The psychological impacts of long-term unemployment, sex differences and activity: a case study analysis

Juanita Muller  
*Bond University, j.muller@griffith.edu.au*

Brian Delahaye  
*Queensland University of Technology*

Sharon Winocur  
*Dept. of Employment, Vocational Education, Training & Industrial Relations*

Richard Hicks  
*Queensland University of Technology, Richard_Hicks@bond.edu.au*

Follow this and additional works at: [http://epublications.bond.edu.au/hss_pubs](http://epublications.bond.edu.au/hss_pubs)

Part of the Psychology Commons

Recommended Citation
Juanita Muller, Brian Delahaye, Sharon Winocur, and Richard Hicks. (1996) "The psychological impacts of long-term unemployment, sex differences and activity: a case study analysis".

There is renewed interest in the use of qualitative methods in the unemployment research arena to provide a richer understanding of the unemployment experience. This study is designed to investigate the effects of long-term unemployment on psychological well-being, sex differences and the effects of participating in 'activity' using a case study methodology. Findings from ten semi-structured interviews with people, unemployed between 12 and 36 months, showed that psychological distress, depression and life satisfaction were the most affected psychological variables. Financial difficulties also have a major impact on psychological well-being, irrespective of unemployment. Activity was found to be positively associated with psychological well-being. The social policy implications from this study suggest that women may have different needs in relation to employment assistance due to their personal and family circumstances, and that unemployment policies may need to address some psychological variables and financial difficulties more directly. Future studies in this area are recommended to explore these issues further.

It has generally been considered that people who have been unemployed for a long period suffer from lowered psychological well-being (Jahoda, 1988). Lowered psychological well-being is synonymous with what Jahoda (1988) refers to as "a lowered degree of positive mental health" (p. 20). This does not mean that the vast majority of
unemployed are suffering from psychiatric disorders, although some may be. Rather it means that, in general, the unemployed person does not compare well in terms of psychological well-being or mental health to an employed person.

There is, however, relatively little agreement on the psychological effects of long-term unemployment compared to shorter periods of unemployment. Jackson and Warr (1984) reviewed a number of cross-sectional and longitudinal studies and failed to find a significant association between psychological ill-health and longer periods of unemployment. A study by Hepworth (1980) was the only exception and more recent studies have failed to support her results (see Feather, 1985). Winefield, and Tiggemann (1989) found that the maximum psychological impact of unemployment in young people probably occurs after about six months and declines thereafter. Payne, Warr, and Hartley (1984) and Payne (1988) found that men who had been continuously unemployed showed improvements in mental health after a three year period. Feather (1985), therefore, concludes "the evidence typically fails to show that longer durations of unemployment are associated with lower psychological well-being" (p. 270).

Alternatively, there is support for the idea that with long-term unemployment, psychological well-being may increase, or at least be maintained at an initially lowered level without further deterioration. Warr and Jackson (1985) found that adult males reached a point of stabilisation in impaired psychological well-being, after an average of six months of continuous unemployment. Warr and Jackson (1987) found that after a further period of between 12 and 24 months, a small but significant average improvement occurred in psychological well-being. Warr, Jackson and Banks (1988) refer to this improvement in psychological well-being as 'constructive adaptation' where unemployed people take positive steps to develop interests and activities outside the labour market. They found that individuals took up hobbies, expanded their social networks or did voluntary work for the community.

Alternatively, they suggested that individuals may have 'resigned adaptation' where they reduce their aspirations and lower their emotional investment in the environment (Warr et al., 1988). In this case, individuals withdraw from job seeking, depend upon limited routines of behaviour, and protect themselves from threatening events by avoiding new situations and potentially stressful or expensive activities. Warr et al. (1988) consider that
both of these adaptations may lead to a slight improvement in affective well-being, but suggest that resigned adaptation would be regarded as unhealthy because parallel reductions occur in aspiration, autonomy and personal competence.

The findings of Fryer and Payne (1984) also support the adaptation viewpoint. They interviewed eleven 'proactive' unemployed people in the United Kingdom and found that they were not experiencing psychological deprivation, even though they were experiencing material deprivation. This appeared to be due primarily to their active participation in a number of voluntary organisations. 'Good copers' exhibited high levels of personal competence, aspiration and autonomy throughout their lives, and consequently their proactive response to unemployment was primarily a function of their prior characteristics. Fryer and Payne (1984) view the person as an "active social agent striving to make sense of his or her situation and acting according to reasons and intentions to pursue chosen goals..." (p. 287).

Upon reviewing a number of these studies, Haworth and Evans (1987) suggest that the predominant mediating variable in determining the psychological impact of long-term unemployment is the individual's engagement in personally meaningful activity. There is much debate, however, on the nature of what constitutes meaningful activity.

The Nature of Meaningful Activity

Jahoda (1984) suggests that work is meaningful activity in terms of maintaining psychological well-being. She does not consider leisure to be a functional alternative to work (Jahoda, 1981). Other researchers, however, have suggested other forms of personally meaningful activity - leisure and life style aspects (Fryer, & McKenna, 1987; Haworth, & Evans, 1987). These activities incorporate a wide range of activities (e.g., sports, club membership, hobbies, household maintenance and chores, etc.). All of these activities can be perceived by the individual to be personally meaningful.

Stebbins (1982) used the term 'serious leisure' to define those activities which have an element of obligation. Serious leisure is characterised by the occasional need to persevere at it, the development of the activity as in a career; the requirement for effort based on specialised knowledge, training or skill; the provision of durable benefits including
feelings of accomplishment, enhancement of self-image, social interaction and belongingness; the production of an ethos and social world; and the identification of the person with an activity. Haworth and Evans (1987) consider that serious leisure is therefore not very different from work as it provides "access to the categories of experience which Jahoda associated with employment" (p. 246). As Haworth and Evans (1987) suggest, distinguishing the activity of the unemployed person in terms of 'work' and leisure is not always easy. Therefore, in research, close attention needs to be given to defining what is meant by activity. In this study, activity was defined as participation in part-time/casual/voluntary employment and/or education and/or training. This definition does not provide a distinction between work and leisure activities, but it does provide a definition of activity which is an alternative to full-time employment.

**Sex Differences and Meaningful Activity**

In the majority of the studies conducted on activity and psychological well-being, the samples were men or young people (Warr, 1984; Winefield, Tiggemann, & Winefield, 1992). One Swedish study, however, examined the psychological impact of long-term unemployment on women.

In this study Brenner and Levi (1987) compared unemployed women (with and without extra social support) and employed women (with insecure and secure jobs). Results showed that a substantial proportion of the unemployed, compared to the employed, demonstrated a lower degree of psychological well-being, but that the unemployed groups had a gradual adaptation to the conditions of unemployment which was reflected in their psychological well-being. Therefore, again there is evidence for the adaptation viewpoint with stabilisation or an improvement in psychological well-being after longer periods of unemployment.

Sex differences in the adult unemployed have not received much attention in the research. Consequently, there is a lack of published evidence on the psychological impact of long-term unemployment on women (see Muller, Hicks, & Winocur, 1993). Activity for women may have been considered by some researchers to be involvement in home duties or childcare, but it has been demonstrated by a number of studies (see Muller, 1995) that such activities alone are not protective factors against the negative effects of
unemployment. Activity, it seems, must be considered personally meaningful by the individual. Therefore it appears that individual differences are important determinants of the psychological impact of unemployment.

To examine more closely the psychological impact of long-term unemployment, involvement in activity, and sex differences, a small group of long-term unemployed individuals were selected for a case study analysis. It was anticipated that information from semi-structured interviews would provide more in-depth information on individual differences and the impact of long-term unemployment.

Qualitative methodology in the form of ethnographic studies was the technique first used in unemployment research (Jahoda, Lazarsfeld, & Ziesel, 1933). Quantitative methods, however, gradually took over and are employed in the majority of research in this field. There is, however, a recent movement back towards the incorporation of qualitative methods in an effort to gain better understanding of this complex social phenomenon.

Feather (1990) reviewed unemployment research in Australia and has suggested that "the large-scale surveys that have been conducted need to be supplemented by intensive interviews of selected groups so as to obtain more detailed information about the unemployment experience and how individuals cope when they have no paid employment" (p. 242). "The averages that come out of the statistical analysis of large data banks are impersonal and far removed from the life experiences of the unemployed themselves" (p. 24). Other recent studies have also moved in this direction, combining quantitative results from survey studies with case study information (Fineman, 1987; Fryer, & Ullah, 1987).

The use of qualitative methodology, particularly the use of the case study method, as a 'scientific tool' has been a recent phenomenon (Gummesson, 1991). Gummesson (1991) argues that academic researchers who are engaged in-house in organisations get insights into the 'real' world. Interviews with the long-term unemployed in this study provide an opportunity for contact with the 'real' world of unemployment. The limitations of a qualitative approach are the lack of reliability and the subjective bias of the researcher. However, Taylor and Bogdan (1984) argue that qualitative researchers emphasise validity, while quantitative researchers emphasise reliability, and consider that reliability has been overemphasised in social research.
Therefore this study uses a qualitative methodology to provide a more personal and in-depth investigation into psychological well-being, activity and sex differences in the long-term unemployed. The following research questions will be investigated:

1. What is the impact of long-term unemployment on psychological well-being?
2. Does activity have a positive impact on psychological well-being?
3. Are there sex differences in both the impact of long-term unemployment on psychological well-being and the psychological impact of activity?

METHOD

Subjects

Ten subjects were selected from a sample who had been unemployed for a period of between 12 months and 36 months and therefore met the Australian Department of Social Security criteria for 'long-term unemployment'. At Time 4 of a longitudinal study (Muller, 1994), 53 subjects were asked to indicate if they would be able to be contacted for an interview in early 1993. Twenty people agreed. Letters were sent to 16 of the 20 who still lived in the Beenleigh area. Four had moved out of the area and therefore it was decided to contact them by phone. Those in the local area were invited to attend an interview and receive a complimentary morning or afternoon tea. Eight subjects agreed to be interviewed. Of the 4 who had moved to different towns, 2 were interviewed by telephone. In total 10 subjects were interviewed: 5 males and 5 females.

Subjects appeared well matched to the initial sample of long-term unemployed. Their mean ages were 47 years (range 32-59 years) for males and 32 years (range 22-57 years) for females. Sixty percent of the group had no dependent children. They consisted of two single females, three JET clients (Female Sole Parents), one single male, one married male with a dependent child and three married males with non-dependent children. All subjects had English as a first language. The mean length of unemployment was eighteen months. Forty percent of both males and females were blue collar workers. Scores on psychological variables also reflected the findings of a quantitative study (Muller, 1994) as they showed improvements in Psychological well-being as the result of activity level and employment status. Those subjects interviewed represented all of the available sample.
Procedure

The interviews were held at a local coffee shop in central Beenleigh (an area of high unemployment in Queensland, Australia). The coffee shop was situated in the central business district and was close to the railway station. Free parking was also available.

The interviews took place at a table in an outdoor setting to minimise interruption and to enhance privacy. The coffee shop had only a moderate number of clientele and therefore was not too noisy or distracting. Staff were advised that the author was conducting interviews (the nature of which was not disclosed) and therefore they made every effort not to interrupt.

On each occasion the subject was invited to order from the menu and the order was placed by the author. This was done so that the subjects would not feel in anyway financially obligated, which may have made the situation socially tense. A prior arrangement had been made for payment to occur after the person had left.

The author introduced herself and stated that she was interviewing those people who had indicated that they were happy to be interviewed at the time of the last survey to find out information on how they had been personally affected by unemployment. Confidentiality was again assured. Rapport was maximised by wearing casual clothing and by limiting note-taking to key words and sentences to ensure an easy communication flow. For reasons of privacy and confidentiality, it was decided not to use a cassette recorder, as it was considered that the subjects would not disclose personal information if they thought it was going to be recorded.

Instrument

The semi-structured interview format consisted of a question pertaining to six psychological variables (self-esteem, depression, psychological distress, hopelessness, life satisfaction, and time usage) which have been measured in previous studies (Muller, 1992; Muller et al., 1993; Muller, Winocur, Hicks, & Delahaye, 1994; Muller, 1994). Two other variables were also examined - financial difficulties and attitude towards employment.
Although the interviews were semi-structured, the subjects were encouraged to talk freely about their experiences. Each interview took approximately 45-60 minutes.

After the interview procedures were completed, a verbatim summary of each interview was recorded onto a cassette by the author. This method was used as it was considered that a verbal report was more representative of the actual circumstances than an initial written report which is more likely to be subject to editing. The transcripts were then typed verbatim from the recordings. These are available upon request.

RESULTS

Case Study Analysis

Trends in the psychological variables which constitute psychological well-being have been identified from the case studies. These are related to the three areas of interest in this research program - (i) the impact of long-term unemployment on psychological well-being; (ii) the impact of activity on psychological well-being; and (iii) sex differences. Case Study findings will therefore be discussed to address the three research questions.

Psychological well-being in this study consisted of a number of variables. These and the other two variables will be discussed separately.

Self-Esteem. The general trend emerging from the case studies suggests that self-esteem is mediated by involvement in activity. The majority of subjects did not report having problems with self-esteem. Being involved in activity appears to be the main reason for this. Most subjects were actively involved in some form of leisure or life style activity (e.g., participation in sporting clubs or voluntary work).

One subject who did have some problems with self-esteem considered that this was due to past personal problems (i.e., domestic violence) and was not related to unemployment (Case 5). Another subject initially reported self-esteem problems, but after commencing a training course (which was considered an increase in activity) her self-esteem improved (Case 6). This wasn't due to the content of the course, it was due to the fact that she decided there was more to life than sitting at home - "I was able to come outside my box and see there was a world out there and I had to do something to embrace it."
Case 10, however, did report low self-esteem. Although it was seen to be related to long-term unemployment, it was directly related to her poor financial circumstances which limited her participation in social activities.

In summary, self-esteem was considered to be mediated by activity. Any problems with self-esteem did not appear to be attributed by the subject to long-term unemployment alone, but rather to other factors (e.g., personal/relationship problems and financial difficulties). These, however, may be secondary effects of long-term unemployment in some cases. Slight problems with self-esteem were more evident with female subjects than males. Lowered self-esteem was particularly evident in two of the women with dependent children who had either personal problems or who had not initially participated in activity, and the older single woman with no dependent children.

**Depression.** The trend emerging from the case studies regarding depression is that the majority of subjects reported periods of depression. Depression, however, was attributed directly to long-term unemployment by only one subject (Case 3). He carried a folder of job application rejection letters which he had received over time. He stated that he would prefer personal rejections rather than standard impersonal letters. However in Cases 5 and 10, depression was related to financial difficulties which are generally a consequence of long-term unemployment. Personal problems were also reported as being the cause of depression for four subjects.

In summary, it seems that at times depression was experienced by the majority of the long-term unemployed subjects, but it was not totally attributed to long-term unemployment. Rather it seems that the secondary effects of long-term unemployment (e.g., financial difficulties) and personal problems are more often cited as reasons. All of the female subjects reported some periods of depression, compared to only three of the male subjects.

**Psychological Distress.** Psychological distress was experienced by the majority of the subjects. Half of the subjects reported feelings of irritability, anger and frustration at being (long-term) unemployed, whilst the others reported financial difficulties and personal problems as the source of their distress. Again, financial difficulties and personal problems may be seen as secondary to the effects of long-term unemployment.
Attitude Towards Employment. Finally, it was considered interesting to compare the attitudes of men and women with regard to the importance of paid employment. The women with dependent children generally considered that their family was their major priority. Even though they sought employment, it was only considered one aspect in their concept of 'identity'. They saw themselves as wanting to have both a child care provider role and paid employment, particularly in a position which provided a sense of meaning. The single older woman, on the other hand, was more employment-oriented and appeared to have more negative effects on psychological well-being directly associated with unemployment (Case 10).

The men generally had what may be described as a 'breadwinner mentality'. They saw themselves as being primarily responsible for providing an income and clearly identified with this role. Most of the men, however, no longer had dependent children and were older than the women. Therefore the sex differences in attitudes towards employment may also be related to age and personal circumstances.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study will now be discussed to answer the research questions.

Question 1: What is the impact of long-term unemployment on psychological well-being? The overall findings from this qualitative study suggest that only particular aspects of psychological well-being (i.e., psychological distress, depression and life satisfaction) are affected in this group of long-term unemployed subjects. However, long-term unemployment is not seen as the major cause of decreased psychological well-being. It appears that financial difficulties and personal problems (which may be considered secondary effects of long-term unemployment) are more responsible for the lowered aspect of psychological well-being.

Question 2: Does activity have a positive impact on psychological well-being? Activity, in all cases, does appear to have a positive impact on psychological well-being. Activity may therefore mediate the negative effects of long-term unemployment and in some cases may also mediate the secondary negative effects in relation to psychological well-being.
Question 3: Are there sex differences in both the impact of long-term unemployment on psychological well-being and the psychological impact of activity? There are some sex differences in the impact of long-term unemployment on psychological well-being. These are mainly found in the variables of self-esteem and depression, which are consistent with findings found in other sex difference studies (see Muller, 1994). Women, it appears, may be more prone to these types of problems with psychological well-being than men. Women in this study, however, had more responsibilities than the men, as the majority of them were sole parents with dependent children. It is therefore difficult to generalise the findings on sex differences due to the lack of men under similar circumstances, but this aspect should be considered in future studies. With regard to the psychological impact of activity, it appears that activity has a positive impact on both men and women.

The Findings in Relation to the Literature

The results of this study are generally consistent with the findings of Warr and Jackson (1985, 1987) in that the long-term unemployed subjects either stabilised or improved in their psychological well-being. Most subjects could be described as having 'constructive adaptation' (Warr et al., 1988) where they developed interests and activities outside the labour market (e.g., voluntary work, cycling, baseball, writing).

The results are also in agreement with the findings of Fryer and Payne (1984) where engagement in activities moderated the effects of psychological deterioration, despite material deprivation. All subjects in this study experienced material deprivation (i.e., financial difficulties) and all were involved in activities.

Haworth and Evans (1987) suggested that the mediating factor in the prevention of psychological deterioration was involvement in activity which was considered 'meaningful'. Evidence from a number of the case studies supports this view as their activities were personally meaningful. Fryer and McKenna (1987) view leisure activities as being meaningful activities. As most of the activities engaged in by the subjects would be considered leisure activities, their view is also supported. Furthermore in some instances (e.g., Cases 3 and 8) the activities would be considered to be 'serious leisure' as defined by Stebbins (1982).
Overall, this study supports the following arguments - that engagement in meaningful activity moderates the negative effects of long-term unemployment; in general, psychological well-being does not deteriorate further with extended durations of unemployment; only some aspects of psychological well-being are lowered; financial difficulties and personal problems are related to some negative psychological aspects of psychological well-being in long-term unemployed subjects; and that in this sample there appear to be only a few sex differences in psychological well-being and these may not necessarily be due to long-term unemployment.

Three important findings, however, are that (i) women with dependent children may have different needs with regard to assistance with employment; (ii) some aspects of lowered psychological well-being may be positively affected by activity; and (iii) financial difficulties appear to have a major impact on psychological well-being irrespective of unemployment. These issues have important social policy implications. For example, (i) child and home care responsibilities must be considered in employment assistance programs for women in the actual employment opportunities they seek, and by policy makers; (ii) special intervention funding should target programs which have been empirically shown to increase psychological well-being or case management practices need to incorporate activity in their overall plan; and (iii) financial deprivation may be addressed through the provision of a minimum social wage. Overall, this study has identified trends which provide more insight into the 'real' impact of long-term unemployment on psychological well-being, the effects of activity and sex differences. Such trends highlight avenues for further research.

REFERENCES


Long-term Unemployment: Case Study Analysis 43