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978-0-521-09818-2 - Men Out of Work: A Study of Unemployment in Three English Towns

M. J. Hill, R. M. Harrison, A. V. Sargeant and V. Talbot

Excerpt

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## 1 Introduction

This book is the first report of a sociological survey, undertaken in Autumn 1971, of unemployed men in three large urban areas, Coventry, Hammersmith and Newcastle upon Tyne. To explain how the approach to the study of employment described in this book developed, it is necessary to review some earlier studies and discussions of the subject. Running through most of the older presentations of the issues is a tendency to separate economic explanations of unemployment from explanations in terms of the characteristics of the individuals involved. Hence there are available either discussions of only one half of the subject, or worse still, explanations which make the assumption that while some unemployment is explicable in purely economic terms, the failure of certain groups to obtain or hold jobs must be the subject of generalisations dealing with social and personal factors.

The nineteenth century Poor Law approach to the problem was largely to disregard economic factors and attribute unemployment solely to the personal failings and faults of individuals, to assume that anyone with the will to work could find work. It was to counteract this view that Beveridge published his *Unemployment: A Problem of Industry* in 1912. In this book he expressed the argument against the traditional view in colourful terms which remind us of the way unemployment was popularly regarded:

If, therefore, certain degenerate types could be abolished, and if the common level of human nature – in respect of assiduity, sobriety, adaptability, and all other virtues – could be raised, the volume of idleness, whether voluntary or involuntary, would no doubt be diminished. To this extent it is right to urge improvement of human character as a remedy for unemployment. The limitations on this admission have, however, to be carefully noted. First, the number of the entirely unemployable class, though uncertain, is certainly not very great. Second, the most practicable way of improving human character lies often in abolishing industrial and social conditions which induce or pander to the vices of idleness, slovenliness and irresponsibility. Third, no conceivable improvement in the character of the workmen will eliminate the main economic facts in unemployment. (Pp. 137–8)

Another writer of roughly the same period, Charles Booth, in his *Life and Labour of the People of London*, showed a similar sensitivity to the importance

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of economic factors, but he portrayed perhaps more clearly than Beveridge did, in the piece quoted above, the way in which economic and other factors interact:

Whilst men in almost every trade work with practically no loss of earnings, and some do so even in the most irregular and uncertain employments, others are habitual half-timers. No point has been more emphatically emphasised by the present enquiry than the unequal efficiency of the members of any industry and the relatively disadvantageous position of the less efficient. To them, competition deals out stern justice, whatever the cause of their inefficiency be.

While we may not warm today to all Booth's explanations of the causes of this inefficiency, there is in this simple statement of his a very clear expression of the way in which the inefficiencies of a capitalist economy have the maximum impact upon the least well equipped individuals. This is a fact that tended to be forgotten as the economists began to dominate the study of unemployment during the massive recession of the 1930s.

Prior to Keynes the orthodox economist's viewpoint corresponded closely with the Victorian doctrine that anyone who is out of work more than temporarily is in some sense at fault. The orthodox analysis of the relationship between wages and unemployment allowed for only two categories of unemployment, 'frictional' and 'voluntary' unemployment. Frictional unemployment was seen as:

due to a temporary want of balance between the relative quantities of specialised resources as a result of miscalculation or intermittent demand; or to time-lags consequent on unforeseen changes; or the fact that the change-over from one employment to another cannot be effected without a certain delay, so that there will always exist in a non-static society a proportion of resources "between jobs". (J.M. Keynes, quoting Pigou's viewpoint).

Any unemployment that was not frictional must be, it was argued:

"voluntary" unemployment due to the refusal or inability of a unit of labour, as a result of legislation or social practices or of slow response to change or of more human obstinacy, to accept a reward corresponding to the value of the product attributable to its marginal productivity. (Ibid.)

The importance of Keynes' analysis for the study of unemployment is that he showed how it was possible for what he called 'involuntary' unemployment to occur as a consequence of deficient demand for labour. Those studies of unemployed men which were conducted in the thirties were concerned to

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make a similar point, though not in terms of academic economics. Both the Pilgrim Trust study and the study of unemployment in Greenwich by E.W. Bakke stressed that the general run of unemployed men showed no signs of being voluntarily unemployed and were in general terms simply typical members of the working class. On the voluntary unemployed, the Pilgrim Trust team argued:

That there is a certain number of “work-shy” men among the young unemployed is of course not open to doubt, and the question is only what proportion they bear to the whole. In our view, the number is relatively speaking not large, and tends to be exaggerated by confusion with another group, which constitutes a much more troublesome problem, the men who have become diffident owing to continual unemployment, who find it more and more difficult to face repeated failures and who finally give up looking for work. (Pilgrim Trust p. 173)

Bakke took a similar line, putting the problem of malingering in the wider context of the social and economic situation of the time:

Malingering is mainly a misfit problem. Certain groups fail to be exposed to the influences which develop self-respect in the normal individual, or these influences may be removed through prolonged unemployment. Individuals in these groups, then, are particularly subject to the temptation of malingering.

Malingering is in the main a negative lack of virtue, not a positive vice. It manifests itself in doing nothing rather than actively plotting to “beat the system”...

Malingering is the result primarily of the failure of certain behaviour forming influences to function rather than the operation of certain influences productive of an active will to “get all one can”. (Bakke, pp. 266–7)

These students of British unemployment were primarily interested in stressing the ‘normal’ nature of the mass of the unemployed, and were therefore prepared to concede to the Victorian view that there might be a ‘pathological’ minority within the massive ranks of the unemployed. Inevitably these studies, as more or less the last large-scale sociological studies of unemployment carried out in Britain, did not dispose of the popular view that the voluntarily unemployed, or, more pejoratively, work-shy, would be a social problem again once the problem of mass unemployment was defeated.

There is, naturally, likely to be a small group of men who will freely admit to being voluntarily unemployed. But in addition many members of the general

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public will allege that there is a much larger class of people who are in fact voluntarily unemployed even though they will not admit to it. The main difficulty in testing this 'theory' is that it is almost impossible to refute, since to do so it is necessary to prove that the men in question cannot behave in any other way than the way they do. Even where it seems possible to 'explain' unemployment by reference to characteristics such as severe disability, it can always be argued that such people could find work if only they tried harder. What is required, therefore, in relation to any hypothesis about voluntary unemployment is a value judgement about the amount of effort individuals should make in order to overcome their disadvantages and handicaps.

In the light of these considerations it is worthy of note that a number of writers have drawn attention to the sources of low motivation on the part of the underprivileged worker. Many years ago Allison Davis drew attention to this issue with reference to the poor in the United States, developing a line of argument that has become a commonplace to students of the Negro poor, which he set out as follows:

He lives in a different economic and social environment from that in which the skilled and middle-class workers live. Therefore, the behaviour that he learns, the habits that are stimulated and maintained by his cultural group, are different also. The individuals of these different socio-economic statuses and cultures are reacting to different realistic situations and psychological drives. Therefore their values and their social goals are different. Therefore, the behaviour of the underprivileged worker which the boss regards as "unsocialised" or "ignorant", or "lazy", or "unmotivated" is really behaviour learned from the socio-economic and cultural environments of these workers. In a realistic view we must recognise it to be perfectly normal, a sensible response to the conditions of their lives.

If we wish to change their habits ... we must offer the underprivileged workers real rewards. They must be sufficiently powerful to repay him for the hard work and self-denial required to change his old habits, and to compete with the rewards of a physical kind which he clearly gets. (A. Davis in W.F. Whyte ed. pp. 103–4)

More recently some economists, particularly in the United States (see Hall, Bosanquet and Doeringer), have seized upon this kind of argument, and have sought to show that some of the peculiarities of the functioning of national labour markets result from the presence of a 'secondary' labour market, which offers insecure and un-rewarding employment to poorly educated and low skilled workers. In this 'market' workers respond to their unsatisfactory economic situations by being unreliable employees, who abandon jobs readily

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and accept spells of unemployment as a respite from the unwelcome demands of their work situations.

While it is unlikely that the social situation of the British white unemployed worker, living in an area where the overwhelming majority of men are in full-time work, can be entirely equated with that of the underprivileged in the United States, and particularly with the situation which faces the Negro ghetto dweller, these observations on the relationship between economic situation and motivation serve to remind us of the underlying possibilities of such links. The psychological mechanisms which create and reinforce work habits are bound to be relatively 'fragile' in situations where work is insecure and unrewarding. Therefore, while economic factors do not 'explain' why some individuals have low commitments to work in situations in which other comparable men have high commitments, they suggest that it is not surprising that such attitudes exist.

Another plausible way in which voluntary unemployment is 'explained' rests upon the argument that under certain circumstances it is unprofitable to the individual to work. Interestingly this argument is found in the studies of unemployment done in the thirties, despite the very low levels of benefit and relief available then. The Pilgrim Trust study referred to 'men living at a low level because they have never known anything better'. (Pp. 60–1) 'This particular factor in unemployment', they said, 'can only be attacked as part of the general social problem of poverty—a larger task ... than the attack on unemployment which is sometimes one of its many symptoms'. Similarly Bakke laid considerable emphasis upon the significance of the fact that the unskilled workers secured only a very small margin over their basic needs when in work.

More recently Abel-Smith and Townsend, Atkinson and the Ministry of Social Security report on the Circumstances of Families have drawn attention to the large numbers of families supported by wages below or only just above the income levels provided by Supplementary Benefits scales. When these people fall out of work the Supplementary Benefits Commission is required to ensure that any payments from that source leave them with incomes not exceeding their normal wage levels, but it is open to argument (a) whether this 'wage stopping' is always successful in actually keeping help from all sources during a period of unemployment below potential wages, and (b) whether a relatively slight difference between a wage-stopped allowance and normal earnings is sufficient to offset all the other disincentives to go to work.

In this discussion so far it has been shown that there are considerable difficulties in distinguishing the arguments about unemployment as a consequence of voluntary choice by the unemployed from those about unemployment as an economic phenomenon with an involuntary impact upon individuals. Much

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the same difficulties reappear with the approach to the explanation of prolonged unemployment as a phenomenon with a 'social' as opposed to an economic cause. This involves the explanation of unemployment in terms of the inadequacies of individuals.

Once a combination of favourable economic circumstances and post-Keynesian management of the economy enabled the unemployment level to be kept at a very low rate, by the standards of the thirties, it tended to be assumed that those who remained unemployed might be considered to come under the two old-fashioned headings of 'frictional' and 'voluntary' unemployment attacked by Keynes.

The concept of frictional unemployment was, at the same time, given a rather more sophisticated meaning. Thus Hauser and Burrows wrote:

This kind of unemployment accompanies technological progress, the reorganisation of production, and lasting shifts in the pattern of demand. Workers in particular jobs and with particular skills lose their occupations and must seek alternative employment ... . In recent years interest has centred on the relatively high level of frictional unemployment in particular geographical areas and also on the severe impact this unemployment can have on particular sections of the labor force. In its more severe, rather long-term form, frictional unemployment is often referred to as structural unemployment. (M.M. Hauser and P. Burrows, 1969)

Concern with frictional unemployment has particularly focussed upon the rate of labour turnover. Evidence from Department of Employment statistics shows that a high proportion of all the men who register as unemployed remain on that register for only a short period. Fowler studied registrations during the period 1961 to 1965 and showed that of an average of 57,000 new registrants each week '15,000 could expect to leave within a week and 39,000 (or 68 per cent) could expect to leave within four weeks'. Economists who were concerned with raising labour market efficiency therefore concentrated on seeking means to reduce the length of time spent on the register by this large number of men who get back to work fairly quickly (Mackay et al, Reid).

In accordance with this preoccupation there have been a number of studies of redundant workers (Kahn, Wedderburn, 1964 and 1965, Acton Society Trust).

Regional inequalities have been also given considerable attention by economists (Hunter, Brechling), and there has altogether been a different public attitude to unemployment in the least prosperous regions. Although the differences between the regions with high and the regions with low unemployment have been typically only a few percentage points, people are very much

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more ready to conceptualise unemployment in the North-East, for example, in the same terms as that of the thirties. Hence generalisations about voluntary unemployment or about individual pathology are much less readily applied to such areas. There has only been one study of the social characteristics of unemployed men in such areas, a small one by Sinfield (see Sinfield 1970).

Other unemployment that cannot easily be explained in terms of either slow redeployment or regional pockets of stagnation is often explained by reference to the personal inadequacies of individuals. Professor Paish, resting his analysis upon a Ministry of Labour survey (Ministry of Labour Gazette, 1966, pp. 156–7 and 385–7) in which employment exchange clerks were asked to assess whether their unemployed clientele were ‘likely to spend long periods on the register even when the local demand for labour is “high”’, developed a highly simplistic argument on this point. He argued, of the group who were assessed as having poor job prospects, in this way:

These people, who cannot be regarded as competing effectively for the vacancies available, are put in the Ministry of Labour’s survey of October 1964 at over 180,000 or about 0.8% of the employed population, a figure which now may well be higher. These “non-effective” unemployed are distributed very unequally between the regions, with 98,000 or 1.3% of employees, in the North or North-West of England, Scotland and Wales, and only 83,000 or 0.5% in the rest of England. If we deduct the non-effectives ... we reduce the amount of unemployment in the high unemployment area in October, 1967 ... from 254,000 or 3.4% to 156,000 or 2.1% and in the low unemployment area from 307,000 or 1.9% to 224,000 or 1.4%. (Paish, 1968, p. 16)

Paish advised, ‘It would clarify the position if the greater part of the non-effectives could be removed from the unemployment figures and transferred to some other register of the welfare state’. (Ibid.) There are several serious flaws in Paish’s argument. The figures are based upon assessments made by a large number of junior clerks in the Ministry of Labour, who were asked to make a judgement on a purely hypothetical question; whether their clientele would get work if labour demand were high. It is therefore not surprising that clerks in low labour demand areas differed from those in high demand areas in their judgements, coloured as they must have been by their experience of one specific kind of labour market. Judgements about the ‘effectiveness’ of individual potential employees cannot really be made in a vacuum. A joint strategy aimed at increasing the attractiveness of so-called non-effective employees to potential employers, increasing the advantages to be gained from going to work for such employees, and increasing the overall demand for labour would

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inevitably decrease the non-effective numbers. The latter is an approach that has been favoured by those economists who are exponents of the need to adopt an 'active labour market policy' on the lines developed in Sweden (see the description of this approach in Mukherjee, Rehnberg, Olsson and OECD, 1963; and the reflections on the British situation by Thirlwell, and Bosanquet and Standing).

It seems sensible to suggest that at any given level of demand for labour those who cannot get work easily will appear 'less effective' than those who can. This means that in practice it must be difficult to distinguish between 'non-effectives', as described by Paish, and the 'frictionally unemployed', as described by other economists. To pick up the physical analogies implied, it must be recognised that there are degrees of friction up to a sticking point. This is clearly acknowledged in the Report of an Inter-Departmental Working Party on the Unemployment Statistics, where the following objections are raised to suggestions that there is a sizeable class of 'unemployable' people who can be clearly distinguished from the rest of the unemployed:

It is clear ... that there is some confusion between the meaning of "unemployable" as a description of certain characteristics of a person, and as a description of the "employability" of a person in a particular labour market. It is this confusion which leads to the apparent contradiction that whilst some virtually "unemployable" individuals can be identified, the characteristics of these individuals cannot be used as a basis for the definition of a wider "unemployable" group. In short, the symptom is common to too many ailments to form the basis of a useful diagnosis.

There is a further distinction to be made between the use of the word "unemployable" as a description of a group, and as applied to an individual. The Department of Employment has a duty to do its best to place in work everyone who is registered for employment in as far as this is possible, and it must therefore act on the assumption that everyone is employable. However, it is obvious that some individuals are more employable than others, and that employers are inclined to take a very selective view of the quality of registrants submitted to them.

While it is sensible to expect that employers' selection procedures will tend to sort potential employees in the way assumed by those who talk of 'non-effectives' or 'unemployables', in fact very little is known about the actual impact of such discrimination. Few studies have been made of selection techniques and those there have been have suffered from poor response rates and difficulties in probing beyond official policies. One valuable study that is available (Mackay et al) does, however, suggest that selection procedures are



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often absent, and that many employers are little concerned to adopt elaborate techniques to ensure that they acquire only the best 'quality' manual employees.

It is therefore dangerous to jump to conclusions about the employability of individuals from information about their characteristics alone. This is a warning that must be given to those who seek to generalise about employment trends from the information presented in this study. In particular it is difficult to relate findings about the quality of the labour 'supply' to currently fashionable theories about technological-unemployment without information on the reasons why employers seem to persistently reject some applicants for work.

The purpose of the discussion in this chapter so far has been to analyse some of the difficulties in considering such notions as 'voluntary unemployment' and 'unemployability' or 'ineffectiveness', and to suggest the complex nature of the interaction between economic, social and psychological factors in relation to unemployment. It serves, therefore, both to introduce the present study and to warn against some of the difficulties that are associated with attempts to theorise about the characteristics and attitudes of unemployed men. Since a study of unemployed men of the scale and scope of the present one has not been attempted in Britain since the 1930s, the authors have had to try to address themselves to the mixture of assumptions based on official statistics and folk wisdom that provides almost the only available source of hypotheses in this field, while acknowledging that the complicated relationship between economic and social factors makes theorising difficult. If this study tends to seize upon the simplifications and half-truths that govern public attitudes to unemployment and use these as hypotheses, it is hoped, at least, that it will provide some findings upon which future students of the subject can build more sophisticated hypotheses.

This study was originally conceived as an attempt to throw some light upon long-term unemployment in situations of full employment, by comparing the social characteristics and attitudes of long and short-term unemployed men in situations of comparatively full employment. However, during the planning stage the employment situation worsened, and by the time the field work was due to start in October 1971 unemployment had reached a level almost unprecedented in the post Second World War period. Figure 1 illustrates very clearly the contrast between the 1971 situation and the situation everyone had grown used to in the years before.

This change in the employment situation in itself made it very clear that a sociological study of unemployment needed to take careful note of economic factors. The first group of hypotheses to be tested were concerned with those characteristics of the long-term unemployed which might tend to make them less effective, or less employable, in any situation, while at the same time considering whether differing economic climates had any impact upon the

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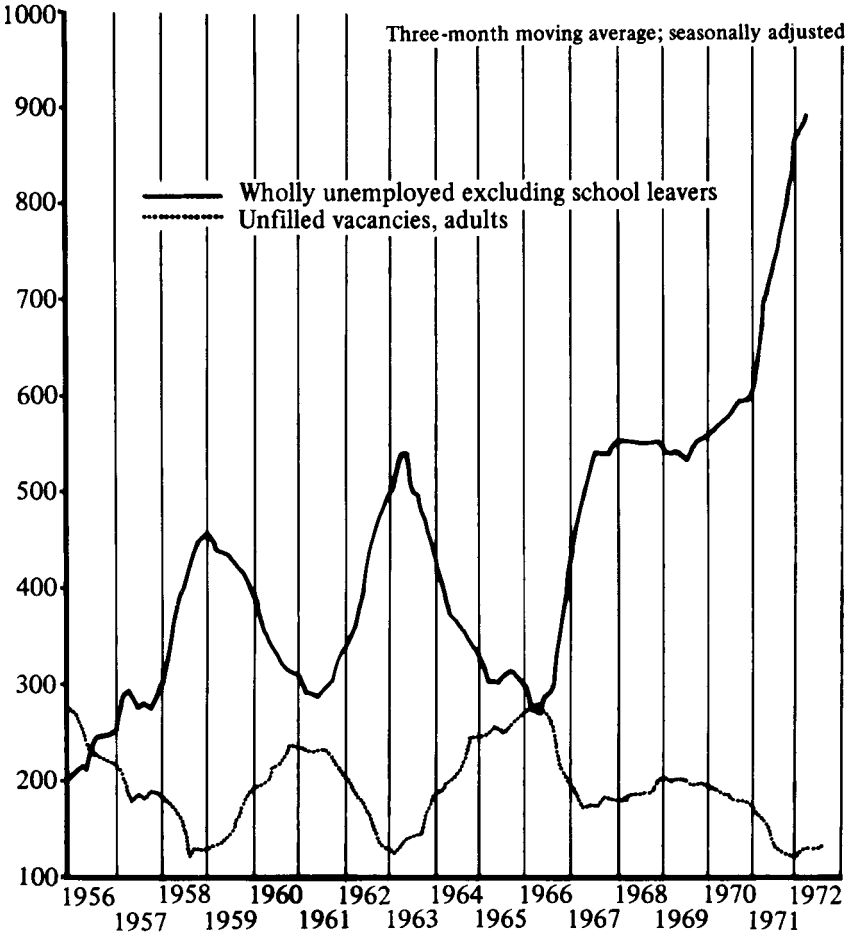
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Figure 1.

Unemployed and vacancies: Great Britain



Source: Dept. of Employment Gazette, May 1972.

significance of factors of this kind. In drafting this group of hypotheses considerable use was made of the evidence available from published unemployment statistics, and of the evidence brought together from a wide range of countries in Adrian Sinfield's *The Long Term Unemployed*.

Without doubt the strongest evidence available from these sources was on the impact of age upon a man's employment prospects. The figures in Table 1.1 were derived by relating Department of Employment statistics on numbers unemployed in July 1971 to numbers in the work force.

The figures here for the youngest group are perhaps a little misleading, as