thus, it provides a means to present different perspectives on the related case (Patton, 2001). Hereby, we reached 16 undergraduate students (8 female and 8 male) from various faculties in universities in Turkey’s two big cities. One of these two universities was established recently, while the other is well-known. Table 1 shows the gender and department information of the participants.

Table 1

Gender and departments of the participants

Focus Group	Participant	Gender	Department
Focus Group 1	MA	Male	Political Science and Public Administration
	MB	Male	Psychological Counseling and Guidance
	MC	Male	Mathematics
	MD	Male	Mathematics
	ME	Male	Political Science and Public Administration
	FA	Female	Mathematics
	FB	Female	Economy
	FC	Female	Economy
	FD	Female	Economy
	FE	Female	Mechanical Engineering
	FF	Female	Healthcare Management
Focus Group 2	MF	Male	Political Science and Public Administration
	MG	Male	Political Science and Public Administration
	MH	Male	Electrical and Electronics Engineering
	FG	Female	International Trade and Logistics
	FH	Female	Theology

Researchers

The researchers are academicians working in the field of career counseling. One of the researchers serves as a professor in the Department of Guidance and Psychological Counseling. Furthermore, he has also published non-academic publications on education and employment politics in Turkey. Another of the researchers is a PhD candidate in the same department and works as a research assistant. She is familiar with employment anxiety as she started her job recently and about two years after graduation. Therefore, she received supervision from other researchers so that her own experiences were not reflected in the current study. Finally, the last researcher has a job in the university's career center as a career counselor, so he actively deals with the career concerns of students. He is also a PhD candidate in the same department. We negotiated and assessed ourselves jointly to minimize the influence of personal and professional experiences on the study. Furthermore, we believe that the guidance of a theory rooted in strong foundations to interpret the findings might also help reduce possible biases.

Procedure

The ethics committee approved that this study is in accordance with ethical standards (Selcuk University, Faculty of Education Ethics Committee: 22.08.2022-E.343875). Then, we announced the present study to recruit volunteer students through the faculty members and the university career center. The volunteers contacted us via telephone and e-mail, and together we determined the date of the

meeting. One of the researchers carried out focus group interviews, the first being face-to-face and the second conducted using an online interview application. We ensured that the online interview application is a reliable and frequently used tool in the field. In the spring of 2022, focus group discussions occurred. Participants replied to a total of seven questions in the focus group interviews. We prepared the questions using a systemic view. Accordingly, the questions included personal, environmental, and global employment concerns. The questions started with the participants introducing themselves and concluded with a request for any additional comments. As for the main issue, five questions were asked, for example, "What do you think about finding a job after graduation?" and "What do you think are the things in your family and social life that make you more worried about finding a job?". Each focus group interview lasted approximately one hour. During the focus group interviews, only audio was recorded; no video was captured. The interviewer then transcribed the audio and shared it with other researchers immediately. The transcripts are anonymized to ensure the privacy of the participants.

Data analysis

A researcher coded the data obtained from the face-to-face and online focus group interviews by using MAXQDA Pro 22.2 qualitative data analysis software. Other researchers reviewed and discussed all codes. As a result, all researchers agreed on the codes and themes. During the data analysis, thematic analysis stages were followed (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Firstly, the researcher carefully read the transcripts, again and again. Then, the codes were generated, the themes that were relevant to the codes were uncovered and analyzed, the themes were labeled, and the findings were summarized. The Systems Theory Framework of career development (McMahon & Patton, 2018; Patton, & McMahon, 1999) and Ecological Theory Framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) guided the process of theme formation. Consequently, the codes and themes were visualized as diagrams (Figure 1).

Trustworthiness

Similar to quantitative research, qualitative research provides evidence of its credibility in a variety of ways (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Thus, we used more than one method to ensure validity and reliability of the present study. The researchers became aware that their personal experiences could introduce bias into the study. We constantly reviewed, discussed, and reported these experiences during the study. After collecting the data, 13 out of 16 participants approved the accuracy of their expressions. The findings were detailed and accompanied by numerous quotations. Obtaining the opinions of the readers or reviewers was also one of the methods adopted to verify the validity of this research (Creswell, 2015; Creswell & Miller, 2000). Therefore, we presented this study at a national conference. This national conference is for psychological counselors from various specialities. Accordingly, we received opinions from psychological counselors working in the field and academia.

RESULTS

Focus group interviews revealed that in the initial phase of their careers, a noteworthy proportion of participants intended to work in the public sector. This was especially observed in the participants who experienced indecision. Figure 1 presents the codes and themes within the framework of ecological theory. Accordingly, employment anxiety emerged with individual, close-circle, labor market, and systematic factors.

Individual factors

The theme of individual factors consisted of codes that were skill deficiency, unsatisfactory education, person-job mismatch, low career awareness, and lack of social capital. In this regard, some participants had concerns related to their own competencies. These participants stated that they were worried about their lack of knowledge and skills that would benefit them in finding a good job. For example, FG, a female student in International Trade and Logistics, stated that her foreign language skills were not sufficient. FG says: "*This is my biggest disadvantage because my competitors are world-class. They speak two languages and even three languages.*" Further, FE, a female student in Mechanical Engineering, doubted her own leadership and communication skills. FE stated, "*I will be a manager someday, and I am afraid of being not capable of managing people.*" It is noteworthy that the skills expressed by the participants are soft skills rather than field knowledge.

According to the participants, they require skills not only to get but also to keep a job. MD, a male student in Mathematics, expressed this as follows: "*Because I am thinking about the private sector... As long as you cannot improve yourself, it doesn't matter if you go to organization X or organization Y, you cannot*

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hold on.” On the other hand, skill development can also serve as a reason for hope. A belief that any individual can find a job if he/she develops himself/herself, may give the feeling of career control. MC, the male student in Mathematics, said: *“As long as we improve ourselves, there is no such thing as being unemployed. As long as we improve ourselves, we can find a job anywhere.”*

Similar to skill deficiency, unsatisfactory education contributed to employment anxiety. Some participants were worried about courses at university concerning being more theoretical than practical. They believed this could be a problem in the labor market, which expects their employee candidates to have experience. FF, a female student in Health Management, stated that she was not satisfied with her internship due to the conditions of the pandemic and also within the course. FF said as follows: *“I did an internship, but it was not a good one. We cannot say it was very productive because it was an applied course and there was a pandemic.”* FF stated her search for experience: *“That’s why I always wanted to do internships voluntarily.”* FC, a female student in Economics, agreed with and expressed her concern as follows:

“We do not get enough practical training in our education. It would be better if there was more practice. For example, I could not be appointed to the public sector, and I want to work in the private sector. But I do not have enough information about this job. So, I will waste my time getting that information. It would be much better if I took this at school.”

Person-job mismatch also served as a trigger for employment anxiety. Some participants stated that they did not freely choose their department. In this regard, family demands or financial concerns had an impact on their career choice. FB, a female student in economics, expressed: *“My department that I did not choose willingly. ... My department is very complex. I wanted to be a teacher. ... But I still think the same way. [For this purpose] Working for paid or free makes no difference.”* FB pointed out that she wants to work at a job she really wants in the future, regardless of her department. FB was not the only person desiring a career other than his/her major. MG, a male student in Political Science and Public Administration, explained his experience as follows: *“I wanted to study physics. Like I said, there was some family pressure. Frankly, I do not want to build my career through my major. If necessary, I can retake the exam and study for a new department.”*

When discordance with the department and inadequacies in career planning skills are combined, uncertainty and lack of control may arise. A participant indicated that he got improper guidance during department choice and, therefore, he had difficulty in making plans. In this situation, he could only see his most familiar and straightforward option. In this regard, MB, a male student in Guidance and Psychological Counseling, expressed his feelings of uncertainty as follows:

“... I still do not understand how I got to this department and how I am in the fourth grade. I still do not understand what this department is. I cannot see my way. I believe the public sector is the shortest path... I do not think I have the chance to choose a job right now.”

Finally, thoughts of not having enough social networks can involve employment anxiety and also regret. FG, who believes that social networks can increase job opportunities, especially in the private sector, expressed her anxiety because she believed that she had missed an important opportunity. She explained as follows: *“Our student community is very active. If I had been there since freshman year, I might have known a lot of businesspeople. I feel so alone about this. ... Because my friends who did this started getting job offers.”*

Close-circle factors

The participants explained how their family and friends impact their anxiety about finding a job. Accordingly, family expectations, jobless friends, and social media codes emerged. Parents' aspirations for their children to have good jobs can be challenging for students in some respects. FA, a female Mathematics student, remarked that she had an underlying concern even though she did not see any obvious pressure from her family to obtain a job. FA said:

“There is a status that your families and social circle see in you. They say you can do this, you can achieve that status. But you know, you may not feel ready ... or you come across option A or option B. I am afraid of making that mistake, I am afraid of not reaching that status.”

Similarly, FH, a female student in Theology, expressed that she was afraid of disappointing her family as follows:

“I think I would be in a sticky situation ... You know, they look at you with the belief that you will climb the ladder because you go to university. When I say something to the contrary... Of course, their upset means that I am also upset.”

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There was concern about how family and other relatives would react, in the case of being jobless. In addition, FH also worried that they would compare her to peers. FH said:

“If I am not being appointed... We are all the same age; we are in the same department. It would be a curious coincidence... If they were appointed but I was not appointed, people's attitudes toward me would definitely change. I would feel down.”

MA, a male student in Political Science and Public Administration stated that his family did not interfere with him. Therefore, he does not feel any positive or negative influence from his family. On the contrary, MH, a male student in Electrical and Electronics Engineering, constantly feels the pressure to get a job and earn money not only from his family but also from his relatives and close circle. MH said this about the difference between his own values and goals and those of his family:

“There is always pressure from family. This is my second university. Because you are older, when you visit your relatives, it looks like this. They say, ‘Are you still in university?’ or ‘What are you going to do with so much training?’ In fact, they view going to university as money-making. However, I want to be a good engineer for my country.”

FE said she experiences family or close-circle pressure differently. FE expressed it as follows: *“They usually look at mechanical engineering as a male job. Whether it's my family or my social circle, they think I will not have a promising future because I am a girl.”* In this way, students had to deal with gender-based prejudices in getting jobs.

Another worrisome case was being a witness to peers or graduates who could not find a job because it set off thoughts that they would not find jobs like their friends. This may reduce students' hopes for the future. FG explained it as follows: *“Graduates do not work in very good jobs. That's why we feel this way”*. MF, a male student in Political Science and Public Administration, agreed and pointed out how upper grades' concerns are transferred to them as follows:

“All seniors feel the same ... We all have the feeling before we get our diploma that we will not be able to find a job. Because we see what happened to those before us and then this is somehow passed on to us.”

Today's youth spend most of their time on social media. Therefore, social media is now involved in their close circle. At this point, MG gave an example of how social media triggers their employment anxiety. MG said:

“We all use social media. We come across some news there. It is like a doctor [physician] quitting his job and setting up a shop abroad. And then you say to yourself, if a doctor also does this, what will I do? You despair about this.”

Labor market factors

The codes, which were 'university reputation', 'too many graduates', 'unlike job worries', and 'experience expectations' formed concerns about the labor market. In this regard, one of the issues expressed by the participants was the increase in the number of graduates. The ongoing development of new universities and increasing quotas have exacerbated this worry. Despite the high number of graduates, the limited demand for a labor force can lead to excessive competition. FF stated her concern and anger about higher education politics with the following words, *“This is what I am most concerned about. There are so many universities now. I worry that there are so many unnecessary university graduates. They also removed the barrage [university admissions criteria over a particular score]. Now anyone can enter the university.”* MA agreed and added, *“They are studying to be unemployed.”* Moreover, FH, who intends to work in the public sector, expressed her despair regarding more graduates as follows: *“Scores increase every year. Your competitors are also increasing. The number of people preparing to take the exam has increased. No matter how hard you try, sometimes that is not enough.”* Public sector recruitment in Turkey is based on an examination process. More graduates entering exams means an increase in exam scores. Therefore, students begin to prepare for the exam rather than focusing on their courses, due to employment anxiety when they become seniors.

Another concern was being able to work in a desired job or suitable conditions. Several participants specified that they were worried about working in low-paid, challenging conditions and outside of their profession. *“I do not think I would sweat finding a job. I think I would be able to find the job I desire,”* FG stated clearly. This feeling was challenging because they considered they would experience financial issues and job unsatisfactory despite all efforts to complete higher education. Their plans and hopes may result in disappointment. MH expressed his anxiety about this as follows:

“I am worried about not working in a job I want. ... I want to think and produce. That is what I want

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to do. My concern is being unable to find this kind of job and being compelled to do an ordinary engineering job.”

Regarding the matter of getting a job in the private sector, inadequate experience was one of the obstacles to finding a job according to participants. Moreover, employers’ expectations of experience led some participants to limit their options and be steered towards the public sector. MG explained:

“I am no different than a high school graduate in the private sector. The only way for me is to work in the public sector because of my department. In other words, I can only work either in the Ministry of Interior Affairs or in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. I have no choice...”

MA, on the other hand, believed that university reputation would be important in their employment. In this sense, unless they obtain a degree from a prestigious university, the only option is to be appointed to the public sector instead of the private sector. MA put it this way: *“It doesn't matter if you graduated from [University Name] or [University Name] as long as you are not in a [Prestigious University Names]. In the public sector, they don't look at your graduation”*. However, some participants believed that with enough effort, they could find good jobs in the private sector regardless of which university they attended.

Systematic factors

The current conditions in the world and the country, as well as cultural factors, are defined as systemic factors. The codes consisted of nepotism, discrimination, and uncertainty in this theme. Participants believed that nepotism is common, especially in the public sector. *“Those with a friend at court will get jobs, those without friends will be left out.”* FF said in short. MG agreed and added how nepotism and lack of experience limited his alternatives as follows:

“Actually, we have a lot of job opportunities both in the private and public sectors. But in the private sector, they want experience, and I don't have that. In the public sector, they want friends in high places, and I do not have that either. That's why I think I am going to have difficulty.”

Some female participants were worried about gender or religious discrimination in recruitment. Women in “men's” jobs like engineering suspect they will face challenges during their internship or employment. FG expressed her feelings as follows: *“It can be challenging to work as a woman when it comes to logistics, ports, and customs. Working as a woman in such enterprises can be difficult, and also being hired in such enterprises can be difficult.”* FD, a female economics student, added that she was concerned about being discriminated against due to her religion and lifestyle. FD explained her case as follows: *“If I apply for a job in the private sector, for example, to banks, I might not be preferred because of my hijab.”*

Another issue raised by participants was uncertainty. Some participants stated how hard it is to predict the future of their careers due to unstable political and economic conditions. Policies could change in a short time, and the pandemic showed that economies can easily break down. This uncertainty seemed to be the only concern of MC. He said:

“There is something long-discussed. They say the end of the private sector is near, and everyone will go into the public sector. They still say it even though it does not happen. Only that worries me. What will we do if the private sector is at an end?”

Similarly, MF was concerned about economic and political changes in the country. He described it as follows, *“There are some economic problems in the country. I am worried about the possibility that the economic problems would affect our purchasing power or budget for a job in the future or that humanitarian or legal difficulties would be experienced.”*

Finally, codes and themes were related to each other. As suggested in the ecological theory, there was an interaction between layers. For example, participants who did not gain enough experience at university worried that they would not meet the expectation of experience in the private sector when they entered the workforce. It led them to turn to the public sector, in other words, to limit their options. Similarly, the pressure of finding a job from close circle may increase the possibility that participants will work in low-paid and challenging conditions, namely undesired jobs, to find a job as soon as possible. In summary, individual, environmental, and systemic factors can be suggested to be intertwined as in the ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) and Systems Theory Framework of career development (McMahon & Patton, 2018; Patton, & McMahon, 1999). Figure 1 shows the code model formed from the systematic perspectives.

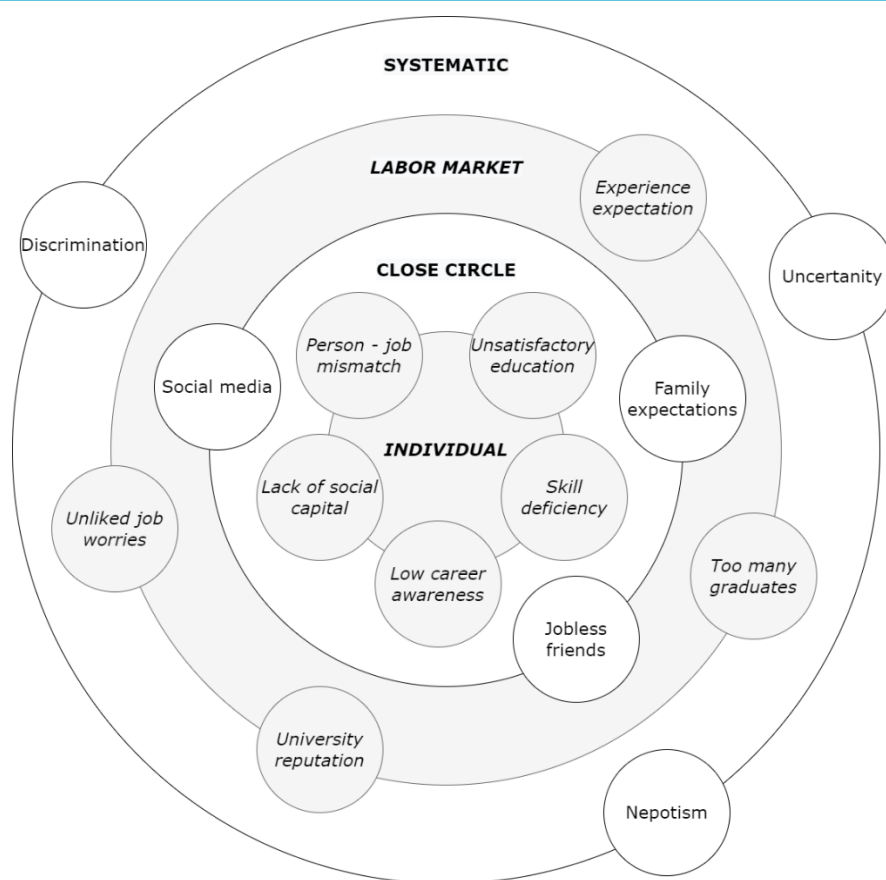


Figure 1. Code model of the present study

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION, RECOMMENDATIONS

The present study outlines employment anxiety into three themes in line with the ecological theory. The first theme, individual factors, mostly consisted of the perceptions of knowledge, skills, and university education. Previous studies reported that inadequacy in work-related skills was involved in jobless anxiety (Eş & Durak, 2018; Demir, 2016; Lim et al., 2018; Pizarik et al., 2017; Tekin-Tayfun & Korkmaz, 2016). On the other hand, the current study also expands the findings regarding individual factors. Concerns about 21st-century skills such as entrepreneurship and social networking were noteworthy in terms of their expression by the participants. Today, the labor market demands these skills because they can be used by transferring to many jobs (Rotherham & Willingham, 2010). Therefore, skill deficiencies and associated employment anxiety relate not only to technical skills or knowledge but also to transferrable skills, namely soft skills. Another contribution to the definition may be that dissatisfaction with education is involved in employment anxiety.

In the study, some participants were dissatisfied with their university education. As one participant stated, this dissatisfaction may have started with the COVID-19 pandemic. During the COVID-19 pandemic, educational institutes suddenly and unpreparedly transferred to the online world, and the quality of education was controversial. Some research suggests that distance education does not provide sufficient quality compared to face-to-face (Prestiadi et al., 2020; Robson and Mills, 2022). The decrease in the quality of education possibly affects the readiness of young people for the labor market. Accordingly, there can be a risk for young people getting more education in the future that they may not be able to work in higher-level jobs due to the quality of their education.

Findings show that people in a close circle can set off employment anxiety. Furthermore, social media was also included in this circle. In line with this, previous research defined employment anxiety as including concerns arising from interactions with family and friends (Demir, 2016; Eş & Durak, 2018; Lim et al., 2018; Tekin-Tayfun & Korkmaz, 2016). A study reported that social comparisons may feed career anxiety (Pizarik et al., 2017). In the present study, participants compared themselves with their peers. In addition,

participants also expressed their concern about being compared to others in family and relative circles. Individualism and collectivism coexist in Turkey's society. Therefore, people face social comparison inside themselves and outside, such as with family and relatives. Turkish students were worried because they were comparing themselves with others as well as being compared with their friends by relatives.

In research on employment anxiety, family impact was an economic concern (Demir, 2016; Eş & Durak, 2018; Lim et al., 2018; Tekin-Tayfun & Korkmaz, 2016). For instance, financial support from the family when unemployed was a source of anxiety. Participants simply did not want to burden their families. In this study, stigmatization and failing expectations, rather than economic conditions, were the focal points of the concerns from family members. This may be a limitation due to the sample characteristics of our study. However, disappointing the family can be as stressful as financial hardship. Therefore, this finding may expand the literature. Another noteworthy finding is that social media posts may also function as a close circle regarding employment anxiety. More research is needed into the relationship between social media and employment anxiety.

Regarding the findings on the labor market, participants expressed concern about underemployment, as expected. However, research regarding job seeking, employment or career anxiety deals with this issue limitedly. Eş and Durak (2018) mentioned underemployment narrowly in the despair dimension of job-seeking anxiety. Considering the concerns about it (OECD, 2021a), underemployment can be a part of employment anxiety.

Growing number of graduates, excess competition, and experience expectations were also included in job-seeking anxiety in other studies in line with the present study (Demir, 2016; Eş & Durak, 2018; Tekin-Tayfun & Korkmaz, 2016). Demand for higher education has increased not only in Turkey but also around the world (OECD, 2022a). Therefore, graduation from higher education has begun to be common in societies. Yi and McMurtrey (2013) discussed the potential implications of more and more people attaining a higher education degree. In this regard, employers may be challenged to find employees for low-skill jobs. On the other hand, there may be an overabundance of applicants for high-skilled positions requiring a university degree. The number of educated graduates working in high school jobs may also rise (Yi & McMurtrey, 2013). Thus, there are concerns about underemployment for the future rather than unemployment. The OECD's (2021b) cautions make sense in light of the findings.

Systematic barriers such as nepotism and discrimination are stressful events that individuals can hardly control. Accordingly, the findings support the hypothesis that the possibility of discrimination made the participants hopeless. Demir (2016) defined job-seeking anxiety with the dimension of discrimination. Yaşar and Turgut (2020) reported that the concerns about discrimination in employment were not different according to gender. However, the participants in their study were less concerned about discrimination than other factors. Gender discrimination is especially evident in women's jobs for men and men's jobs for women. Discrimination cannot, however, occur solely based on gender. According to the findings, participants had concerns about being discriminated against for their religious views. Discrimination can be based on gender, religion, sexual orientation, or any other difference. Therefore, employment anxiety can be inferred to include any form of discrimination.

In the present study, the career goal of some participants was to be appointed to the public sector, at least in the early stage of their careers, whereas for others, this was the only purpose. Previous studies supported participants' interest in the public (Bardaççı et al., 2020; Mutlu et al., 2019). Because of working conditions in the private sector and job security in the public sector, young people's purposes may be reasonable. Further, working in the public sector seems to provide young people with the time and money to pursue their aspirations, such as starting their own business and studying in the department they choose. Especially for those who cannot make decisions, the public sector can be favorable.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

The sample and focus group interviews have limitations. Focus group interviews provide richer data because of interactions within the group, whereas individual interviews can give in-depth data. Thus, if we conducted individual interviews, we would gain more in-depth knowledge from the experiences of the participants. Another limitation is the sampling of only two cities in terms of accessibility. In addition, some departments, such as medicine and fine arts, could not be represented, although we tried to reach the maximum diversity. Finally, conducting a focus group online resulted in the loss of participants. In addition, we were concerned that the interaction in online focus group interviews was more limited than in face-to-face interviews. In this case, we recommend that researchers take precautions regarding the loss of participants and interaction in online focus group interviews.

The present study aimed to explore employment anxiety. As a result, we concluded that employment anxiety includes concern about not only joblessness but also underemployment. Therefore, we recommend that future research should focus on youth employment concerns and review existing definitions. There is limited research on these concerns. However, increased concerns about underemployment indicate that more research is needed. We recommend supporting and expanding our findings with quantitative and qualitative research.

Implications for Practice

This research may have some implications. In this regard, the need for career counseling at the university level appears clear. The university career centers should provide more training and consultancy services to students, especially about the business world of the new century. Career counseling and education should focus on factors in every layer of the ecological model. For example, career services aim to increase career concern at the individual level, whereas they aim to increase career control at the systematic level. In addition, as Patton and McMahon (2015) suggest, this systemic perspective can be used in career counseling and career education practices related to employment anxiety. Students may benefit from the exploration, which increases their awareness of systematic factors affecting their employment concerns. Further, considering the concerns about more graduates, we suggest cooperation among policymakers, university administrations, and employers to produce common solutions and policies. Relations between the university and the labor market need to be strengthened.

CONCLUSION

In the present study, employment anxiety was elaborated with the Ecological Theory. Individual, close-circle, and systemic aspects claimed that employment anxiety emerged with interactions in complex systems. However, these findings cannot be claimed to generalize over the population because of the qualitative paradigm. On the other hand, we hope that this research provides a perspective for future research and draws attention to this important issue. There is limited study to examine students' employment concerns. Investigation into the concerns such as skill deficiency, under-education, undesired job, working low paid and challenging conditions is suggested within the scope of the anxiety of finding a job in future studies. In addition, we consider that ecological theory is suitable to explain employment anxiety. Therefore, we suggest studying how the intervention in different systems affects other systems and employment anxiety.

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