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978-0-521-31518-0 - Unemployment: Its Social Psychological Effects

Peter Kelvin and Joanna E. Jarrett

Excerpt

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1 Introduction*

Preliminaries

There is nothing new about unemployment – or about social and economic policies designed to cope with its consequences. There are grounds for thinking that the building of the Pyramids, for instance, or the Temple of Jerusalem, were public works, largely undertaken to absorb surplus labour: and certainly the colonisation of Asia Minor in classical times was in part deliberate policy to cope with joblessness in ancient Athens and other city states (Garraty, 1978). In England, and closer to our own time, the systematic involvement of government with the provision for (and control of) the unemployed goes back nearly four hundred years, to the Elizabethan Poor Law of 1601; and that itself consolidated a large array of earlier but much more *ad hoc* regulations. Indeed we shall show that the basic and often contradictory attitudes towards the unemployed in Britain today are the product of a pattern created in the very different conditions of the mid-fourteenth century, and handed down ever since: and we shall argue that much of the quite genuine confusion over what to think, feel, and do about the unemployed stems from the inappropriateness of this pattern. That is for later. The first and salutary fact at the outset is that the unemployed have been recognised and treated as a ‘problem’ for centuries, but psychological research on the problems of the unemployed themselves spans only the last fifty years.

The beginning can be placed quite precisely in 1933, which saw the publication of both *Marienthal* by Jahoda, Lazarsfeld and Zeisel, and Bakke’s *The Unemployed Man*. Since then research on psychological aspects of unemployment has generated a literature of several hundred articles and numerous books (we shall in future refer to this simply as ‘the literature’). This material has three broad characteristics: it is descriptive, it is diffuse and fragmentary, and it is almost entirely concerned with the unemployed *man*. It is descriptive in the sense that it has concentrated on painting pictures of the unemployed and of their situation, and only rarely considers underlying processes and implications (important exceptions are Jahoda *et al.*, 1933/72; Eisenberg and Lazars-

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feld, 1938; Komarovski, 1940; Jahoda, 1979). It is diffuse and fragmented in that very valuable information about psychological aspects of unemployment can often be found in sources which are not themselves technically (or intentionally) psychological – not only, for example, in the neighbouring disciplines of sociology and anthropology but also in history and in official statistics. The predominantly male-orientated nature of the research is something which we shall discuss in several contexts. We do stress, however, that it is not due to male ‘chauvinism’ on the part of the researchers, some of the most distinguished of whom have been women (outstandingly Jahoda and Komarovsky in the thirties; but we shall also refer to valuable contributions in recent years by, for example, Wedderburn, Briar, Hartley, Swinburn). Another basic fact then is that the literature on unemployment deals almost exclusively with the unemployed man, touching on the unemployed woman only occasionally, and in passing.

Within all this we have been particularly concerned with the literature on the *social psychological* effects of unemployment on the relationships of the unemployed individual – with his family and friends, with social service agencies, with potential employers, and, quite broadly, with ‘society’. That is all manifestly ‘social’. In addition, however, as an integral part of his relationships but less obviously so, we have also been much concerned with the unemployed individual in his own right: with the effects of unemployment on his behaviour in general and on his attitudes – towards himself as well as to others. For the nature of a relationship depends not only on what each participant to it thinks, feels, and does concerning the other: that itself depends on what each thinks and feels about himself; and what he thinks and feels about himself is greatly affected by what he finds himself doing – or not doing. One pattern of response to becoming unemployed, for example, is a sense of not doing anything worth while, and disliking oneself because of this: dislike of oneself makes one uneasy, depressed, or perhaps aggressive: and this sours relationships with others. Equally important, and in some respects often more so, the concept which one has of oneself is profoundly affected by how one is treated by others, or at least by how one thinks one is being treated by them. In other words, an individual’s self-concept is in large part *socially* defined – not only by others as such, but also by how he himself perceives his relationships with them. We shall have much to say on the self-concept of the unemployed.

The essence of the social psychological effects of unemployment can be defined in terms of four basic questions:

How does his unemployment affect the way in which the unemployed individual sees himself?

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How does his unemployment affect how he perceives others?

How does his unemployment affect the way in which he perceives himself to be seen *by* others?

How do others actually see the unemployed?

and to each of these has to be added the follow-on 'What is this due to, and what effects does it have in its turn?' In the 'real world' some of the most important answers to those questions are, of course, closely connected: how an individual regards himself affects the ways in which he behaves to others, which affects how they treat him, which affects how he sees them . . . and so on. These questions do not produce neatly distinct answers. They do however define and clarify the central problems; and in doing so they provide a conceptual framework for examining and integrating information which, without it, would remain even more fragmentary and diffuse.

There is one other, very different, question: 'What is the point of social psychological research on unemployment?' As far as we know the question has not been asked – at least not quite so bluntly; and not by psychologists, who are ultimately the people who have to answer it. There is, of course, the academic case that unemployment is worth study simply as a phenomenon, just as much as, say, the respiration of molluscs or the influence of Norman French on Chaucer. Though one can usually put forward some potential 'use' for such research, in truth it is an intellectual mountain, to be climbed because it is there. The pursuit of the useless is one of the most distinctively human of human characteristics: it is moreover frequently a source of esteem as well as of pleasure – except, significantly, in the case of unemployment. Research can thus be valued and valuable in its own right, even when it is not in any normal sense 'useful'. However, given the undisputed hardship of the great majority of the unemployed, the idea of essentially 'academic' research into their condition may appear almost indecent; and in practice, the motivation and purpose of psychological research on unemployment seems to have been to help the unemployed.

The desire to help is understandable. Unfortunately the fact is that *professionally* there is very little that psychologists as such can actually and directly *do* for the unemployed. There may indeed be a small proportion of the unemployed who seek psychological help, and that proportion might be a little larger if psychological services to the unemployed were expanded. Even expanded psychological facilities, however, would be only a minor adjunct to other services: for the principal agencies for the welfare of the unemployed are first and foremost concerned with their material needs – and in the vast majority of cases very properly so. As we shall argue, there has been a singular failure to distinguish between the

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psychological effects of unemployment and those of the poverty which usually attends it. It is a failure which has frequently misled not only psychologists but also the medical profession, sociologists (as distinct from social administrators), churchmen, and innumerable others. In the final analysis the psychologist cannot supply either of the two things which most of the unemployed most need: money, or a job which brings money. (A job may also provide for several other important needs, such as a structure to one's activities, membership of a group, a 'place in society', and we shall discuss these later: but psychologists, medical practitioners, sociologists cannot supply the unemployed with those any more than with an income or work.)

Research on the social psychological effects of unemployment is therefore of very little direct use to the unemployed. A case could be made that inasmuch as psychological findings are disseminated they may provide the unemployed with 'insight', and this might help them indirectly, if they can act on its implications. Such findings might also help other people to understand the problems of their unemployed relatives, friends and neighbours, and so smooth relationships with them. All this is true, but these are no more than haphazard palliatives for a profoundly unpalatable situation. It is also not what social psychological research sets out to do, certainly not in most cases.

Fundamentally, social psychological research on the effects of unemployment is concerned with one of several classes of non-economic consequences of this particular economic condition (another important class is the effect of unemployment on health). The function of such research is to identify and explain the non-economic 'costs' of that condition; and these in turn can then be built into the evaluation of policies, not least economic ones. In kind, social psychological research on unemployment belongs to the same category of research as research on the side-effects of drugs or the effects of pollution.

In the case of the side-effects of a drug, for example, or of an industrial process which produces pollution, the drug or the process may offer important, often very important, benefits to the individual or to society. The problem is that these benefits cannot perhaps be obtained without harmful by-products. It therefore becomes a matter of *decision* whether or not the benefits outweigh the harm, or even the mere risk of it: alternatively, we may seek the benefits at less risk, even if at greater costs of various other kinds. Examples abound, ranging from personal decisions about cigarette smoking, to decisions on the conservation of buildings and the countryside, the control of industrial waste, the monitoring of pesticides and drugs, and the development of new forms of energy. In all instances, the function of research, whatever its discipline, is to provide information and to examine its implications from the standpoint of that

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discipline. Beyond that, however, the applications of its findings in practice always involve further assumptions and value-judgements which lie outside the domain and the discipline of the research itself.

That is the position of social psychological research on the effects of unemployment. It can be seen particularly clearly in the context of high unemployment. One of the main causes of this, both historically and at present, has been the development of new technologies. New technologies usually bring considerable benefits, but they also bring the demise of the methods which they replace, and so the unemployment of those whose jobs thus disappear. What then happens to these unemployed depends – as with other forms of industrial waste – on whether there is investment in other ways in which they might be productive; or whether, through lack of investment, they become jetsam and are left to drift. Whatever the course or compromise, these ostensibly economic decisions will have been significantly shaped by considerations which are essentially non-economic. On purely economic grounds, for example, it is absurd to spend billions on welfare support for the unemployed – billions which are economically unproductive for society but even so barely provide subsistence for most of the recipients. Yet not to provide for them at all would be almost universally regarded as morally inexcusable: and to make provision conditional – say on communal work – would be politically widely unacceptable and impractical in our kind of society. In effect, any answer to the question ‘What should be done about unemployment?’, even if the answer is ‘nothing’, has its roots in beliefs about the nature of man and of society.

It is here that social psychological research can make constructive contributions. Social psychology is concerned with what people believe; it is also concerned with how they act; and it is therefore inevitably concerned with the relationship between beliefs and actions. The ramifications within this are, of course, complex. In particular there is the very important difference between beliefs concerning facts and beliefs which reflect systems of value: in the realm of fact the relation between belief and action is essentially a matter of competence, in the realm of values it is a matter of integrity. Since beliefs about man and society encompass both facts and values, the relationship between belief and action can go awry in a variety of ways. For example, there is a taken-for-granted assumption that whatever other differences there might be between individuals in a democracy they are nevertheless equal as citizens. Unemployed people, on the other hand, frequently feel that they are treated as ‘second-class citizens’: and when one examines the conditions for obtaining welfare benefit, especially means-related benefits, it is quite incontrovertible that these involve invasions of the privacy of claimants which would be deemed intolerable in relation to ‘ordinary’ men and women. It

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may well be that these invasions of privacy are justified in order to insure as best one can that limited resources go to those who truly need them. That is not the issue here. The issue is that in becoming unemployed many a citizen becomes a second-class citizen. In a period of high unemployment, moreover, this is likely to be through no fault on the part of the individual. It is, as it were, one of the costs of technological change. It is, however, also incompatible with any basic assumption that a citizen is a citizen, whatever his or her condition. There is then a choice; either we, as individuals, can admit (and not least to ourselves) that recipients of public welfare cannot be treated as full citizens; or 'society', on our individual behalfs, that is in the form of the state and its laws, has to accept that full citizens have rights which some of them may abuse to defraud it.

Unemployment raises a host of problems of various kinds, and most of them are probably not capable of wholly satisfactory solutions. Some, like the second-class citizenship of so many unemployed, are not so much problems of unemployment as of society's attempts to cope with it: inasmuch as this kind of problem is a product of legislation, and 'society' *wants* to solve it, to that extent at least it can be solved by legislation. Other problems, however, seem to be inherent in the basic conditions of being unemployed. The most important example is the consistent evidence that human beings need a sense of purpose and structure to their lives; that the vast majority derive this purpose and structure very largely from their work; and that to be unemployed is therefore for most people deeply disturbing, distressing, and debilitating. It is, of course, possible that if the unemployed had more money, many of them might find new purposes and new structures through developing leisure and other personal activities. The fact is that the great majority of unemployed do not have access to such external resources: is it then valid, or arrogant self-deceit, or sheer cant, to argue that external resources are scarce and yet expect internal ones to be limitless?

Research can discover, inform and explain: it does not itself produce decisions and action. It cannot make us good; it may help to make us honest.

Scope

Our commentary covers both less and rather more than the conventional 'review' of a literature on which we originally set out. It covers less because it was only when we had had our first look at the material that we realised that there is not just a single psychological literature on unemployment, as we had thought, but there are two – and all *our* questions were concerned with only one of these. It is also less because, in our initial naivety, we had intended to encompass research from anywhere in the world: in the event, although we have examined work

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done in the United States, Europe, and Australia, and although we shall make use of some of that, most of what we shall have to say has its basis in the United Kingdom; and to what extent, and in what ways, one may generalise from this, is itself a matter for research.

We covered more than we had planned, because the answers to our ostensibly simple social psychological questions took us inexorably beyond the individual into his (or her) situation: into the general economic setting in which the unemployed individual finds himself, into the services and provisions available to the unemployed, and the implications of these, and into the wider social environment of the unemployed. We also covered very much more than would be encompassed by a review of simply the academic social psychological literature. If we had confined ourselves to the strictly academic, we would have had almost nothing to say; there would have been very little to add to Eisenberg and Lazarsfeld's classic review of 1938. We have ranged quite widely. We have included not only substantive contributions from other disciplines, but also articles from ephemera, such as weekly magazines and, occasionally, daily newspapers; such ephemera may be lightweight in themselves, but on several issues they were our only sources of evidence, and on others they provided highly relevant supportive material.

Our central concern was the *effects* of unemployment. Put slightly differently, but usefully for identifying the nature of the problem, we were concerned with *unemployment as the cause* and the behaviour, feelings, and ideas associated with it as effects. It is at this level that the literature on unemployment as a whole splits into two main classes: for there is also a literature which treats psychological and social psychological factors as the cause, with *unemployment* as the effect. That is the perspective of the considerable body of research on the problems of special groups within society as a whole, and on the special programmes for such groups. These encompass the physically and mentally handicapped; people handicapped by their history, say, as alcoholics or ex-convicts: most of them are, however, concerned with the problems of three, often overlapping, categories – the young unemployed, the unemployed of ethnic minorities, and the hard-core, long-term unemployed. This literature probably warrants exploration in its own right, but we shall touch on it only occasionally and in passing. Our present concern is first and foremost with, for want of a better term, the *ordinary* 'unemployed worker' – that is with the effects of becoming and being unemployed on the kind of person who has 'normally' been in work; who has seen himself, and mostly still sees himself, as 'normally' being in work; and who is seen as someone who would 'normally' be working. Inasmuch as an individual is an ordinary worker in this sense, the fact

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that he may be young or black is irrelevant, and some of the research to which we shall refer certainly included young people and members of ethnic minorities in just this ordinary way. We have, however, mostly excluded studies which concentrated on groups with special problems *because* they were 'special': for in the great majority of these studies the focus has been on the *causes* of their unemployment, any effects being little more than implied. With one major exception, only very few studies of such special groups have so far explored the interaction between causes and effects – as in the case of sub-cultures which are partly a response to and then partly a cause of difficulties in getting work (e.g. Triandis *et al.*, 1975). The one major exception is research on the relationship between the length of time for which an individual has been unemployed, and the effects of this on himself and on his chances of finding work: that interaction is well documented; it can happen to the most 'ordinary' of employed workers; and it raises problems which we shall indeed discuss in several contexts. We shall not, however, deal with the problems of special groups as such: for inasmuch as the people involved belong to groups which are, and are seen to be, 'special', this may profoundly complicate and confound any analysis of the causes and effects of their unemployment. Or it may not: but until we have some grasp of the general pattern of effects on the ordinary unemployed worker, we do not even have a rational basis for the questions we might ask concerning those with special problems.

The other constraint which we had to impose on ourselves stems from a kind of ignorance which is almost unavoidable. The effects of unemployment do not occur in a vacuum, but within particular environments: not only in particular social but also in particular economic and physical environments. We have a certain amount of knowledge and understanding of the situation in this country, and where we recognised that we did not know something we needed to know we mostly had reasonable access to relevant information: we have no equivalent personal knowledge of the situation in other countries, nor any reasonably practical access to equivalent information concerning them. We will take two examples. First, the way in which an individual responds to being unemployed must be assumed to be significantly affected by the level of *provision* which his society makes for its unemployed, and by the conditions on which that provision is available to them. We know something about this in relation to the United Kingdom; we know almost nothing, or truly nothing, about the situation in other countries. To overcome such ignorance would, in practice, require a multi-national team; in the absence of such a team, international comparisons cannot be more than superficial, except in being misleading. Secondly, different places have different *climates*. Astonishing as it may seem, we have not found a single study

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which has looked systematically at the effects of climate on reaction to unemployment. Every now and again one encounters passing references to weather, for instance to the additional distress caused by a hard winter (e.g. Zawadski and Lazarsfeld, 1935): but controlled studies and comparisons there are none. Yet it must surely make a difference whether one is unemployed in Newcastle upon Tyne or Newcastle, New South Wales, in Wigan, or San Diego – if only in terms of the clothes one wears, and of being in- or out-of-doors. Among psychologists, however, climate, presumably because it is part of the taken-for-granted personal background of the researcher, has been ignored.

Climate, and the levels and conditions of provision for the unemployed, are hard facts: differences between countries on these counts constitute differences in the most basic physical and material circumstances of the unemployed – even before one considers more general, and generally rather vague, ‘cross-cultural’ differences. (The French term for unemployment, *chômage*, derives from ‘to take one’s ease during the heat of the day’; *un jour chômé* is ‘a day off’ (Garraty, 1978, p. 4). The literature has, for all practical purposes, nothing to say on these matters: whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.

At least perhaps one should be. In fact, of course, one cannot write sensibly about the effects of unemployment without reference to fundamental and ‘classic’ work such as Komarovskiy’s *The Unemployed Man and his Family* (1940), from America, and especially the study of *Marienthal*, from Austria, by Jahoda *et al.* (1933/72). We shall also make use of other American research, and a little from the Netherlands, Australia, and Japan. Nevertheless, we are very aware that the literature with which we have been concerned is, with very few exceptions, essentially an English-speaking literature. We have nothing from Scandinavia and Germany, and we particularly regret that we have nothing from France, Italy, or Spain – that is, from the more southern and Catholic parts of Europe (*Marienthal*, in Catholic Austria, had no church: we shall return to this). This is partly because our computer searches listed scarcely any material from these sources, and partly because our own resources in terms of languages are limited. More fundamentally, however, we know that we could not in any case have assessed that literature with any confidence, let alone validity: we simply do not have the necessary grounding in the circumstances of other countries; and without that grounding one cannot sensibly discuss the psychology of their unemployed. We have, in effect, been deliberately parochial in that even within the English-speaking literature we have concerned ourselves primarily with British material on the British situation. It is at this level that we have covered rather more than we had envisaged at the outset.

Our initial questions were essentially cognitive – how did unemploy-

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ment affect the way in which an individual saw himself, how did it affect the way in which he perceived himself to be seen, and so on. In trying to find the answers, it became increasingly clear that one has to consider the general settings in which the unemployed individual operates, and his experiences within these. Examples of this are the search for work; the factors which shape search strategies, and the consequences of failure to find work; the conditions for obtaining benefit, and particularly the social psychological implications of these conditions; the domestic economy, and the general economic environment of the unemployed; the perspectives of agency staffs (primarily Benefit Office staff) and of employers; the complex and contradictory nature of Public Opinion – and numerous other factors. All this in turn took us beyond the strictly ‘social psychological’ literature, and also sometimes well outside the strictly ‘academic’: we had, for example, to foray into ‘social administration’, and a little into ‘economic history’ and economics; and on a number of issues the relevant evidence was, as we have said, in ephemera, and not in books or learned journals. We certainly do not claim to have a full set of ‘answers’, but, by ranging as we did, we have, we believe, clarified a number of questions; and for some of these we can at least point in the directions where the answers might be found.

We ourselves, then, have of necessity to concentrate mainly on British material. The chances are, however, that much the same *questions* could be asked in other countries: and which of them yield similar answers, and which different – and why – is in fact the only way to discriminate between local patterns of response to unemployment, and to identify any truly general ones.

Sources

We began, for all practical purposes, as newcomers to the psychology of unemployment. We had read *Marienthal*, and Marsden and Duff’s *Workless* (1975), the review of the literature of the Depression by Eisenberg and Lazarsfeld (1938) and other odd pieces. In retrospect these three provided probably the best and most stimulating introduction to the field. They still do; and for ‘basic’ reading we would only add to them Bakke’s *The Unemployed Man* (1933), and Komarovsky’s *The Unemployed Man and his Family* (1940). Although not ‘psychological’, there is also much to gain from the quantitative research of Daniel’s *A National Survey of the Unemployed* (1974a; also Daniel and Stilgoe, 1977; Daniel, 1981); and from the social administrative perspective, of Sinfield’s *What Unemployment Means* (1981). Finally, Garraty’s *Unemployment in History* (1978) provides an important but almost invariably neglected historical background.