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PREDICTORS OF DEPRESSIVE SYMPTOMS AMONG UNEMPLOYED BLACK ADULTS

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ABSTRACT

Using data from a probability based survey of unemployed Black adults residing in an urban area, this study explores factors related to the presence of depressive symptoms. Findings indicate that depressive symptoms are less among unemployed persons with higher levels of income, education, religiosity, age and satisfactory social support. Age, however, is the single best predictor of depressive symptoms among unemployed Blacks. There were no significant differences by gender.

With unemployment becoming an increasing phenomenon in recent years, researchers have given greater attention to the psychological impact and mental health consequences of unemployment. Yet, despite the disproportionately high representation of Blacks among the unemployed, few studies have systematically examined the psychological consequences and responses of Black adults to conditions of unemployment.

Historically, the unemployment problems of Blacks have intensified during periods of recession and economic decline. During the ten-year period from 1970 to 1980, the unemployment rates for adult Black males and females were consistently at least twice as high as rates of unemployment for adult white males and females (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1982). To be noted, these official unemployment rates did not encompass the numbers of long-term unemployed Blacks, i.e. those who have joined the ranks of discouraged workers no longer seeking employment (National Urban League, 1981). Nonetheless, most of the research on the mental health effects of unemployment have focused on white workers, to the exclusion of Blacks.

In general, research has shown that unemployment can have a devastating effect on mental well-being. Noted among the consequences of unemployment are distress, loss of self confidence, hopelessness and depression (Eisenberg & Lazarsfeld, 1935; Bakke, 1933; Hall, 1955). In particular, depression among unemployed persons may become manifested in alcohol abuse (Borrero, 1980), family violence (Hall, 1978), crime (Borrero, 1980) or thoughts of suicide (Brenner, 1976).

The psychological response to unemployment, however, is not a uniform experience (Gore, 1978; Liem & Rayman, 1982). Previous research has indicated that the extent to which the experience of unemployment is associated with depressive symptomatology varies according to one's life circumstances or socio-demographic characteristics as well as the availability of social support from family members, friends, neighbors and others.

Among the socio-demographic characteristics found to mediate the psychological effects of unemployment is age (Minkler, 1981; Hepworth, 1980). According to Minkler, middle-age persons (40 to 55 years of age), in particular, may encounter great psychological difficulties, as many still have families with children in school to support. Minkler suggests that even though younger workers may be discouraged, they are more likely to develop alternative career goals and locate new employment. And, older workers may use this opportunity to ease into early retirement.

Studies by Hepworth (1980) and Figueira-McDonough (1978) report that those of the highest level of educational attainment evidence less anxiety and less worry than unemployed persons with the lowest level of educational attainment. The underlying assumption is that more highly educated persons have greater marketable skills, resources and awareness of employment options than persons in unskilled and semi-skilled occupations. Hepworth (1980) and Figueira-McDonough (1978) also note that the level of psychological distress is heightened as the duration of unemployment extends. In terms of marital status, less distress is reported among unemployed persons who are married in comparison to those who are never-married, separated, divorced or widowed (Komarovsky, 1940).

Unfortunately, most of the studies of the psychological consequences of unemployment have focused on males, without consideration of its impact on females. Among Blacks, in particular, the rate of unemployment is often higher for Black females than Black males depending on the region of the country (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1982), but meager evidence is

available to document differences between Black males and females and their psychological responses to unemployment. In a large, mostly white sample, Campbell, Converse & Rodgers (1976) do point out that unemployed men and women have greater distress than those who are employed, but the psychological distress is more acute for unemployed men. On the other hand, Warr & Parry (1983) report an inconsistent relationship between employment and psychological health among women.

There is some evidence which suggests that religious involvement may help to reduce symptoms of anxiety, poor self-image and anger associated with depression (Stoudenmire, 1976) as well as promote psychological well-being in general (Cutler, 1977). Religiosity in particular is a factor to be considered as a moderator of psychological distress among unemployed Blacks, given studies reporting a high level of participation in religious activities among Blacks (Olsen, 1970; Klobus-Edwards et al., 1972; Brown, 1982) and the unique role of the church in Black communities (Myrdal, 1944; Frazier, 1963; Gary, 1981).

Another set of factors projected to mediate the psychological consequences of unemployment is support derived through social relationships. Social support encompasses the tangible and intangible assistance that people receive from family members, friends and others in their network of social relationships (Gottlieb, 1978; Leavy, 1983). Studies of depression among the unemployed contend that social support tends to buffer the stresses of unemployment (Komarovskiy, 1940; Ferman, 1964, Gore, 1978).

From a longitudinal study of the physical and mental health consequences of unemployment, Gore (1978) reported that men

with little or no social support were the most depressed and consistently reported a higher sense of economic deprivation than those receiving social support. Also, Figueira-McDonough's (1978) findings indicate that active social support along with acquiring help for daily needs was the most relevant factor in reducing the distress of the unemployed. However, neither of these studies specifically reported findings related to Blacks and the Figueira-McDonough study was based upon a non-random sample of respondents.

Given the sparsity of empirical findings related to psychological consequences of unemployment among Blacks, the present study had as its objective to examine factors which influence the extent to which psychological distress is experienced by unemployed Black adults. Specifically, it is hypothesized that: 1) unemployed Black males have more depressive symptoms than unemployed Black females; 2) depression is higher among middle-age unemployed Blacks than other age groups; 3) the longer the period of unemployment, the greater the depressive symptomatology; 4) unemployed persons who are married will have fewer depressive symptoms than those who are not married; 5) depressive symptoms will be fewer among unemployed persons who are high in religiosity in comparison to those who are less involved in religious behavior; 6) those who perceive the social support they receive from others as being satisfactory will have fewer depressive symptoms than unemployed persons who receive unsatisfactory social support; and 7) when various factors are considered, satisfaction with social support will be the strongest moderator of depressive symptoms among unemployed Black adults.

DATA AND METHOD

The data for the study were gathered from a survey of Black adults residing in a metropolitan area. Respondents were selected through a stratified random sampling procedure. They participated in structured interviews conducted during the fall and winter of 1981.

The original sample consisted of 451 Black adults, 18 years of age and older. Excluding housewives, retired persons and students, 355 persons were eligible for participation in the labor force. Of these, 109 or 30.7 percent indicated that they were unemployed. The unemployment rate for males in the sample was 26.4 percent and 33.5 percent for females. Almost two-thirds (66.1 percent) of the unemployed were female.

The unemployed respondents had an average age of 39.6 years. Nearly three-fourths (75.2 percent) were not married. Level of educational attainment averaged 9.5 years of schooling; the median household income of respondents approximated \$5,500. Respondents had been unemployed from less than a month to more than ten years. A considerable number of respondents were among the long term unemployed as the average length of time unemployed was 6 years, 2 months. Most of the unemployed persons (50.8 percent) worked in skilled jobs, however 34.4 percent had previously worked in service, semi-skilled and laborer occupations. Only 14.8 percent had been employed in professional, managerial and other white-collar occupations.

The dependent variable of depressive symptoms was measured by the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CES-D; Radloff, 1977). Widely used in epidemiologic field studies (Eaton &

Kessler, 1981; Comstock & Helsing, 1976; Roberts & Vernon, 1982; Frerichs, Aneshensel & Clark, 1981), the CES-D consists of 20 statements pertaining to recent moods such as feeling fearful, sad, lonely, happy, and so forth. Respondents indicate the frequency of particular moods from "rarely or none of the time" to "most of the time" on a four-point Likert-type scale. Total scores on the CES-D range from 0 to 60; scores 16 and above represent high levels of depressive symptomatology (Radloff, 1977). The Spearman Brown split-half reliability was 0.80.

Among the independent variables, the general socio-demographic factors included age, gender, marital status, household income, and highest year of education completed. Two of these variables (gender and marital status) were dichotomously coded. Respondents were also asked to give the length of time unemployed. Religiosity was measured using items from the scale developed by Kenney, Cromwell & Vaughn (1977). For this analysis, ten items were used pertaining to the frequency of involvement in a range of religious activities and the application of religious beliefs to their life. Responses to the scale items ranged from "never" to "very often" on a five-point Likert-type scale. Total scores varied from 10 to 50 and were categorized into low (10 to 27), moderate (28 to 43), and high (44 to 50) involvement in religious practices, based upon one standard deviation above and below the median score. Finally, the efficacy of social support was assessed by asking respondents to indicate the extent to which they were satisfied or dissatisfied with the responses of others to their problems on a four point Likert-type scale. Responses were recoded into dichotomous categories of

"satisfied" and "dissatisfied." Analysis of variance, Pearson's correlations and multiple regression techniques were used to analyze data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

First, to ascertain if conditions of unemployment have a detrimental impact on the psychological well-being of Black adults, scores on the CES-D for unemployed Blacks were compared to those for employed respondents. As expected, the 109 unemployed persons had a significantly higher mean level of depressive symptomatology ($M = 14.91$) than the 246 persons who remained employed ($M = 9.54$; $F(1,353) = 31.140$, $p = .001$). Almost one-half (45.6 percent) of the unemployed had CES-D scores of 16 or above, indicative of higher levels of depressive symptomatology. This contrasts with 27.4 percent for the entire sample.

Among the unemployed, it was hypothesized that the level of depressive symptomatology would vary according to selected socio-demographic characteristics and the efficacy of social support. Table 1 gives the distribution of CES-D scores for the independent variables in the analysis.

In terms of gender, the results show a slightly higher mean score for unemployed Black females than males, but the difference is not statistically significant ($F(1,107) = .481$). Contrary to the findings of Campbell *et al.*, (1976), these data suggest that unemployed Black males are not more likely to have higher levels of psychological distress than similar females. Moreover, these findings also do not reflect the general trend of higher depressive symptomatology among females in comparison to males (Eaton & Kessler, 1981; Comstock & Helsing, 1976).

Table 1

CES-D Scores By Socio-Demographic Variables

	<u>n</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>sd</u>
<u>Gender</u>			
Males	37	14.05	8.86
Females	72	15.35	9.39
<u>Age</u>			
18-30	45	15.60	8.51
31-45	25	14.92	10.66
46-60	21	13.05	9.84
61 years & over	18	15.33	8.35
<u>Education</u>			
8 years or less	34	15.94	9.33
9-11	41	15.39	9.63
12	19	16.63	9.47
13+	13	8.85	5.08
<u>Household Income</u>			
less than \$6,000	47	16.43	9.57
\$6 - 11,999	17	12.18	7.23
\$12 - 24,999	14	13.86	8.65
\$25,000 and above	9	7.67	4.21
<u>Marital Status</u>			
Married	27	13.33	9.27
Not Married	82	15.43	8.94
<u>Religiosity</u>			
Low	23	12.04	7.53
Medium	62	15.47	9.47
High	10	9.10	7.49

Table 1 Cont'd

	<u>n</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>sd</u>
<u>Length of Time Unemployed</u>			
1 year or less	34	12.71	8.44
1 to 3 years	17	15.47	9.03
3 to 10 years	21	19.14	9.90
10 years or more	16	14.19	9.22
<u>Efficacy of Social Support</u>			
Satisfied	62	13.71	9.24
Dissatisfied	12	20.67	8.77

The results show a good association between age and CES-D scores ($r = -.248$, $p = .01$), indicating that depressive symptoms among unemployed Black adults tend to decrease with increasing age. In contrast to the findings of Minkler (1981) and Hepworth (1980), distress was not greatest for middle-age unemployed adults.

That these findings do not corroborate those of Minkler and Hepworth may in part be due to the slightly different age categories. In addition, it may be the case that many middle-aged Blacks would have been more likely than younger workers to have previously encountered periods of unemployment, and thus, be less apt to experience psychological distress related to unemployment. On the other hand, these results support other studies which have found that depressive symptoms decrease with increasing age among Blacks in general (Eaton & Kessler, 1981; Comstock & Helsing, 1976).

Education was only modestly associated with CES-D scores ($r = -.155$, $p = .05$), but nevertheless suggested that depressive symptoms decline with higher levels of educational attainment among unemployed Blacks. These data support the previous findings of Hepworth (1980) and Figueira-McDonough (1978).

Depressive symptomatology was only slightly higher among non-married unemployed persons ($M = 15.43$) than those who were married ($M = 13.33$). The mean difference was not statistically significant ($F(1,107) = .457$). Accordingly, marital status among unemployed Black adults does not appear to influence the extent to which depressive symptoms are reported.

The level of depressive symptomatology did vary inversely with household income ($r = -.280$, $p = .01$). Specifically, CES-D scores declined with increasing levels of household income. Unemployed Black adults with household incomes of \$25,000 or more reported considerably fewer depressive symptoms than those of the lowest incomes.

It is not surprising that unemployed Blacks of the lowest incomes would report the highest levels of distress. Financial resources are understandably limited for the poor. Recognizably, unemployed persons of the highest incomes are more apt to have been in professional or white collar occupations and thus, have alternative financial resources such as severance pay, savings or employment income from a spouse or other family member.

When depressive symptomatology was examined according to the length of time unemployed, a very weak linear relationship was found ($r = -.006$, n.s.). A further examination of the data, indicates an increase in mean CES-D scores as the period

of unemployment ranges from one year to ten years. After ten years of unemployment, depressive symptoms decrease. It would appear that at the end of ten years, many unemployed Blacks have adopted alternative ways of economic survival such as part-time or interim employment. To be noted, these findings differ somewhat from those of Hepworth (1980) who reported greater psychological distress among the unemployed as the length of time unemployed increased. Unlike the Hepworth study where only 23.1 percent of the sample of white male respondents had been unemployed for more than one year, this study included both males and females; 61.4 percent of whom were among the long-term unemployed.

For the variable of religiosity, it was expected that depressive symptoms would decrease as involvement in religious activities increased. To the contrary, there was only a weak linear relationship ($r = -.025$, n.s.). A closer look at the mean scores indicates that depressive symptomatology is lowest among the low and high religiosity groups ($M = 12.04$ and $M = 9.10$ respectively) and highest for those with mid-range religiosity scale scores ($M = 15.46$; $F(2,92) = 2.942$, $p = .05$). These findings indicate that having a strong religious commitment or none at all is associated with fewer symptoms of depression.

In terms of the efficacy of the social support provided by social relationships, there was a fairly good association with level of depressive symptoms ($r = -.179$, $p = .05$). Similar to the findings of Gore (1978), it appears that depressive symptomatology declines as satisfaction with the assistance received from others increases.

Table 2

Standardized Regression Coefficients
for Predictors of Depressive Symptoms

	<u>beta</u>	<u>se_beta</u>	<u>t</u>
Gender	.080	.123	.654
Age	-.482	.164	-2.945**
Education	-.228	.137	-1.663
Household Income	-.210	.129	-1.663
Marital Status	.008	.127	.066
Religiosity	.068	.137	.670
Length of Time Unemployment	.156	.142	1.098
Efficacy of Social Support	-.101	.119	-.846

F (8,65) = 2.413*
Adjusted R² = .243

** p = .01

* p = .05

Table 2 presents the results of the regression analysis conducted to examine the factors having the greatest influence on depressive symptoms for unemployed Blacks. A

comparison of standardized regression coefficients among predictor variables indicates that age (beta = $-.482$, $p = .01$) is the single best predictor of depressive symptomatology among unemployed Black adults.

These findings differ from those of Figueira-McDonough (1978) who reported that social support was the most important factor related to the experience of psychological distress among unemployed persons. Although receiving satisfactory social support is positively related to fewer symptoms of depression among unemployed Blacks, these results indicate that when other factors are controlled, social support is less important than age, education, household income and length of time unemployed. To be noted, this study employed a different measure of social support than the one used by Figueira-McDonough. And, this study included both unemployed males and females.

CONCLUSION

It was anticipated that unemployed Black adults would experience greater psychological distress than those who remain employed. However, the experience of being unemployed affects persons differently, depending upon their socio-demographic circumstances, religiosity, and social support. The psychological consequences of unemployment are less devastating to those with the greatest resources, that includes older Black adults and those of the highest levels of education and income. Also, distress is less among those who perceive they are satisfactorily supported by friends, family members and others. And, unemployed Blacks who are actively engaged in religious activities are likely to have fewer adverse psychological reactions. Of all these

factors - age, income, education, religiosity, and social support - which meliorate the potential negative consequences of being unemployed, the most important factor for Blacks is age. The experience of getting older appears to be accompanied not only by fewer idealistic perceptions of work and employment but also the accumulation of greater resources in terms of socially supportive relationships, economic alternatives and work experience.

Contrary to traditional assumptions applicable to white populations, findings from this study point out that unemployment may be just as psychologically distressful to Black females as males. Out of the necessity to contribute to the economic maintenance of their families, Black females have had an historical pattern of a greater participation in the labor force than females of other racial and ethnic groups. However, given the changing nature of workforce participation by women in general, their entry into a greater diversity of careers and occupations along with the increasing dependence on the financial contribution of women to their families, there is the need to further explore the psychological ramifications of unemployment for women.

Finally, the results of this study suggest that additional research is warranted among a much overlooked group - the long term unemployed, e.g. those who remain jobless for a year or more. Particularly acute among Blacks, lengthy and interminable periods of unemployment need to be examined around factors which affect participation in the labor force as well as factors related to strategies for coping and survival.

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