

Unemployed and struggling: The lack of financial help-seeking behaviour exhibited by male construction workers

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The project sought to understand the impact of unemployment on financial help-seeking behaviour. The study surveyed 158 unemployed construction workers. Six in-depth interviews were also conducted. Findings indicate that the majority of men (57 per cent) did not seek help for financial issues (from professional or non-professional sources prior to becoming unemployed). In addition, becoming unemployed *per se* did not serve as a trigger for most men to seek help and they preferred to rely on their own resources (68 per cent) (e.g. they believe that "I/we can cope"). However, unemployment did have a detrimental impact on participants' ability to cope financially and negatively affected their wellbeing.

Barriers to financial help-seeking were identified and this included shame and embarrassment, as well as lack of knowledge about professional sources. The study highlights a number of issues that predominantly men who are blue-collar workers face when negotiating financial difficulties. Recommendations include advocating for a perspective that view financial stress as a public health issue, and enhancing financial literacy at the community level.

INTRODUCTION

During the recent 2009 Global Financial Crises (GFC) many Australian households were exposed to negative financial outcomes (e.g. debt repayment problems and bankruptcy) (Laeven & Laryea 2009). The building and construction industry was also significantly affected: figures for 2009 showed that the number of people in the industry who were unemployed and seeking work doubled since 2008. Unemployment can have a significant impact on someone's financial situation. Access to relevant and timely financial information and assistance when recently unemployed can assist people to successfully manage their financial situation.

The building and construction industry is project-based and the availability of work often fluctuates during different economic cycles (and its concomitant over/under-supply of skilled labour) (MacKenzie 2008). The industry is also male dominated (i.e. homogeneous with regard to gender) and traditionally has a strong masculine orientation (MacKenzie 2008).

Masculine gender orientations have previously been identified as a factor which can hinder help-seeking in men (Smith, Braunack-Mayer & Wittert 2006). However, less is known about the perceived barriers to accessing financial information which can prevent help-seeking in *unemployed* men. This study sought to understand these barriers as well as gain an informed understanding of unemployed workers' financial behaviour, so as to develop more targeted programs.

UNEMPLOYMENT

Work significantly contributes to an individual's well-being and identity (Erikson 1982). For example, Jahoda (1982) notes that employment provides regular contact with people outside the home, a sense of identity, a shared sense of involvement in goals, and a time structure for the waking day. Research indicates that losing one's job results in a significant deterioration in emotional well-being (Cobb & Kasl 1997; Linn, Sandifer & Stein 1985), with re-entry into the job market in turn linked to significant improvements in mental health (Payne & Jones 1987; Warr & Jackson 1985).

For most individuals unemployment has immediate and ongoing financial ramifications. Financial stress is frequently linked with mental health issues, including anxiety and depression (Livingstone, Bruce, Kotnik & King 2010). Whilst unemployment has been linked to adverse outcomes, such as ill health (Janlert & Hammarstrom 2009), strained intimate relationships (Vinokur, Price & Caplan 1996), and a range of mental health symptoms (e.g. depression and anxiety (Molarius, et al. 2009)), little is known about the financial help-seeking behaviour of unemployed workers.

FINANCIAL KNOWLEDGE AND BEHAVIOUR

A decline in financial resources has been linked to a decline in personal wellbeing (Mantler, Matejcek, Mateson & Anisman 2005). In addition, due to a lack of income, unemployed individuals can be seen to be 'at financial risk'. Australian researchers, Singh and Shelly (2005b), found that people at financial risk aligned their finances with their priorities, whether that is funding their children's education, pursuing lifestyle choices, or paying their mortgage. Budgeting and setting financial priorities are important, however, Singh Shelly comment that "priorities without money management and communication skills are not sufficient". They therefore advocate a broader perspective on financial management and in particular, they encourage greater communication around socioeconomic, cultural and community factors, which might in turn support households.

Apart from employment, individual's financial behaviour is influenced by a number of factors. This includes financial attitudes, financial literacy, financial decisions, financial circumstances (e.g. income and expenditure), as well as social, cultural and psychological factors (Schagen & Lines 1996). Research has also shown that people's attitudes toward money (e.g. spending, saving, credit) are shaped by what they have experienced in their own family (Singh & Shelly 2005b).

Financial literacy can be defined as individuals' ability to make effective judgments and decisions around the management of money (Schagen & Lines 1996) within the context of their own needs and circumstances (Roy Morgan Research 2003). Financial

literacy programs are a relatively recent phenomenon and have been implemented in various settings, for example, as school-based and employer-based programs (Martin 2007). These programs generally fall in the area of prevention (i.e. optimising financial well-being), with financial counselling generally classified as post-vention (i.e. rectifying financial problems).

Much of the financial literacy education programs discuss what individuals *should* do to be financially successful – thus, they are seen as prescriptive in nature (Martin, 2007). However, in reality many households fall short of this ideal, and there is in many instances a gap between the 'ideal' and 'practice' of sound financial management (Martin 2007). Research does indicate a correlational relationship between financial knowledge and prudent financial behaviour (Courchane, Gailey & Zorn 2008), but Martin (2007) cautions that correlational relationships should not be construed as causal. For example, he notes that a plausible alternative explanation might see personal characteristics (i.e. personality) predisposing certain individuals to seek out financial education because they want to improve their financial management. Although one should not jump to causal conclusions, research in general indicates that *improved* financial literacy increases the likelihood of *improved* financial behaviour and outcomes (Courchane et al. 2008). Although financial education is of value in itself, it is also particularly useful to find that its effects permeate across a number of areas, including savings, credit use, retirement planning and homeownership (Martin 2007).

Research has identified that most Australians have basic financial literacy (Roy Morgan Research 2003), however, Worthington (2006) raises concerns about the financial knowledge of specific groups, namely young consumers, the elderly and those from low socioeconomic backgrounds. In addition, financial knowledge becomes particularly tested when individuals face financial stress, such as that caused by unemployment, and at that point sound financial behaviours and money management become particularly relevant.

FINANCIAL HELP-SEEKING

Research indicates that individuals seek help from financial counsellors when their financial problems reach a 'tipping point' and they are unable to manage on their own (Singh & Shelly 2005b). According to Singh and Shelly this is often preceded by a period of 'floundering in debt' (2005a), severe embarrassment, and a reluctance to seek help (Feeny 2005). During these phases people are very susceptible to exploitation and often seek financial help from high cost financial products (e.g. credit cards) or loan providers, for example 'payday' lenders (Livingstone, Bruce, Kotnik & King 2010). As a result people in low income brackets (or those who are unemployed) can experience exacerbated financial stress by being unable to service these high interest loans/credit (Feeny 2005).

A framework which is frequently used in the social sciences, and which specifically focuses on help-seeking behaviour, is Suchman's help-seeking framework (1966). Grable and Joo (1999; 2001) researched the financial help-seeking behaviour of employed individuals within this framework, as is it specifically allows for the inclusion of multidimensional constructs. Suchman's help-seeking framework (1966) includes symptom evaluation; determining the cause of the symptom; making a decision to seek treatment; and choosing a specific treatment.

Following this theoretical framework, Grable and Joo (1999) identified a number of demographic variables characteristic of individuals inclined to seek financial help, which included young individuals, non-homeowners, individuals who exhibit poor financial behaviours and those that experience high levels of financial stressors. However, further research (Grable & Joo 2001) identified that individual differences emerge once an individual has decided to seek help which determine whether help is sought from a professional (e.g. financial counsellor) or non-professional source (e.g. family friend). They found that individuals who seek professional financial help tend to be those who:

- exhibit higher levels of financial risk-tolerance;
- own their own home;
- have higher levels of financial satisfaction;
- exhibit better financial behaviours; and
- are on average older.

In addition, research consistently identifies gender as a determining factor in help-seeking behaviour, with men generally more reluctant than women to seek help for physical and psychological problems (White, Fawcner & Holmes 2006). Help-seeking is often difficult for men to align with their masculine gender role. For example, Smith, Braunack-Mayer and Wittert (2006) argue that stoicism and suppression of emotion are qualities often associated with patriarchal gender role socialisation, and that observance of such masculine characteristics as *superiority*, *independence*, and *self-reliance* may operate as a barrier to men accessing and using services.

More recent research (Dowling, Corney & Hoiles 2009) identified that young male workers in the construction industry who are most in need of professional financial assistance, are no more likely than other young male workers to seek help. These researchers highlight the importance of outreach initiatives to demonstrate the benefits of seeking professional help. In their study, Dowling and colleagues (2009) focused on the financial management practices of young working men. However, as noted above, less is known about the financial help-seeking behaviour of unemployed men, and area which this study aims to address.

METHOD

Participants

The sample was drawn from the organisation's redundancy fund members, who, due to unemployment, withdrew some of their funds. The study gathered data between October 2009 and February 2010 through a short survey and a more in-depth interview process.

From the 940 questionnaires handed out a total of 158 completed questionnaires were received (16.8 per cent return rate). Six follow-up interviews were also completed with the first six participants who had indicated their willingness to complete an interview on the questionnaire form. Of the seven participants contacted for an interview only one participant refused to participate. All participants in the study were unemployed at the time of data gathering and the majority were men (98.7 per cent). The mean age was 42.67 years, and ranged from 19 to 72 years ($SD = 12.60$). Participation in this project was voluntary and consent to participate was implied by return of the questionnaire to the organisation, or the signing of a consent form by interviewees.

Procedure

Both the questionnaire and the interview questions were piloted amongst the organisation's staff prior to conducting the research. Questions used in the questionnaire, and which relate to the results reported here, include:

- "In the 12 months prior to being out of work, who did you seek advice from about your personal finances? (accountant, financial counsellor, investment planner, friends, family member, work mate, websites/internet, no one, other)";
- "Since being out of work, who have you sought advice from about your personal finances? (accountant; financial counsellor; investment planner; friends; family member; work mate; websites/internet; no one; other)";
- "What might stop you from seeking professional help? (cost involved; too much paperwork; don't have time; don't know where to get help; embarrassment; I/we believe we can deal with it; other)";
- "During the past month have you been bothered by little interest or pleasure in doing things?; feeling down depressed or hopeless?";
- "How often do you have six or more drinks on one occasion (never; less than monthly; monthly; weekly; daily or almost daily)".

Previous research found that, amongst others, the length of the questionnaire (i.e. short questionnaires preferred), the provision of an incentive (e.g. prize), and the provision of stamped return envelopes, increase the odds that a higher number of questionnaires will be returned (Edwards, et al. 2002). Given the sensitivity of the topic (financial matters) and the previously recorded low response rate of men in general (Breakwell, Hammond, & Fife-Schaw 1997), a number of factors were considered with regards to questionnaire design and the data gathering strategy. Thus, questionnaires were designed to be brief, simple in style (language) and format (e.g. tick boxes). It also included a prize (plasma TV) as incentive, and a reply-paid envelope for ease of return.

Potential participants were handed a short survey by reception staff when they arrived at the organisation to fill in forms related to their account (participants either returned the completed questionnaires to the receptionist or posted it back in a reply-paid envelope). In addition, questionnaires were mailed to unemployed members who telephonically enquired about withdrawing funds (these questionnaires were mailed back in a reply-paid envelope). All participants were able to enter in a draw for a prize (plasma TV) (these competition details were separated from the questionnaire upon return to maintain participants' anonymity).

In addition to the survey data, six interviews were conducted by the researcher. Interview questions were designed by the researcher to gather in-depth information from unemployed members about how they manage their financial situation. Interviews were recorded on a digital recorder and transcribed by an assistant. These interviews were conducted at the organisation's premises and were approximately half an hour in duration.

Data analyses

The project employed a mixed methods approach with qualitative interviews utilised to elaborate on themes identified in the quantitative surveys. Descriptive statistics were used to organise the quantitative data and describe the sample. Additional quantitative data were analysed using SYSTAT, and analysis of variance (ANOVA's) were used to show variances within sample means and show variances between them (Coolican, 2005). Graphs and tables were utilised to present visual summaries of the data.

Qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis in NVIVO. In line with Braun and Clarke (2006) a theme was construed as "some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set". The thematic analyses coding process followed a three-step progression and involved developing concepts and categories to organise data into a framework of ideas; comparing data instances, cases and categories for similarities and differences; and unifying key themes (Boyatzis 1998). Participant quotes are used to illustrate themes.

RESULTS

Help-seeking for financial issues decreases when people are unemployed

At the time of the study all participants were unemployed. However, they were asked to self-report on their financial help-seeking behaviour when previously employed and compare that with when they were unemployed (Table 1). When previously employed the majority of men (57 per cent) reported that they

preferred to ask no one for help and did not make use of any professional (accountant, financial counsellor, financial planner) or non-professional sources (family, friends, work colleagues) of help. As indicated in Table 1 there was an increase from 57 per cent (when employed) to 68 per cent (when unemployed) of men not making use of professional/non-professional sources of help. From this it can be surmised that unemployment had a negative effect on whether men took the step to seeking financial help.

Barriers to seeking help for financial issues

Cultural and male gender role beliefs around money and financial management

A large portion of men ($n = 63$, 41.2 per cent) felt that they do not need to seek professional help because they are capable of managing their finances themselves. Thus, even if services were free, had limited paperwork, and they knew where to get help, they still believed that they can manage their finances themselves. This is illustrated in the following quotes:

"In my situation I don't think a financial advisor is any good for me for the simple fact that I've done a lot of thinking myself and I probably could sort it myself"

"I think they [men] prefer to work it out themselves"

Meanwhile, 15 per cent of men from the survey admitted that it is embarrassing to admit that you need help, particularly with regard to their finances. However, 5 of 6 participants in the qualitative interviews (83 per cent) self-reported that embarrassment was a barrier to them seeking help.

Table 1. Sample use of professional¹ and non-professional help²

Variables	When employed ($n = 155$)		When unemployed ($n = 149$)	
	n	per cent	n	per cent
Professional help	40	25.81	19	12.75
Non-professional help	22	14.19	23	15.44
No one	88	56.77	101	67.79
Websites/internet			2	1.34
Other	8	3.23	4	2.69

Notes: 1. Professional help: accountant, financial counsellor, investment planner 2. Non-professional help: friends, family, work colleagues

Figure 1a. Least squares means for household income and embarrassment as a barrier to seeking financial help

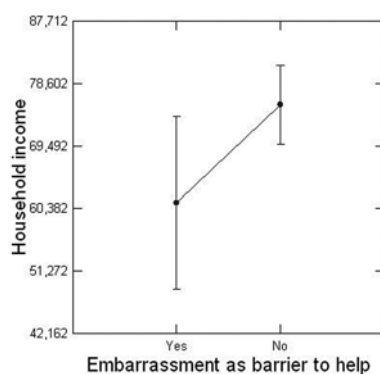
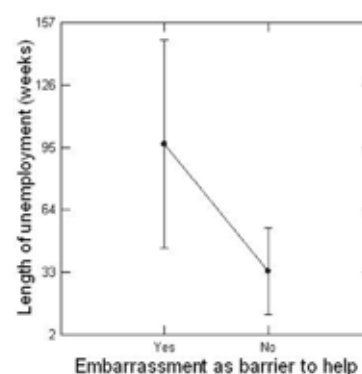


Figure 1b. Least squares means for length of unemployment and embarrassment as a barrier to seeking financial help



Research indicates that it can be particularly difficult for people to talk about finances where money issues are not discussed as a norm and are culturally viewed as people’s own private matters. In addition, many men perceive financial matters as something that they *should* be able to manage themselves as *men*. Asking for help could be perceived as a weakness and this creates role conflict for men around their masculine identity gender role. For example, some participants noted:

“Ah, pride. Yeah, yeah I mean having to ask someone for money, it’s a big thing really or asking for advice even. If its friends and family they are gonna judge you”.

“For me it’s that I don’t want no one to know my business”.

“People hate admitting to someone else that they’re in trouble and need help and also shame and embarrassment”.

An ANOVA showed that household income had a significant effect on whether men felt embarrassment was a barrier to them seeking help (see Figure 1a). Particularly for men on a lower income embarrassment was a significantly greater barrier to seeking professional help, than for men on a higher income, $F(1, 126) = 4.18, p = 0.04$.

Another ANOVA showed that length of unemployment had a significant effect on whether men felt embarrassment was a barrier to seeking help (Figure 1b). Men who had been unemployed for a longer period was more likely to cite embarrassment as a barrier to seeking help, than men who had been unemployed for a shorter period, $F(1, 138) = 4.96, p = 0.03$.

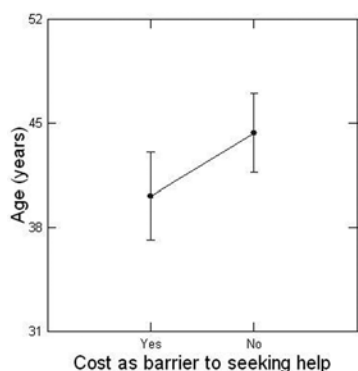
Misperceptions and lack of knowledge

The majority of participants ($n = 68, 44.7$ per cent) identified that paying for financial services would be a barrier to seeking professional financial help. Most participants did not know that financial counselling services were offered free of charge throughout Australia.

The perception that there is a charge for financial counselling services becomes particularly problematic when someone is unemployed with limited financial means. For example, one participant noted that:

“The cost of seeing a financial counsellor. Yeah, it would put me off, you can’t give something that you don’t have. I mean you are there for a reason.”

Figure 2. Least squares means for age and perceived cost as a barrier to seeking financial help



Age differences were noted between younger and older men with regard to cost being a barrier to seeking professional help (see Figure 2). An ANOVA demonstrates that the perceived cost of professional financial advice was particularly a barrier for younger men, rather than older men $F(1,150) = 4.40, p = 0.04$.

Furthermore, approximately 1 in 5 men (18 per cent) did not know where to go for help for financial matters. There seems to be some confusion among construction workers about who people should approach for help, what is involved in obtaining help and whether there are any costs associated with it. For example, one participant simply commented that:

“I don’t know where to go”

Unemployment and people’s decreased capacity to cope financially has a significant impact on well-being

Approximately a third of all participants in the sample indicated symptoms of depression. Notably this includes a loss of interest/pleasure (35.62 per cent, $n = 52$) and feeling down, depressed or hopeless (34.25 per cent, $n = 50$). ANOVA’s (Figures 3a and 3b) further indicates that household income had a significant effect on people’s experience of depressive symptoms. Thus, lower household income was associated with experiencing loss of interest/pleasure in doing things, $F(1, 120) = 6.86; p = 0.01$, and feeling down, depressed or hopeless, $F(1, 121) = 5.94; p = 0.02$.

Figure 3a. Least square means for household income and depressive symptoms – loss of interest/pleasure

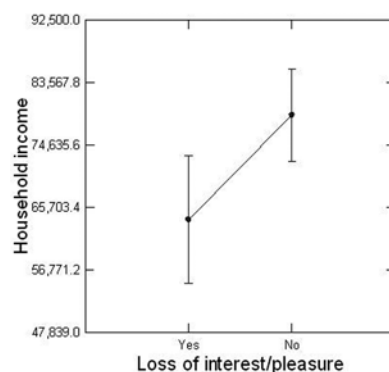


Figure 3b. Least square means for household income and depressive symptoms – feeling down, depressed or hopeless

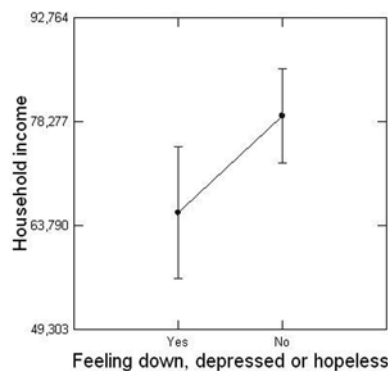
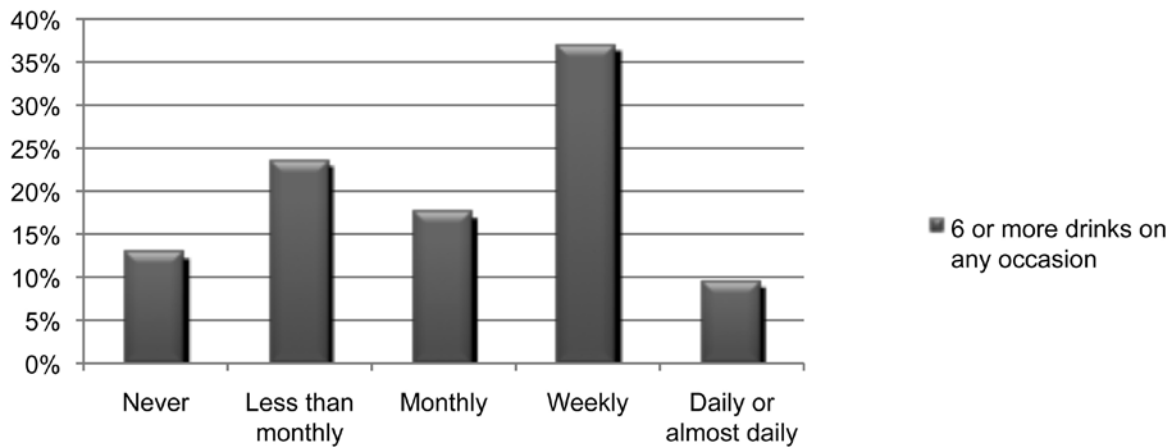


Figure 4. Unemployed men's frequency of consuming 6 or more alcoholic drinks on any one occasion



In this sample of unemployed men, heavy alcohol consumption (6 or more drinks on any one occasion) occurred relatively frequently. Whilst 13 per cent of men never drank more than 6 drinks at a time, or did this less than monthly (23.5 per cent), approximately 37 per cent of men drank more than 6 drinks on any one occasion on a *weekly* basis. Of particular concern are the approximately 10 per cent of men who drink 6 or more drinks on a *daily* basis (see Figure 4).

DISCUSSION

The majority of men in the study were found to *not* seek financial help. The literature indicates that gender-based factors (e.g. ideas around masculinity) are a significant influence which make it less likely that men will seek help (Molarius, et al. 2009).

In addition, the occurrence of unemployment as a significant financial event *did not* trigger more individuals to seek financial help. Thus, there is no positive change in help-seeking behaviour evident from unemployed status alone, and in fact there was a negative change.

This is particularly problematic for financial counsellors and those in financial distress, as the people who might be most in need of financial counselling services become even more difficult to access. Furthermore, the literature indicates that most men believe that they have intentions of seeking help when a serious issue arise (Sears 2004). However, research has found that men (young men in particular) have a decreased likelihood of seeking help from informal or formal sources when in dire need ('help-negation effect') (Rudd, Joiner & Rajab 1995), particularly in relation to financial aspects (Dowling, Corney & Hoiles 2009).

A large portion of men identified that 'cost' was a significant barrier to them seeking help. This is understandable given that unemployed individuals are likely to be on a reduced income. However, financial counselling services are generally free – a fact which many individuals were unaware of. From the results it is not clear that these men know where to access help and which professional sources to turn to for help. Although many people keep a 'mental budget' of their finances for day-to-day spending it would appear to be the case that long-range financial planning often fall short of what is required in the event of unemployment. Improving financial literacy overall for men in the building and

construction industry could assist in preventing financial problems from occurring and improving financial outcomes for members.

Many men cited self-reliance as a coping strategy. This self-reliance could be further exacerbated by embarrassment and shame around financial issues, and cultural/gender role perceptions (e.g. beliefs around masculinity) that men *should* be able to cope with their finances. This embarrassment is particularly acute for men on lower incomes and those who have been unemployed for a long time. Self-reliance is also by nature isolating and could in itself be a further risk-factor for those who are struggling financially.

In this study most men believed that they were capable of managing their financial situation by themselves or within the context of their immediate family (e.g. with the help of their partner). Due to fluctuating employment conditions in the construction industry, many employees take a proactive stance by saving as much of their money as possible; however, others are often in a financial position where it is not viable to save. This might be because they have a number of debts and creditors to repay or because they are spending more/all that they earn.

Previous research has also identified that young people, who are accustomed to a consumer culture which is associated with easily obtainable credit, experience high rates of financial difficulties (Roberts & Jones 2001). However, it is when unemployment becomes a long-term prospect that financial management could become severely challenged.

In line with previous studies (Janlert & Hammarstrom 2009; Molarius, et al. 2009; Vinokur, Price & Caplan 1996) the results indicate a connection between unemployment and decreased well-being. Men in the sample report high levels of alcohol consumption on a regular basis. One in three of the participants (35 per cent) indicated symptoms of depression.

This compares poorly to the general prevalence of depression in Australian men reported at one in six men (www.beyondblue.org.au).

In addition, men who are depressed have a significantly greater risk of suicide (www.beyondblue.org.au). All these factors together, financial stress, depression, and high levels of alcohol consumption shows that unemployment and financial worries have a significant impact on these individuals' well-being.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study's findings particularly apply to men in the Victorian building and construction industry, but would also have national relevance to the building and construction industry and potentially to men in other similar 'blue collar' industries (e.g. mining, transport, forestry).

In addition, the study's findings also have relevance to the financial counselling sector and the manner in which financial counsellors engage consumers – particularly blue collar men.

However, caution should be observed in generalising the findings from this study to unemployed women, as the literature demonstrates that help-seeking behaviour varies by gender. The data gathered through this study was cross-sectional and based on self-report, as such financial behaviour was not observed. Future research could investigate men's financial behaviour in a longitudinal manner.

Given the significant impact of financial stress on well-being (e.g. as a correlate of unemployment), and the importance of improving financial literacy, this study (in line with Livingstone and colleagues' recent study on financial stress) advocates for a broader public health model to address financial stress (Livingstone, Bruce, Kotnik & King, 2010). The basic public health model distinguishes between primary (upstream), secondary (midstream) and tertiary (downstream) interventions. In particular the results from this study have relevance to informing secondary interventions, which provide information and education, as well as early intervention and advocacy. Since lack of knowledge is an obvious issue, improving health literacy is important. In addition, the results are particularly relevant to

tertiary interventions which provide support to those in crisis (Livingstone et al. 2010).

However, this needs careful consideration and targeted interventions given the plethora of information already available to consumers. 'Trust' is another issue of importance, since people will be more likely to talk to someone they can trust, but how do they know who they can they trust to provide them with relevant, unbiased information?

Further research could explore practice models which tie together a theoretical help-seeking framework, intentions, motivations and behaviours. In particular researchers and practitioners need to identify which additional factors will help improve people's motivation to access financial counselling services. For example, someone might have intentions of seeking help, but their financial help-seeking behaviour is contradictory to their intentions. It needs to be discerned whether it is a matter of increasing awareness, or decreasing the impact of barriers, or creating incentives for using services (or combinations of all of these). In order to identify a comprehensive solution, it is important to develop collaborative partnerships with a range of stakeholders across the financial sector (e.g., financial counsellors, debt collectors, banking groups) in consultation with community groups. To date, many of these groups have operated independently with cross-collaboration a rare occurrence. To develop these partnerships it is important to establish clear communication guidelines and build trust between the various stakeholders with an eye to developing the best possible outcomes for consumers. In addition, it is important to develop multidisciplinary partnerships to share information and advance understanding of complex problems from a range of perspectives. ●

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