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Unemployment and psychological health

Schaufeli, Wilmar Bernardus

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Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:

1988

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Schaufeli, W. B. (1988). *Unemployment and psychological health: An investigation among Dutch professionals*. s.n.

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Summary

As a macro-economical and social problem, unemployment might have severe psychological consequences for the individual. A psychological approach to unemployment tends to be particularly valuable since the public debate on unemployment is strongly dominated by economical facts and figures. More attention for the psychological state of affairs of unemployed people might counteract this one-sidedness and offer better perspectives for tackling nation's number one social problem.

In the present book the literature on unemployment and psychological health has been reviewed. Moreover, their relationship has been investigated empirically in a homogeneous group of professionals. In recent years the number of unemployed professionals has risen dramatically. Notwithstanding many speculations, adequately designed studies on the effects of professional unemployment on psychological health are virtually lacking. These speculations can be summarized in two rival hypotheses stating that professionals are particularly resistant to the negative consequences of unemployment, and that they are especially vulnerable. In our study these were called the *pleasure* and *pain* hypothesis, respectively. The first hypothesis stresses the educational, social, and financial resources upon which unemployed professional can draw, whereas the latter hypothesis points to their marked status inconsistency ("The higher the climb, the harder the fall"). In the following we give a more detailed overview of the chapters of this book.

Chapter 1

Unemployment cannot be adequately studied without first paying attention to the theoretical background of work and employment. For that reason, some preliminary conceptual distinctions were made. Employment was defined in sociological and economical terms as a relationship between employer and employee, while work was characterized psychologically as a particular activity. Accordingly, work might or might not be performed within the context of employment. Moreover, unemployed people are not necessarily without work. It was argued that the psychological influence of work is profound as was demonstrated by Critical Psychological theory. This theory maintains that being "workless" is very threatening for the individual since basic human motives to control the environment are frustrated. This particular psychological theory offers an intriguing perspective since an

attempt is made to bridge the gap between sociological thought on employment and psychological thought on the working individual. Finally, the nature of unemployment was discussed from a general sociological point of view, referring to the rewarding aspects of employment which are generally, though not necessarily, lost in unemployment. These positive features of employment are more marked in professional jobs than in other jobs. Losing an enriched professional job might therefore have severe personal consequences. In Chapter 3 we did return to this issue by describing unemployment in more psychological terms.

Chapter 2

A comprehensive review of the literature on unemployment and psychological health was presented. More than eighty studies were discussed being selected on methodological grounds (e.g. both case studies and macro-social studies were excluded). In order to display a complete picture, the scope in this review was fairly broad and was not restricted to studies on professional unemployment but also included other social groups. It was concluded that unemployment has a negative impact on the psychological health of adults, whereas re-employment produces a positive effect. This holds in particular for general psychological distress and depressed mood, and does not seem to apply to self-esteem. In addition, some particular risk-factors for developing psychological symptoms were identified (e.g. a high employment commitment, financial strain, and lack of social support).

The picture was somewhat different in younger (school-leaver) samples. An interesting phenomenon has been demonstrated in a number of recent studies: The psychological health of unemployed school-leavers remains stable, whereas the health of employed school-leavers improves. Obviously work enhances psychological health. Again, self-esteem was largely unaffected by changes in employment status.

Results from studies using higher educated and qualified samples were less conclusive. Besides, the number of well-designed studies was rather limited. Both above mentioned rival hypotheses found some empirical support. It was concluded from the review that a *differential* study of unemployment is needed, whereby large and homogeneous groups should be studied longitudinally, using valid and reliable measurement instruments. Above all, however, a theoretical framework is needed which differentiates between individuals who might or might not be affected by unemployment. Such a framework was outlined in the next chapter.

Chapter 3

Unemployment has been described from a psychological perspective mainly because of the introduction of the concept of unemployment as a recent life event research. A number of several valuable concepts that eventually guided our empirical work were derived from literature that psychological dispositions such as an external locus of control and psychological distress when unemployed. On the other hand, factors such as social support act as resistance factors. Several psychological theories: perceived uncontrollability, attributional patterns (Learned Helplessness) related to a job (Expectancy Theory) (Coping theory). These psychological concepts such as uncontrollability as an etiological factor. Essentially, each theory puts forward a model which is meant to explain the psychological consequences of an uncontrollable situation such as unemployment. Three approaches were outlined: a correlational, a transverse, and a longitudinal. The correlational approach was designed for a different purpose than in studying differences in psychological health between employed and unemployed individuals. It was assumed that a number of variables (e.g. employment commitment) were correlated with psychological health. This approach was used to study the relationship between (i.e. employed, unemployed, and re-employed) and was made between moderator and mediator variables (e.g. social support) which were assumed to be related to psychological health and employment status, whereas the longitudinal approach that psychological health was studied in a longitudinal and moderated way, and indeed a longitudinal model (e.g. social isolation, perceived uncontrollability) model was specified which studied the *changes* in employment status. In the longitudinal model a stable psychological distress were

Chapter 3

Unemployment has been described both from a sociological life-event, and from a psychological perspective. These two viewpoints tend to converge, mainly because of the introduction of psychological concepts (e.g. coping) in recent life event research. A theoretical discussion of unemployment yielded several valuable concepts to be incorporated in the approaches which eventually guided our empirical research. Vulnerability and resistance factors were derived from life event research. It has been demonstrated that psychological dispositions (e.g. low self-esteem, neuroticism, and an external locus of control) increase the persons' susceptibility to psychological distress when confronted with some negative life event. On the other hand, factors as social support or a particular coping style might act as resistance factors. Other concepts were derived from various psychological theories: perceptions of control (Critical Psychology), causal attributional patterns (Learned helplessness theory), expectancies and values related to a job (Expectancy-value theory), and particular ways of coping (Coping theory). These psychological theories emphasize the importance of uncontrollability as an etiological factor for psychological distress. Essentially, each theory puts forward some particular intervening variable which is meant to explain individual differences in reactions to an uncontrollable situation such as unemployment.

Three approaches were outlined to be empirically investigated: the so-called correlational, transversal, and longitudinal approach. Each of these was designed for a different data-set. The correlational approach was used in studying differences in psychological health *within* the groups of employed and unemployed professionals, respectively. This approach assumed that a number of variables (e.g. attributions, employment commitment) were correlated with psychological health. The transversal approach was used to study differences *between* employment status groups (i.e. employed, unemployed, students). In this approach a sharp distinction was made between moderator variables (i.e. psychological dispositions) and mediator variables (e.g. social support, perception of control). The former were assumed to be relatively stable and unaffected by changes in employment status, whereas the latter were not. Thus, it was hypothesized that psychological health was influenced by employment status in a direct and moderated way, and indirectly, through changes in mediator variables (e.g. social isolation, perceived uncontrollability). Finally, a longitudinal model was specified which was used to study the relationship between *changes* in employment status and *changes* in psychological health. In this longitudinal model a stable "trait" and a changing "state" component of psychological distress were distinguished.

unemployment was associated with social isolation and a positive attitude towards non-work. These variables in their turn were positively and negatively related to psychological distress, respectively.

The results from the correlational analyses were somewhat disappointing. Unemployment was only (weakly) positive related to financial problems and negative appraisal of unemployment (both studies), and also weakly positive to duration of unemployment, useful spending of one's time, and perceived stigmatization (Study 2). Quite surprisingly, the intensity of looking for a job was *negatively* related to psychological distress contradicting a frustrated motivation interpretation. As expected in the employed group, most indicators of job stress were positively related to psychological distress. Generally, correlations in the employed group were higher than in the unemployed group, indicating that job-related variables were more important in explaining differences in psychological distress than variables related to the unemployment situation.

Chapter 7

Two different kinds of longitudinal analyses were performed. First a rather simple analysis was carried out, based on previous employment status transitions. These transitions could have been either positive (e.g. from unemployment to employment) or negative (e.g. from employment or study to unemployment). School-leavers who had experienced a negative transition did *not* show higher levels of psychological distress than those who had experienced a positive transition after their graduation. In Study 2 the re-employed exhibited lower mean levels of psychological distress at the one-year follow-up than the permanently unemployed. This difference, however, already existed at T_1 when all respondents were without a job. This finding suggests the operation of a kind of selection mechanism, resulting in jobs for the relatively healthy unemployed respondents and prolonged unemployment for their less healthy fellows. In Chapter 9, we returned to this intriguing issue in greater detail. Moreover, a general tendency towards better psychological health was observed for the employed as well as the unemployed respondents. It was argued that this phenomenon, which is typically observed in longitudinal studies using self-report questionnaires, might be an artefact resulting from social desirability.

In addition, in Study 1 a comprehensive structural equation model was developed step by step. This model included all four follow-ups and used a weighted indicator of the respondents' actual employment status based on previous status transitions. (A similar analysis could not be performed in Study 2 since the model assumed at least three subsequent measurements.) Unfortunately, the model did not fit the data very well. Nevertheless, two conclusions were drawn tentatively: (1) the respondents' actual employment

status did *not* affect the level of psychological distress, (2) the level of distress was strongly determined by a stable vulnerability component, which explained about two-thirds of the variance of distress. The former result was rather unexpected, whereas the latter finding agrees with recent studies using the same kind of models. In the next chapter we tried to shed more light on the nature of this vulnerability component by analyzing two extreme distress groups.

Chapter 8

Psychological distressed and non-distressed (i.e. symptom free) respondents were compared in order to determine the differences between both groups. A discriminant analysis was made to identify a particular set of variables on which both groups differed maximally. The distressed group was characterized by low self-esteem, neuroticism, and an external locus of control. In addition, the distressed respondents were more often female and lacked social support. Other variables such as attitudes and cognitions related to work and non-work did not discriminate between the two extreme groups. The psychological profile of the extreme groups agreed with that reported in the literature, suggesting that particular relatively stable dispositions act as vulnerability factors increasing the individual's susceptibility to psychological distress.

Two additional analyses were performed using unemployed and employed respondents, respectively. In the former case the results were rather disappointing: distressed and non-distressed unemployed respondents could not be discriminated by using a number of situation specific variables (e.g. causal attribution of unemployment, way of coping, being engaged in unpaid work). Distressed and non-distressed employed respondents, on the other hand, were successfully discriminated by a number of variables which indicated job stress. Not surprisingly, distressed respondents held stressful jobs.

Chapter 9

The determinants of success and failure were studied by comparing future successful and unsuccessful applicants, and by predicting future success on the labour market. The results from both studies indicated persuasively that the future employed respondents were more job oriented than the future unemployed respondents. The first group, for instance, were more strongly committed to work, they spent more time on seeking a job, and were more often engaged in non-paid activities than those who had failed to find employment.

Future success on the labour market could be predicted only to a limited

extent. The initial level of psychological distress played a significant role in this prediction so that the hypothesis that unemployment was refuted. This hypothesis states that unemployment, rather than

Chapter 10

Our analyses presented in this chapter confirm the earlier corroborative predictions. A finding that similar unexpected findings have been found in other studies. The theoretical approaches of Chapter 3 were reconsidered in the analyses. It was concluded that the particular theoretical framework mentioned theories emphasized. Unfortunately, in our study the effect of unemployment on psychological distress is to remain very small. Three different kinds of generalizations were predicted results. Although they cannot be ruled out, it was concluded that they have been distorted by these kind of explanations seem to be more plausible for researchers that unemployment is a function of historical and social context, and not of individual factors. We argued that for the most part the unexpected results. Firstly, a number of studies of unemployment has been done in the Dutch system of social security. The differences between employed and unemployed people in the Netherlands are higher than in other countries (until very recently). Finally, the label redundant workers as disempowered might explain why results from the Netherlands are generally less positive. *Psychological* explanations for the results are useful when we take a closer look at the results strongly suggested that the respondents were generally capable of dealing with the situation. Interviews indicated that the unemployed behaved in a proactive way.

extent. The initial level of psychological distress did not play an important role in this prediction so that the *reverse causation hypothesis* should be refuted. This hypothesis states that a high level of distress "causes" unemployment, rather than the other way around.

Chapter 10

Our analyses presented in the three previous chapters yielded many non-corroborative predictions. A critical reappraisal of the literature showed that similar unexpected findings have more often than is usually admitted been found in other studies.

The theoretical approaches to unemployment which were discussed in Chapter 3 were reconsidered in the light of the results obtained by our analyses. It was concluded that the results do not fit smoothly in any particular theoretical framework. This is not very surprising, since all mentioned theories emphasize some kind of intervening (cognitive) variable. Unfortunately, in our study we did not find profound effects of unemployment on psychological distress. Accordingly, the role of intervening variables is to remain very limited.

Three different kinds of general explanations were given for obtaining non-predicted results. Although *methodological and statistical* explanations cannot be ruled out, it was argued to be unlikely that our results have been distorted by these kinds of flaws or fallacies. Particular *contextual* explanations seem to be more plausible. Though it is recognized by most researchers that unemployment has to be considered within its specific historical and social context, little attention has usually been paid to these factors. We argued that four factors might be responsible for the unexpected results. Firstly, a *cultural change* towards a greater acceptance of unemployment has been documented in The Netherlands. Secondly, the Dutch system of social security tends to minimize differences between employed and unemployed people, for instance by institutionalizing unpaid work for unemployed people. Thirdly, employment benefits in The Netherlands are higher than in most other industrialized countries (at least until very recently). Finally, the Dutch system of social security tends to label redundant workers as disabled rather than unemployed. These factors might explain why results from psychological unemployment research in The Netherlands are generally less dramatic compared to foreign studies. *Psychological* explanations for the non-corroborated predictions prove to be useful when we take a closer look at the particular group under study. Our results strongly suggested that professionals are *good copers*, who are generally capable of dealing adequately with their unemployment. Additional interviews indicated that the unemployed professionals in the present study behaved in a proactive way. Instead of being passive, they acted upon

situations, pursuing desired goals and looked for alternatives. It was speculated that this proactive behaviour was supported by considerable educational resources, relative good prospects on employment, and favorable psychological features, such as high self-esteem and internal locus of control.

The chapter closed with some critical remarks about the present study and suggestions for further research. The most crucial suggestion was that in future studies the distinction between "employed" and "unemployed" should no longer be taken for granted. We learned from the present study that a suchlike dichotomization is irrelevant from a psychological point of view. What we need instead is a detailed description of a person's daily activities in psychological terms. At the same time such an approach would also overcome the prevalent traumatic view on unemployment by emphasizing the role of the individual as an active agent.

Ofschoon werkloosheid in eerste probleem is, kan het ook ernstig werkloze met zich meebrengen. In de eerste lezing ook in de desbetreffende is. Een psychologische benadering van dit boek wordt gepresenteerd. Werkloosheid bijna uitsluitend v. Meer aandacht voor de psychische eenzijdigheid in de discussie voor het aanvatten van wat me vormt.

In het onderhavige boek wordt psychische gezondheid uitvoerig beiden empirisch onderzocht is dat wil zeggen bij mannen en v. De afgelopen jaren is juist on. Ondanks talloze speculaties psychische gezondheid van h studies op dit gebied nagenoeg worden samengevat in twee riv stelt dat hoger opgeleiden in h negatieve gevolgen van werklo beschikken op maatschappij alternatieve hypothese bena kwetsbaarheid van werklozen naar de aanzienlijke statu geconfronteerd wordt. Dit la gezegde: "Hoe hoger men In het onderstaande wordt pe van de inhoud gegeven.

Hoofdstuk 1

De individuele gevolgen van worden onderzocht zonder a betekenis van werk. Met het onderscheid te maken tusser betaalde baan ("employment"