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**The Experience of Unemployment in  
Ireland: A Thematic Analysis**

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**The Experience of Unemployment in Ireland:  
A Thematic Analysis**

## **The Experience of Unemployment in Ireland:**

### **A Thematic Analysis**

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#### **Abstract**

This paper reports on the results of 13 semi-structured focus groups carried out with unemployed respondents across Ireland in 2010. The purpose of the research is to examine the subjective experience of unemployment across a wide range of dimensions. 15 overarching themes emerged from a detailed thematic analysis of the texts of the interviews. The themes highlight a wide range of aversive psychological states associated with unemployment. The themes examine: perceptions of the economic boom; reactions to the recession; attitudes toward media coverage; gender differences in experiences of unemployment; financial worries relating to unemployment; perceptions of the position of young people; uncertainty about the future; lack of structure and routine associated with unemployment; health issues associated with unemployment; identity challenges; the social context of unemployment; issues surrounding reentering employment; attitudes toward social protection payments; social comparison effect and perceptions of training services. This paper concludes with a brief discussion of the psychological impact of unemployment.

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## 1. Introduction

The aim of this study is to capture the subjective experience of unemployment in Ireland during the current economic downturn. The debate about unemployment in Ireland has been restricted to discussion regarding the macro and micro-economic issues, taking the social and psychological implications for granted. By listening to and documenting the views and experiences of people who have lost their jobs, the paper examines how material, emotional, psychological, social and physical well-being is being affected by unemployment and examines participants' views on how people who are unemployed are treated in Ireland. This study will be of interest to economists, policymakers, and anyone who is unemployed or has contact with people who are unemployed. We aim to use this information to further drive hypothesis testing with regard to the determinants of unemployment, the potential effectiveness of interventions and the mechanisms by which unemployment leads to psychological distress.

Examining the subjective experience of individuals who are unemployed is important for a number of reasons. Firstly, the welfare losses associated with unemployment have been shown in a large body of research to be far higher than those caused by a drop in consumption alone (e.g. Blanchflower and Bell, 2009; Delaney, 2009). It is vital to understand more fully where the large psychological cost of unemployment derives from. Secondly, a growing body of evidence is pointing to the fact that psychologically distressing features of unemployment may be a vehicle for prolonging unemployment, in that lower morale may generate suboptimal patterns of search and training on behalf of individuals who have been involuntarily laid off (e.g. Banerjee and Mullainathan 2007). Thirdly, the current Irish recession has a number of unique features relating to the size of the fluctuations of the Irish economy in the last 20 years. No other industrialised country has witnessed fluctuations of the size experienced in Ireland during this period and this makes it important to examine in detail the expectations that unemployed people carried with them into the current recession. Fourthly, the research has direct relevance to specific training policies in that the views of the participants is elicited regarding how much they feel training and support is available to them.

The consequences of unemployment have long been documented in the psychological literature (e.g. Bakke, 1933, Jahoda, 1982). Research has also shown that the well-being effects of unemployment are not uniform and can vary according to factors such as social support, age, gender, ethnicity and financial circumstances (e.g. Woodward and Kawachi, 1998). Furham (1982, 1988) investigated the range and type of accounts that people provide for unemployment and analysed the structure of these accounts. He found that there tended to be three kinds: an individualistic explanation where people are held responsible for their own situation, a societal account where factors such as economic, structural and political factors are said to cause unemployment and a fatalistic account where unemployment is said to have occurred because of uncontrollable factors.

This research was conducted with a qualitative focus. Unemployment is an inherently social experience. Exploring the experience of unemployment in Ireland through the medium of qualitative focus groups means the experience of unemployment can be understood from both the individual and the social perspective. The rest of this paper is structured as follows. Section 2 outlines the methodology employed in the research, including sample sizes and recording practices. Section 3 is the bulk of the report and outlines the results of a thematic analysis of the thirteen focus groups, dividing the text into thirteen separate over-arching themes. Section 4 offers a summary and Section 5 concludes and offers directions for future research.



## **2. Methodology**

### ***2.1 Design***

This is a qualitative study. The focus group method was chosen as it has characteristics that are similar to spontaneous and informal discussions that take place in everyday life which allows the researchers to understand the everyday experience of unemployment.

Thirteen semi-structured focus group interviews involving unemployed people were carried out. Seven focus groups were conducted in Dublin city and county and the rest in Waterford city, Cork city, Limerick city, Leixlip, Tuam & Letterkenny. These locations were selected on the basis of their visibility in the statistics (Live Register & Redundancy) and also with consideration to the large-scale lay-offs which occurred in some of these areas (e.g. DELL – Limerick and SR Technics - Swords). They were also chosen as they constituted diverse samples of individuals, covering both urban and rural areas of Ireland.

### ***2.2 Data Collection***

The thirteen focus groups were conducted from February to May 2010. Participants were recruited through local job centre organisations, websites such as [activelink.ie](http://activelink.ie), a website which advertises jobs and volunteering opportunities in the Irish non-profit sector and voluntary organisations like Dublin Job Club and the Jobs Seekers' Union. Initial contact was made with a representative within these organisations who then recruited participants. In the case of online recruitment, participants themselves contacted the research team. Three of the focus groups were conducted on university property in north inner city Dublin and a further group was conducted on UCD's south side campus. All other focus groups were conducted in the job centres in rooms provided by the staff that worked there. Ethical approval was received from UCD's Human Research Ethics Committee in December 2009.

Participation in the study was entirely voluntary. At the end of each focus group, participants received 10 Euro as an acknowledgment of their time and as a contribution to their travel costs.

The interviews were carried out by an interviewer and a co-interviewer (both members of the Geary Institute research team). Each focus group lasted approximately one hour.

### ***2.3 Participants***

Recruitment criteria for the focus groups were that the participants were unemployed. Participants knew each other in a number of the focus groups, but the groups recruited through websites, such as those in Dublin inner city, were not known to each other previously. Appendix 1 contains demographic information regarding focus group participants.

### ***2.4 Analysis***

Open questions were posed to the group and interviews were recorded using a Dictaphone and later transcribed. Transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis, a qualitative method used for 'identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data' (Braun & Clarke, 2006). On analysis of each of the focus group interviews, a coding framework was devised. This report is structured in terms of the main themes which emerged from the interviews.

### 3. Thematic Analysis

During the course of the thirteen focus groups, participants described their reactions to the downturn in the economy, the material realities of living on social welfare benefits and the stress involved in job searching. They discussed the psychological and physical challenges involved in dealing with the lack of a daily routine, the distress associated with coping with an uncertain future, the erosion of a sense of identity, their coping strategies (e.g. exercise, home improvements, creating their own routines) and their attempts at re-entering the Irish job market. They gave their views on how they are perceived by those who are employed, on their interactions with potential employers, with the social welfare system and with the training and employment agency, FÁS. Some participants see unemployment as being particularly damaging for young people who have not yet established a concrete path in life and who have no memory of previous recessions. Those who became unemployed at an age close to retirement feel hopelessness about their chances of being employed again. Unemployment is seen as an almost uniformly negative experience. While some participants acknowledge an improvement in their standard of living which emerged as a result of improved relationships with their families, the overall mood of participants could be summarised by the following quotation: *“It’s every bit as stressful as it was working, except it’s stress without an end.”* The following sections outline the main themes and subthemes emerging from analysis of the interview transcripts.

#### **3.1 Temporal Reference Effects**

##### **3.1.1. Remembering the Boom**

Many participants felt they were paying the price of the economic boom; they felt that it was excessive and unsustainable and that the scale of economic growth that Ireland experienced made the current recession harder to endure. There was a sense that those who experienced the worst of the 1980s recession had better coping mechanisms having already experienced recession once and seeing a subsequent recovery. *“I went through the last recession in the 80s...and we still came out of it, we still hadn’t much, we gotten over it...”*

Those who had experienced it felt that they now had a higher level of stoicism, *“I don’t think the younger generation realise how bad it was”*. There were differing views amongst

participants regarding the experience of the current recession to previous recessions; however in general participants found the current recession to be more severe, but with more State help than previously. For instance one participant notes, *"This is a walk in the park compared to the 80s and as me da says, 'You should try the 50s'. They literally didn't have food"*. Others felt that the current recession was notable because not everyone was experiencing the effects of economic hardship and so there lacks a sense of solidarity, *"In the 1980s...everyone was in the same boat"*.

Many participants distinguished the current recession from previous hardship by noting the global nature of the current recession and the resulting inability to emigrate: *"I literally had to get on a boat and go. But they can't do that"; "The escape valve of emigration has been pretty much cut off at the pass this time round so that people from all walks of life, people who have always worked, are now finding themselves in a position that they never anticipated"* and *"The difference between the 1980s and the present is there was emigration in the 80s"*. The knowledge that there was no escape caused psychological distress; for one participant this was intensified on trips to the airport when giving lifts to friends, when the salience of travel served to reinforce a sense of imprisonment.

### **3.1.2 Suddenness of Recession**

Participants felt that the recession came suddenly and unexpectedly, which perhaps played a major part in the resulting psychological trauma, *"It's very traumatic. You know like, it is like. Then all of a sudden, you have all this time on your hands you know"*. Another participant found the recession unexpected, *"And I was just cruising along happily, I'd gotten married, I got a mortgage, I'm a pretty relaxed, easy going kind of guy, I was pretty content with life. It doesn't take much to keep me happy. And then all of a sudden..."*. Budgeting became an essential feature of people's lives, a skill people hadn't previously needed to cultivate, *"The whole lot came and you were suddenly going from being well able to manage to being all the way down"*.

However there was also, in a limited number of cases, a sense of relief. Participants mentioned that work disturbances prior to their job ending had caused them anxiety about the threat of redundancy and many claimed to have found the eventual unemployment almost a relief. As one woman put it, *"It was a shock when it did come, but it was kind of a relief. I mean our board*

*had asked us to maybe continue in a reduced capacity this year, but we said financially it'd be too precarious and it would have just been completely disheartening so we just decided to let it go".*

### **3.1.3 Nostalgia**

One of the participants felt that the boom years had been a wasted opportunity both politically and commercially with too great an emphasis on the creation of wealth, *"When coming to Ireland, it was harder to find creative and for me worthwhile work. It was either you make money or you don't make money".* The boom itself was seen as a wasted political opportunity, *"the Government did what they want...we took it for granted".* Companies were seen to have indulged in large degrees of excess, with one architectural company's Christmas parties taking legendary status, *"their Christmas parties were phenomenal. They had like weekends in Vienna".*

Participants remembered the boom years as a time of financial security, *"To be honest, I never really had to budget, a decent holiday every year, a second week and a few weekends away. You know, it's tough now where you're actually looking at the price of everything".* In a small number of cases participants described their own behaviour as excessive, *"We all went mad when times were good".* Others reacted angrily to this suggestion, pointing out, *"I didn't lose the run of myself...a certain element of society did and that's the element that has dragged us down and that's the element that seems to be escaping the retribution that is being visited on the rest of us"; "That annoys me when I hear people say, "Oh, we lost the run of ourselves", I didn't lose the run of myself. I had a decent income and I led a decent life which I think is no more than I deserved. You know, I wasn't paying 2 grand on a credit card for a handbag".*

Thus there was a strong sense that unemployment was unfair and undeserved and that the burden of financial hardship was felt by only a portion of Irish society.

## **3.2 Engagement with Politics and the Public Sphere**

### **3.2.1 Power**

In light of the recession, a number of people questioned Ireland's economic and social system, *"I have real issues with the whole capitalist system and being a wage slave".*

Others see Ireland as being overrun with neo-liberal thinking, perpetuated by a media where alternative voices aren't heard and unemployed people are invisible, *"You're only getting opinions and justifications of why we're in the position that we're in, from the politicians, from the banks. I tend to try and ignore all those now"*.

Some believed Ireland was politically misgoverned, *"We've had the sort of gombeen-man, rural political class that has ruled the country since the foundation of the State"*. There was a considerable degree of resentment expressed towards specific Government ministers, *"Different people have ruined the economy at the end of the day"*, a resentment expressed towards the wider government, *"Public servants have screwed this country inside out"* and a feeling that public servants often get rewarded for mistakes, *"You have to keep the senior civil servants up to the standard to which they have become accustomed"*.

Ireland was disparagingly compared to the US, *"If you look at Obama, he says, "Yes we can" and over here it's "No we can't"...there's nothing in any of them that'll say, "Yes, we're going to sort this out"*. There was a strong feeling amongst participants that no political will existed to end the jobs crisis, *"They should be training people in anticipation of, lets say, the renewable energy and get them into the work force, but they're absolutely static at the moment"*. This sentiment was echoed elsewhere, *"There's no direction, there is no leadership"* while another noted, *"Have you seen one news broadcast with the Government actually talking about unemployment? I've seen them doing NAMA, I've seen them doing this, have they done one? One of them? I haven't. Not in this government, the politicians have said nothing."*. Another participant asked, *"Can you pick one of the 166 guys inside the Dáil now, who's helping the people?"*

Blame was attributed, among some respondents, to the inherent greed of the capitalist system, the sense that people's desire for more money caused the recession, *"We want the economy to be running so they can do things, but not to the extent that they've creamed off the top"*. Participants felt that many of the budget cuts that occurred were done in an underhand manner, *"lots of silent cuts, they didn't tell people about, for instance the ROS. That was never mentioned, it just happened"*. Blame was also attributed to international factors, *"Our problem isn't so much the labour market, our problem is our international relations"*. This was also

attributed to communication problems with politicians, *“Brian Lenihan stands up in the Budget and says, “We’re nearly there, we’re halfway through”. Halfway through what? Halfway through being unemployed? Like what does he mean?”*

One participant expressed a degree of resignation to the political state of affairs, *“We voted the people in that are running the country. We put them there”* while the need to remain hopeful was pointed out in a number of groups, *“If we as a nation or as a people belonging to this country lose a sense of hope, we’re all, and I’m going to be blunt about it, fucked”*.

### **3.2.2 Perceptions of Systemic Unfairness**

Feelings of unfairness were prevalent across groups. Participants saw those in positions of power abusing their position to the cost of Irish people and very often those with more money and power were compared to their own circumstances: *“And when you go down to the Dole office, you have to fight for your few shillings and you’re getting 196...and now they want to cut that again...And the fellas in the Dáil, a hundred thousand a year they can’t live off of and they’re giving themselves big rises every year like”*. This was echoed in another focus group, *“that’s not even half the money our own Taoiseach is on. It’s crazy, they’re all doing well out of it. They’re still on their pensions, but my pension is gone”*.

Government social welfare policies were regarded as mean-spirited such as the cutting of the Christmas bonus, *“They cut the few shillings and the bonus and you have the Government shoving money into the banks...like the rest of us don’t get big handshakes”*. A similar sentiment was expressed by another participant, *“You’ve no income coming in and then with the Government, they’re cutting, they’re slashing people left right and centre about this and that is totally wrong. Like there is people there that want to get out and work there”*. Another participant expressed anger at corporations like the ESB and banks who charge high interest rates, *“It seems that on a corporate level, there should be more understanding. But there isn’t. For the poor basically, there isn’t any”*. Participants felt anger at those who worked in social welfare offices, *“These people are lucky to be in a job and they’re dealing with the public, day in and day out”*.

This feeling of intrinsic unfairness was summed up by one contributor: *“I worked in one company for 25 years and then you know, to get to that day, they call me and say, “We’re cutting you”, you know. After a year. You know, 25 years is a long time paying tax. So where has my money gone?”*

### **3.2.3 Powerlessness and Inertia**

There was a feeling that Irish people are willing to put up with more injustice than others, as one participant pointed out, *“even if this happened in the north of Ireland, there’d be uproar...the government here...there wouldn’t be a government any longer”*. Another participant expressed surprise at the lack of action, *“I’m really amazed like when they cut social welfare at Christmas that people didn’t take to the streets in the New Year. I was certain that was going to happen”*.

Participants related the lack of major political protest in Ireland to wider feelings of powerlessness, *“You wonder why people ring Liveline? It seems to be the only way”*, with the unemployed in Ireland being too busy *“trying to put food on the table”*. Another participant felt Ireland was too small a country for there to be any real change, *“We’re such a small country, like a little island, look at the amount of people that run it, like that sit in that place, like the amount of them and the wages that they’re all on. Like you really do only need one or two people to run a little island”*.

When asked about the future, a number of participants felt that the recession was something that they would just have to *“ride out”* like an illness and that there was very little that could be done until the economy regained health. Another participant felt that global factors played a causal role in the Recession and there was little that could be done about it, *“Everyone is competing in a global market so it’s not something that the Irish market will get back because if there is no investment anywhere else there will be not be any here”*. There was also concern that despite the Government saying that future economic growth would be export-led, participants felt we had nothing to export except people.



## **3.3 Media**

### **3.3.1 Political Commentary**

There was quite a large degree of variety in people's reported consumption of the media. Many of those same people described how they tried to avoid commentary and news based media. Many participants explained this by their view that the commentary was not balanced, *"You have to keep in touch, it's important to keep in touch, but don't overdo it. And definitely just stick to just facts and stay away from the political commentary"*. Avoidance was a common theme, *"I hit number 5 on the dial to get Lyric"*.

Other participants did feel that they could use it as means of working out whether there would be any upturn in the fortunes of the economy. However price was given as a reason for cutting down on newspaper reading. People reported searching the media for positive news stories or simply buying newspapers to read the sports section.

### **3.3.2 Fuelling Anger and Unhappiness**

Linked in to the avoidance of media is the idea that reading newspapers makes people angry, an unpleasant emotion which they try to avoid, *"There's no truth out there anymore"*. There is also a sense that the media is a place where individuals in power attempt to justify their own positions and in doing so undermine those without a voice, *"They use the TV and the media to try and get across their point but there's no one trying to get across the point of the people who have actually lost their job...the people who are really paying the price for this as regards their lives"*. Another participant felt there was a hidden agenda in the Irish media, *"You're going to get right-wing slant where it would be anti-workers, reduce the minimum wage, everything from a neo-liberal perspective"*. This was likened to brainwashing.

There was a sense that the news was also a constant source of misery and unhappiness, *"It's so negative and I actually find that listening to too much negativity is just not good for you...I just cannot listen to it anymore"*. Hearing about further job losses was distressing, *"It's depressing me because I think, "Oh great, there's another thousand people looking for jobs"*, thus adding to the sense of unhappiness and powerlessness. *"The media is uniformly negative and I think the simple reason is if you push the right buttons for thousands of years, you can manipulate people"*

*and the most powerful emotional button of all is fear*". Another participant felt that the media in some way fed off people's misery, *"There is never anything positive because it just doesn't sell"*. It was felt the purpose of the media was to sell newspapers, regardless of the effects on people's lives, *"the whole thing is about the human story and yet the media don't report the human story at all. We hear the facts and figures every day, and it depresses the hell out of everyone and it's just being used by various companies to cut figures"*.

There was a feeling that this could be contributing to the bad performance of the economy, *"You feel like saying to RTÉ, 'You know what guys, you really have to throw out more positive stuff, all this negative stuff....we need some success stories because that is going to breed success"*.

Another participant felt, *"They actually own the world, the media...Switch it all off for a period of a month, just one period of a month and see what happens. People will get back to grass roots, indigenous everything, support local stuff"*.

### **3.3.3 Escapism**

Some participants described how they had increased their use of media as a form of leisure. For one mother, television was a way of keeping children quiet and out of trouble, *"I've got kids. They need entertainment. So basically, NTL, the TV has become a necessity"*. For some participants reading a book was a trusted method of relaxing. However this was often done guiltily as participants felt they could be sacrificing valuable job-seeking time.

## **3.4. Gender Differences in Experience of Unemployment**

### **3.4.1 Intruding in Wife's Space**

A number of male participants felt that unemployment was made more difficult because they were at home and felt they were intruding in their wife's space. *"As she says, 'You're in my space' And it was never like that and it would get you down like"*. This had placed an extra strain on the relationship, *"I felt I was after invading her space because I was normally never in the house and she found that hard, difficult to deal with...it was her time, it was her house"*. Women also felt that their husbands were not suited to staying at home all day, *"He'll cook and clean and do the laundry but just not as well as I would if he were going out to work"*.

### 3.4.2 Masculinity Undermined

Some male participants expressed shame that they were no longer the “breadwinner” of the family and “not being able to provide what you can for your family”. One participant found starting new relationships to be difficult, “Me being a single guy, it’s hard also to go out with a lady because they’re earning money and sometimes people can be very put off by it when you say you work for yourself and then you’re not working”. Both men and women expressed sympathy for unemployed men. One woman felt that the male identity was inextricably linked to work and thus the loss of work was felt more keenly by men, “you know the male is usually the typical provider. And needs that. And I think it’s awful to have men sitting at home like...it’s not good for their psyche. They like to feel productive. I feel they do.” One participant linked this directly to a rise in domestic violence against men.

One participant described how he had swapped roles with his wife so he now looked after the home while his wife worked. He described having to come to terms with looking after the children, “It took awhile for me to adjust to that. It’s bizarre, you feel a bit strange”. He felt he had always taken for granted that the man provided for the family, “society and culture believes that the man goes and does it and that’s the way I always operated...there’s still no stigma about men pushing buggies nowadays...you do what you’ve got to do, but sometimes I can see a point when...what worries me is what happens when they go to school? There’ll be a big void there then”.

It was also mentioned that young men may have more difficulty than women in expressing their emotions. One participant had found it very difficult to cope when his girlfriend went on holiday with her ex-partner and his son, “I got very emotional like because I can’t afford to do these things with my son and I was thinking to myself, “Jesus, another man off there with my girlfriend”. And they could do all these things and I couldn’t”

### 3.4.3 Women become Invisible

One woman felt that as women age, they become invisible. This feeling was an adverse one and she needed to make sure unemployment didn’t intensify it, “I don’t want that to happen to me so you need to get up and get out there you know”. Another woman described how the menopause made coping with unemployment harder.

#### **3.4.4 Women 'Lack Self-Esteem'**

One participant pointed out that women may be more likely to suffer from depression due to lower self-esteem as a consequence of unemployment, *"I know that women generally have lower self-esteem than men...I sat there and I attacked myself and that is still there to some extent because when I see something that I really want to do...I just panic over, "Am I capable of doing this?""*.

One participant described how her focus all her life had been to nurture her younger siblings and, in later life, her children. Unemployment had thus not affected her as badly as others as her expectations about life and for herself had always been low, *"My focus all these years has been on the home and apart from working and my husband and my children. So I was not confident"*.

#### **3.4.5 The Expansion of Household Tasks**

Women often described how they created tasks in the home as a means of filling time, *"If you have little things to do around the house, even if it's washing...the day flies"*. One participant said her house had never been so clean. Older women express regret that they worked when their children were young, *"I felt that I never had enough time with them and there's a little bitterness about that now that I'm redundant"*. Another woman had hoped to look after her grandchildren after redundancy but could not as her children were emigrating.

### **3.5 Financial Strain**

#### **3.5.1 Daily Living**

Money worries constitute a large part of the anxiety experienced by participants, *"You look down at your trolley and you say, "Oh my god, how am I going to afford this?...but that time that you're supposed to relax, it's filled with worrying about the next bill and the next bill"*. Often participants describe how they set tight budgets for the week for essential items, however when unexpected expenses occur such as trips to the doctor or unexpected bills they upset the weekly budget, meaning sacrifices in other areas like food had to be made: *"It just covers me for the week like in terms of food. If I get an ESB bill or if I have to see a doctor in one week, I'm screwed"*.

Activities like buying food, paying mortgages, gas and electricity bills and rent were cited as the most anxiety-inducing expenditures. Another had begun to miss some meals, *"I would miss a fair few lunches...for the kids and for this and that and the other. Like I wouldn't eat as much as I would if I could...especially if you are out and about, you will just do without"*. A number of participants had given up driving, *"Coming home and seeing the car there and knowing that I can't...it makes me feel down just seeing the car"*.

While some participants were cutting down expenditure on food, others looked to other expenses to make savings particularly in the area of health and life insurance, *"I ended up reducing all the insurance, like life insurance, motor, car and house insurance"*. One participant tried to avoid visits to the hospital and was willing to put up with pain to avoid it, *"I had to go to Galway, I could barely afford it...so I'm suffering pain because of that"*. This was a sentiment repeated elsewhere, *"I found since I've been out of work, I felt sick and I had a cough and all and I said, 'Oh no. I'll leave it. I'm not going to spend all that money going to the doctor', so I'd hold off and hold off and buy a bottle of Benlylyn or something and then a month later when it wasn't going I ended up spending double that in the doctor because I ended up getting an infection then...but everyone is doing that."*

Participants described their experiences of different utility companies. One participant had experienced problems with paying bills incrementally, *"I'm having a hard time. For me to pay it in to the bank or in the post office, off like that, they insist on direct debit and I'd much prefer to pay it off week by week. That's the way you operate if you are on minimum money. If you are on a salary I suppose it's a different story"*. This led to negative experiences with utility companies, *"I find it humiliating and frustrating. It feels as though you are begging them, 'Please, please don't turn off my electricity', but also it makes me angry because it's going on everywhere"*.

Participants described how events like going for coffee had become rare luxuries, *"I sit down for a cup of coffee if I can afford it. I have to work that out and it's 4 Euro 20, in and out on the DART"*. One participant said she felt guilt that her children could no longer go to the cinema. Engaging in social activities with friends was something people missed, but it would mean

feeling unpleasant guilt, *“My daughter is saying, “Go out, you have to go out socially or you will go mental in the head”. You would be sorry for going out the next morning”*. Another person felt that socialising meant sacrificing payment of fuel or electricity bills. Guilt about engaging in these activities was strong, *“Even if I go out at the weekend, I’m like, “Oh, I shouldn’t really be doing this” and you don’t enjoy it as much”*. Managing to survive and cope on a lowered income had become an integral part of maintaining psychological health, *“you sort of are going up against a hill and you never reach the top no matter how long you try, you never reach the top”*.

### **3.5.2 Savings Behaviour**

For some people unemployment had meant they had been forced to learn how to manage money, something they regarded as a skill. One participant described moving between *“bookshops, libraries and from record stores to online websites and so if things pick up like I said to myself I think I’ll stick with that kind of frugal way”*. Achieving a *“balancing [of] the books”* offered a number of participants a sense of self-efficacy. One participant spoke about an increased sense of value of money, *“I know when I get a job I’d always spend the money before I got it, but you know, you learn. You learn to live on a little you know, if I can do it now, I can do it again, I can save more.”*

### **3.5.3 Inadequacy of Unemployment Payments**

A number of participants felt that the social welfare they receive of 196 Euro a week is not enough, *“It’s atrocious that you can’t survive on that. If I was to break down 196 and pay a bit of your gas bill, a bit of your ESB bill and then pay a little bit of the mortgage, you just can’t survive”*. Participants found that there was simply not enough to get by on: *“There’s nothing left at the end of the week...the mortgage takes most of it. What’s left then has to be spread across all the bills. Give a bit for everyone.”* One participant felt that *“when your money gets reduced, it means that you can’t put three into two. It can’t be done and that puts pressures on you at home as well because you have more time hanging around thinking these things...but money is the main problem”*. A number of participants, over the age of 25, had moved back in with their parents to cope financially.

### 3.5.4 Family Tension

The need to budget and manage expenditure was not an issue within all relationships, however when it did arise as an issue it appeared to cause a great deal of anxiety and bitterness. One participant felt that it had caused a major rift with his wife, *"We're still together and we're still doing our thing together, but there is a vibe and there always will be because even if I think everything is alright I'm still sitting with this guilt feeling, you know, I've always been the breadwinner, bringing in quite a bit of money...and that just all disappeared. And it has caused a big rift in the house"*. Another participant felt her relationship with her husband had become tense, *"there are arguments over...the main cause is money and me deciding not to pay a bill this week and him being really furious about it...I prefer to eat"*.

This was summed up by a participant who mused, *"When poverty comes in, love flies out the window...you might be madly in love with your partner but when you've no money, you can't do anything...the worst comes out...that ruins relationships and families"*.

## 3.6 Youth

### 3.6.1 Sympathy

There was widespread sympathy for younger people. Many older participants felt that because they were older they could cope better, *"I can relate back to the 80s...we can maybe see that we might come out of this some way"*, while they believed that those starting out their careers had higher expectations and were the hardest hit, *"I feel for lads. Like we're kind of past it you know, like we won't get a job again...it's lads here like, they're the people I feel for because there's nothing out there for them"*. Other participants felt that the plight of young people was particularly acute, *"There is so many people under 30 unemployed, it's desperate and no matter what qualifications or whatever you have now, the work isn't available"*.

### 3.6.2 Resentment

Part of the expressed sympathy was also tinged with a certain degree of resentment. There was a sense that younger people have only ever experienced prosperity and therefore can't cope with a harsher reality, *"So now these kids don't understand when they go to the fridge there's no chocolate or there's no lemonade or whatever, like all the stuff that was just there, it was never questioned, so in that way for mothers it must be really difficult"*. Another participant

described how his children, *"Don't do recession"*. Balancing the expectations of their children with a huge decrease in income was something many of the participants had experienced.

### 3.6.3 Age-Related Discrimination

As well as there being a great deal of sympathy for the predicament of young people, many felt that they were now also competing with younger people and this was placing them at a disadvantage, *"My daughters are leaving, they have degrees and they're finding it difficult to cope. What hope have I?"* Many of the older participants felt they would have to wait out unemployment until retirement, *"Like who the hell wants to interview somebody that was born the year after World War II? In all fairness...People expect you to be decrepit at that age."* Those who had previously been self-employed felt it would be difficult for them to now work for someone else, particularly a boss likely to be younger than them.

### 3.6.4 Providing for Children

Providing for children while being unemployed is described as extremely stressful as parents tried to manage their children's needs and expectations. It was felt that children are particularly in tune to social expectations and their own wants and needs, *"You always want to do your best for your children, Christmas comes and birthdays come and "Johnny down the road has this" like, you know? "Why can't I have a bike?" That would get you down"*.

Christmas was found to be a particularly tough period. One father described having to postpone the payment of bills to enable his child to go on a class trip. One lone parent felt upset that she had not been able to afford gifts for her son on his birthday, *"I still haven't given my son his birthday present which was in April. I still haven't given him a party because I simply can't afford it. The things like that that other people take for granted"*. Other parents struggled to provide for their children's basic needs: *"it's nearly a disability at this stage you know, you try and like provide shoes and this and the other for your children."* This led to feelings of guilt, *"I do feel awful that I can't give them a lot more"*. One participant argued that family counselling should be mandatory for those about to be made redundant so that all members of the family know what to expect and learn coping mechanisms. One participant who did not have children felt his future was more secure, *"If I had kids, I would not be sitting here relaxed saying, "Yes I can*



make it””. In spite of this, those who did have children regarded them as an unequivocal source of comfort and hope: *“The girls, we have them for life”*.

### **3.7 Uncertainty about the Future**

#### **3.7.1 External Factors**

Participants expressed concern that it would be many years before there is an economic recovery, *“I don’t think the economy will recover in time”*. Participants were pessimistic about Ireland’s economic future: *“there is no production of goods that are really specific to this country, or any special knowledge, maybe financial services, but it’s not really sustainable”*. The fear that the economy will take many decades to recover was expressed in nearly every focus group. There was also a feeling that too much of Ireland’s economy was sustained by US multinationals who showed no hesitancy in leaving the country to employ people at lower wages elsewhere. This was described by one participant as *“frightening”*.

The behaviour of banks was highlighted as playing a role in uncertainty about future prosperity, *“The mortgages are going up as well, the interest rates are going up...So when the interest rates go up in the banks, they’re telling you that things are going to get better once the banks start or the property is coming back. It’s never going to really, you know.”*

#### **3.7.2 Sense of Foreboding**

Participants expressed a generalised sense of dread and foreboding: *“the pressure is getting deeper and deeper and deeper”*. Another saw, *“no improvement in this going on”*. One participant felt that his psychological health was in jeopardy as he did not know when he would get work again, *“It starts to rot, to eat away at you. You start to believe that this is the way it’s going to be for the rest of your days”*. This sentiment was echoed by another participant, *“What am I going to do? It’s just never going to change. So you don’t know when it’s going to turn around”*. Another participant echoed this, *“It’s every bit as stressful as it was working, except it’s stress without an end. At least you’ve an end to get to in a job. You got to the end and that was it”*. Others worry about what will happen to their employment prospects, *“fear of how long it is going to be before I find work again and what is happening to my skills?”*

A number of the participants expressed very little hope that they would find employment soon, *“Things aren’t progressing and things aren’t looking any better so as far as I’m concerned the recession is still fucking full on. People are still losing their jobs, left, right and centre. No one is finding it any easier to get back into the working situation so I can’t see 6 months from now it changing. 6 months from now, there’s going to be another 750 people out of work. They’re all qualified. I wouldn’t have their qualifications”*. Another participant felt that he would not be able to pay his mortgage in the future, *“At the end of the year, my mortgage won’t be paid any more and money will start to drain so you feel under pressure, there’s always that worry in the back of your head”*.

One participant felt that she coped by having a *“forward attitude”*. Another described how he strived not to over-think the future, *“It’s important for people to be philosophical about the future, not to think too far ahead...not to get too hung up on tomorrow or next week...it’s just to kind of ‘live in the now’”*. However another participant felt that she had no future at all, *“I can’t see hope and I feel all stressed out then. So you are trying to live in the day like”*.

Time duration was an important part of how people felt they could cope. Many felt that things worsened as time went on, *“The longer you are unemployed the worse your situation gets”*. This was felt by another participant, *“The longer it goes on the more pressure you are under”* or *“There is being unemployed and then there is, ‘for how long?’”*

### **3.7.3 Opportunity**

Despite the anxiety and dread experienced with uncertainty, some participants saw unemployment as a chance to work out what was important in life, *“We have lots more discussions about values and plans for the future than we had before, just because now it is really urgent and we want to shape it in a way that really suits ourselves”*. Another participant felt that unemployment allowed him to view his own career trajectory more clearly, *“I am using my time to really learn new skills and to really shape my future in a way that I want it to look like”*. It was also an opportunity to spend time gaining new skills, *“So when the upturn does come, you’re actually preparing or you’re starting from a higher level than when you became redundant”* or, *“In a way this is the perfect time to reinvent yourself, or at least to put some*

*time into your vocation and find something that you are going to want to do*". One participant described it as being a, *"strange opportunity"*.

#### **3.7.4 Social Welfare Status**

Some participants expressed the view that uncertainty about the status of their social welfare also meant that it was difficult to plan for the future. Participants described being *"stuck in a rut"*. Many felt that a lack of funds meant it was difficult for them to plan ahead and that not knowing what will happen when Job Seekers Allowance ends was anxiety-inducing, *"I don't ask any questions. They haven't asked me any...but like that will end fairly soon and I don't know what the hell I'm going to do then"*. Another participant expressed this frustration to a social welfare officer, *"Like even going back to the community welfare officer again, I was in there one day and I stood up and I said, 'I cannot deal with guessing where I am'."*

### **3.8 Lack of Structure/Routine**

#### **3.8.1 Time-Filling**

One of the main negative effects of unemployment is the need to create a daily routine and fill time. Participants described how they would begin the job search on Monday morning and finish on a Friday at 6 pm. Many used job searching as a means of creating routine and structure.

Cleaning the house and doing DIY jobs take on an added importance and the tasks often increase or expand to fill the expanse of time, *"There's no hurry doing anything"*. For others, they felt no motivation to do household chores, *"It had to be done because you were going to work the next day. But when you know you're off the next day and probably off for a very long time, you put everything off like"*. A number of participants used redundancy money to invest in their homes. There was a sense that participants needed to make DIY jobs last longer, *"could do it in an hour but you'd spread it out just for something, to get up and do something every morning"*. One participant mentioned doing a university course to try and *"fill the void"*. DIY was a common theme through many of the focus groups, *"If you get a bit of DIY, something to do, the time does pass a bit more"*.

Volunteering was almost universally regarded as a fulfilling use of time, giving people a sense of purpose and allowed them to, *“keep the mind active”*. It allowed them to *“order their day”* and the sense that they were contributing to something important, *“I do that to lift my mind and I live for it now”*. However volunteering was not always possible, *“You’re looking for work and you don’t know what’s going to happen next”*.

Participants described time as being something *“elastic”*. How a person fills their day affects how they perceive time, *“I think the day will drag if you’re going to sit and mope and just ignore everything, even if you’ve got nothing to do, you can find, like you said, you can find something, just to get out of where you are and go somewhere else and all of a sudden you’re away for an hour or two hours”*. Participants described disliking Mondays as perhaps the traditional day of ‘returning to work’ reinforced the feeling of not having work.

### **3.8.2 Boredom/Monotony**

Participants described how they felt their lives had become boring and mundane and that having no money meant that they were limited in what they could do during the day, *“everything is tied up and no place to go”*. Another participant described how her environment was not diverse anymore and boredom came from not talking to people. Participants found that boredom was almost unavoidable, *“It’s more difficult to do things spontaneously”*. The lack of diversity in what people do was an issue, *“The same routine, boring routine, week in, week out and it’s just disastrous. It’s actually depressing me if this keeps up”*. Similar language was used by another participant, *“It’s the same routine, again and again”*.

### **3.8.3 Importance of Routine**

Participants felt that one of the main ways to maintain psychological health was to create a strict routine, *“How I keep positive, I get up at the same time in the morning. I walk, I just keep motivated”*. Another felt that routine was vital to her mental health, *“If you don’t have a routine, you go quite, quite mad, I didn’t have a routine for the first month and I went, “I can’t cope with this” and then I started putting things in place so I knew I had to be in certain places at certain times and just to keep that going”*. One participant noted that he felt, *“mentally I feel myself getting stronger in myself because I’ve started to do the right things”*. Another participant described the importance of motivating yourself, *“I used to try and plan something*

*every day...I would get up for that and extend it by doing something else because otherwise there has been days where I have like literally done nothing...and it's horrible".*

Many of the negative psychological effects of unemployment mirror the effects of depression such as losing interest in everyday tasks and not wanting to get out of bed, *"Even when you're washing dishes after dinner time, if you're not in the best mood, you say, "Ah sure I can do them in the morning"...but there's days and nights I go really down on myself"*. The need to get out of bed is highlighted continuously, something those with major depression often fail to do, *"You have to get out of bed first of all, that's the most important thing, get out of bed every morning" or, "the single most important thing is to get up at a reasonable hour"*. This sentiment was echoed across all groups, *"I think the most important thing is to get out. To get out of bed every day"*. The importance of morning times and starting the day right was said to be vital, *"the main thing is to keep motivated in the morning...if you plan out your day it will make it go that bit quicker for you"*.

One sentiment expressed frequently was the importance of maintaining an active approach to life, and particular the importance of not getting stuck in unhealthy patterns of behaviour; *"Get up every day to go somewhere"*. One participant described how if she did not keep to this routine she would engage in activities that would seriously damage her health, *"I would be one of those people who would take to the bed, you know, day time television, Lidl wine, chain smoke, never get dressed...and you're destroyed"*.

## **3.9 Health**

### **3.9.1 Psychological Health**

Participants describe getting depressed and feeling a low sense of self-esteem and often waking up early because of anxiety, worry and panic. This is linked to a lack of a structure throughout the working day, lack of social contact, stress, uncertainty about the future and frustration at the job application process where applications are rarely acknowledged, let alone given interviews, *"It's easy to lose confidence in yourself after a certain period of time, especially if you've had a few rejections...you do start to wonder, "Why?" And I think that that starts to play on your mind a lot more"*. A participant described the process of applying for work as, *"soul*

*destroying...no reply, nothing at all. Like even if they say, "No feck off, it's gone. Good luck". It'd be some form of interaction".*

Many participants expressed the view that social isolation was having a negative impact upon their mental health, *"You haven't got so much of a social life through work so therefore you're in your own head a lot"*. Participants described how they often overanalysed things perhaps as a function of the amount of time they had to fill on a daily basis: *"You've only your own voice in your own head to listen to, you know and it does get a bit, sometimes it's nice to get a bit of perspective with other people"*.

This depression and lack of self-esteem was described as cyclical and encompassing a wide range of factors, *"I think it's like a vicious circle when you're stuck in that rut"*. Much of the loss of self-esteem came from rejection from employers. One participant said it made him feel low and it *"makes you aware of how vulnerable you are...it challenges your self-confidence and it knocks you back. It makes you feel bad. It puts you down"*. The lack of a routine meant participants were, *"stuck in a rut"*, they described putting on weight which meant both their mental and physical health suffered.

One participant described feeling as though there was a wall between them and psychological recovery, *"it's [like] you have a wall outside your house or inside your mind, it's oppressive and frustrating and it makes you really challenge yourself as to how you're going to get past or through this wall and the wall is 'not having a job'. And that's incredibly depressing so it's a daily battle to overcome that"*.

Blame was referenced a number of times in the context of psychological health. Those who channelled their anger at political parties and government tended to have fewer negative psychological health issues. Those who made internal attributions of blame described this as a psychologically distressing, *"I felt I was to blame"*. When this person could not find work, he blamed himself, *"you say, "It's not turning up, there must be something wrong with me"*.

### 3.9.2 Need for Positive Thinking

Related to this personal attribution of blame was the sense amongst participants that they had a moral responsibility to remain positive. Participants felt they had few other choices, *“for me the only way I have is to keep thinking positive”*. There was a strong belief that staying positive was the key to enduring this period and the key to eventually escaping it, *“I started getting depressed and say, ‘God, I’m such and such an age. There’s no hope for me getting out there’...but you can’t give in to that mindset and you have to do something about it”*. Another participant was confident about his own skills and experience, which seemed to ward off feelings of anxiety, *“Because everyone is confident, me included, that I will get something eventually, I’m not really worried about it”*.

Maintaining optimism was a constant struggle for many respondents, *“It’s hard work and it’s hard to try and maintain that when things are only getting harder. It’s hard to maintain your optimism...I consider myself to be optimistic and a hopeful person, but it’s hard to maintain that in the face of what is going on”*. Another participant noted, *“I want to be positive, but looking at it at the moment, there really isn’t a lot there”*.

One participant felt that political activism was a key variable in trying to stay positive, *“I consider myself to be a political person and I think that, I can’t let myself be beaten. I have to stay active and to do something to change it.”*

### 3.9.3 Psychological Adaptation

Participants described feeling a strong need to accept unemployment in order to maintain psychological health, *“I’m starting to realise now that I’m not going to get back to what I had so I have to change”*. Many internalised the need to improve, feeling that if improvements in their situation were to occur, it was something that could only come from themselves.

For one participant, adaptation meant giving in to unemployment, *“I absolutely blindly refused to adapt...because you know there is nothing more depressing than standing in a Dole queue and when you look at some of the clients who are there whose lifestyle choices might be to be there on long term basis and you go, “That’s not where I want to be in my life. I want something else for myself and my life”. I absolutely refuse”*.

One participant described how he had adapted by using a form of denial, *“If you were to go and face everything that you have to, day by day, you’d actually depress yourself. That’s why I try occupying time”*.

#### **3.9.4 Psychological Acceptance**

One participant argued that he felt better once he had accepted his position as an unemployed person, he noted, *“My morale has improved...I’ve changed my outlook on not expecting to find a job tomorrow and that has to be a long term strategy”*. This was echoed across groups, *“I was in a huge rush to get a job because I knew nothing else...Now I’m actually appreciating the opportunity to really have a look at where I want to go and accepting the, either likelihood or otherwise that I’m not going to get a job in the next few months, unless it’s by happy accident and that I have to put in a sensible plan for my own life so that I know that whichever way I’m going is because I want to go there, not because I think I have to”*.

#### **3.9.5 Physical Health**

Physical health was acknowledged as being an important part of maintaining psychological health, *“Physical exercise means you feel a bit better and that deals with the...I’m no doctor but that seems to work anyway. The physical deals with the mental and you kind of fight back that way”*. When participants were feeling psychological distress this would manifest itself in unhealthy behaviours such as overeating, either as a comfort or as a means of filling time, *“when you are panicking like that, where you are overwhelmed and when you are overwhelmed with that kind of anxiety, you stop and you don’t do anything...and then you’re not eating properly and you’re not exercising”*.

Some participants felt that physical health can improve during unemployment. Participants have more time to exercise and often engage in it out of necessity, such as bicycle riding, *“You don’t buy takeaways when you’re on no money...I’m eating more fruit and vegetables...I’m cooking in bulk, I’m freezing in bulk, so I’m eating more healthily”*. However this was not always the case. One participant had sacrificed gym membership due to a lack of money. The motivation to exercise was often lacking as well, *“laziness has set in”*. They also found that during work they would burn up more energy, more easily, *“When I was working in town I would, like I’d get the bus in to town or whatever, some days just keep walking until I seen a bus*



*and you don't realise how much exercise you get". Those who had been employed in labour-intensive jobs missed exercise most, "I'd be walking all day, you're active all day, you're walking around all the time and that actually produces energy...my job was all physical so you miss it of course".*

In a similar vein participants described how they had begun to smoke more, *"at work, you're not allowed to smoke so you might only have two in work on that day...whereas you could be having 8 being unemployed, maybe more".* Participants felt that they were succumbing to other bad habits. One participant described how she was now drinking more, *"Drinking during the week. That's what I'm doing. It's terrible like, every single night".* Many described how they gained weight due to stress, anxiety and lack of a routine, for some weight yo-yoed, *"I put on a stone in the last year because I haven't been burning up energy in the workplace".* That particular participant went on to describe how he had developed blood clots as a result.

Often participants could move to the other extreme. One participant found being physically fit had taken on a new importance. Exercise was a means to regulate mood and to fill time, *"If I do miss a run, I feel mad. It's anchoring me and I get out and run and I can live off the steam...if I lose my physical fitness I will lose my mental fitness, I'll lose the whole lot".* Other participants had increased the amount of time that they spent in local sports clubs as there was a social element to that, *"It's getting me looking forward to something that day...it keeps me looking forward to things at the weekend, it's not going to cost me money".* In this sense physical fitness can be seen as a means of controlling a part of your life when you feel other areas of your life are no longer within your remit of control.

Pre-existing illnesses were often brought into the foreground due to unemployment. One participant had now time to properly treat Irritable Bowel Syndrome. Another described how her arthritis had become worse since unemployment as she now had more time to think about it and she was no longer as mobile as she had once been. She had also experienced some bouts of angina. Another participant reported ulcers, a stress-related condition. Participants described how they often had unhealthy habits while they were working and unemployment was a chance to redress those, *"I used to work in shift work, down in the port so you come home*

*off lates and you had to be careful of the habits you were getting into...so I'm phasing that out".*

In general, unemployment had negatively affected physical health due to the change in life circumstances, but in some cases had allowed participants to spend more time caring for their own bodies.

### **3.10 Identity and Social Approval**

#### **3.10.1 Loss**

Participants described feeling an enormous blow to their sense of self and identity since being made unemployed, *"You feel, you're not yourself, the person you used to be, 'the cook' or whatever, you're just, 'on the Dole' and you don't want to be that. You've spent 30 plus years being somebody with a title, regardless of what level it was at and all of a sudden, it's all gone."*

One participant felt a severe degree of distress at losing her job, *"If I'm not working, I'm not a real person, I don't really exist"*. Many participants expressed pain at personal experiences of stigma due to unemployment. They felt that others are judging them to be *"lazy"*.

Claiming social welfare seems to intensify the 'unemployed' identity, with participants frequently feeling discomfort and dissonance: *"with the social welfare system, they're trying to fit you into a hole...not everyone fits in to what they want"*. Participants described feeling *"like a beggar"* when asking for extra benefits like a medical card.

For those who had not felt that their identity was caught up in their job or who perhaps had lower job satisfaction, less distress was experienced. Many participants described taking up other activities to try and evade feelings of boredom. For one participant this in itself was a psychological blow, describing how painting the house symbolised *"accepting it"*. There were a number of participants who felt they had lost their self-reliance since being made unemployed. This was a distressing experience, particularly so for those who had been self-employed, *"For me, from being a self-employed person, you're fairly humiliated"*. Another participant described how she could not adapt to unemployment, *"I can't relax at the weekends, I just can't. If I currently don't have a job, Saturday, Sunday, it doesn't exist for me. I will not rest until I have a job"*.

Money from family was gratefully received, but there was also shame involved, *“I got hand outs from family. When you come to my age, like I’m 46, so you can’t be at an age that you can’t be asking your parents. When you’re independent, you’re independent.”*

### **3.10.2 Strengthening Identity**

One participant felt that the period of unemployment allowed him to step back and to realise, *“there’s more to [him] than just a job”*. Unemployment, in his case, was regarded as an opportunity for self-reflection. Another participant said he had learnt more about himself. When citing an advantage of unemployment one person said they felt that it was a time to re-evaluate your own skills and what you might be capable of, *“Is there anything else that I’m interested in?”*

One participant who was beginning her career said that she felt her period of unemployment had made her believe more in her goals and had in some ways changed her character as she could now identify more with disadvantaged people, *“Please God, if I do go back to work in the future, I’ll be more understanding and able to empathise with people I think...it has given me perspective about that”*.

### **3.10.3 Judgement and Social Approval**

Feeling judged by family and peers was a source of stress. There was general agreement that people are defined by what they do as the first question asked by people you don’t know is, *“What do you do?”* One participant found this quite stressful, *“Shit, what do I say here”*. Participants felt they almost had to invent another story about themselves to justify themselves to other people. These feelings were accentuated in social situations like weddings. *“People think that because you’d say that you couldn’t find work, that there must be something wrong with you”*.

People often employed avoidance behaviour so as not to feel the embarrassment associated with activities they did not feel comfortable doing, *“I know a couple where the wife and the husband didn’t go [to St Vincent de Paul] because he couldn’t stand in the queue, just couldn’t do it. So then she did do it. So she was saying to him like, “We’re stuck and you couldn’t even do that?” and he was saying, “I couldn’t bring myself to do that”*.

One participant felt that this was psychologically harmful, *“I think you can get paranoid though. When you walk into a group of people that have work like you’re thinking, “Oh these are all thinking, “He’s unemployed””. Like I don’t think it’s like that, but it’s very hard not to”*. A similar point was expressed by another participant, *“You constantly do feel judged because you are your worst critic. You are judging yourself”*. Others felt under pressure from their families to get work, *“I can’t help thinking because I was never out of work for very long that my siblings don’t, they think that I’m not trying hard enough, even though I’m spending all day, every bloody day trying to find work”*.

### **3.11. Social Contact**

#### **3.11.1 Work Colleagues**

Participants described how they missed the camaraderie and contact of office life. Participants describe how the job search process can be a very lonely process, *“You feel like you’re by yourself the whole time”*. Another participant pointed out how there was a great sense of loss, *“Because the job is not only going but all the people you were with every day, they’re all gone different ways as well. So you lose more than just a job and money. You lose a lot of relationships...”*

It was also felt that not meeting work colleagues meant losing self-confidence, *“You are used to working with people, and you are not meeting them anymore and that makes a big difference. You lose a lot of self-confidence as a result”*. One participant severely missed the company of her younger colleagues, *“the colleagues I worked with, we did have some fun, there’s no doubt about it and they were all younger than me and it sort of kept me in the loop with what’s going on in younger people’s lives and what they think and the way they talk about things and the situations they find themselves in and it sort of keeps the grey matter going”*. The act of talking was regarded as important in and of itself, *“Just the daily social interaction. Just chatting about nothing with people that’s really, really important and you miss it and you didn’t really value it at the time, you never thought about it”*.

### 3.11.2 Friends

While participants described the social isolation and loneliness of being out of work there did not seem to be a strong drive to replace that contact with friends. Often relationships with friends seemed to become strained. Some described friends being understanding and supportive, one participant had gone to friends for financial support to repay debts; others had friends who helped with their CVs.

However, despite that support, participants often believed they were being judged by their friends and in some way blamed for not having work. This is accentuated when those friends are employed, *“a lot of my peers are working so I wouldn’t be able to be on their level in terms of going out”*. Another participant felt that his employed friends had no understanding of his situation, *“If they’re not on the Dole, or they haven’t been on the Dole, they’ve no idea. Not a clue. Not a clue. So from their point of view, I’m still me. They’re probably looking at me going, “Sure isn’t that great, he doesn’t have anything to do. He’s not under any pressure, no stress”. You know? It’s every bit as stressful as it was working except it’s stress without an end”*.

Many felt these issues were made worse by a lack of cash, *“it’s annoying when you have to say no and you always feel like a stick-in-the-mud you know, when you have to say, “No, I just can’t” and that’s annoying”*. Another participant explained social withdrawal, *“People don’t want to be watching their money when they’re going into a pub. That defeats the purpose of socialising”*. Others felt that they were now boring people who had no news or stories to tell their friends, *“I worry now that I’m becoming an uninteresting person because of a lack of a career and that would worry me”*.

When friends themselves were unemployed this was described as more beneficial for the friendship as they had the ability to *“empathise”* and the friendships themselves were described as becoming *“more honest”*. Participants described how they had learned to be more creative in how they socialised, *“it’s not so much I won’t socialise in public, it’s just there are so many people that I know who are in a similar position, we don’t have any money to do that anymore so if we’re going to get together, again, it’s more creative, we’ll have ‘Games night’ or ‘Wii sports night’”*.

### 3.11.3 Family

When asked if there were any positive aspects to unemployment, participants generally said they found the increased social interaction with their family to be the most positive effect. One participant described how her whole family now congregated in her mother's house once a week, *"So for us, that's our social. It sounds sad I know, but we sit around, I've a brother that is unemployed as well, so for us, that's our social...it's like a party in my mother's house...It'll cost you nothing, we sit there all night drinking tea and eating and that's it"*. In general, participants reported receiving financial and emotional support from their families. One participant had resigned from his job and was receiving financial support from his wife. The period of unemployment was now a time where he and his wife discussed their future and what mattered to both of them. He described how he had done this while his wife had been at university and she was happy to support him as he looked for a change of career.

Parents who lived far away from their children often sent children presents in the post or gave them money, *"People are very supportive when they know you are trying yourself"*. Another participant found that her relationship with her boyfriend had become stronger since unemployment, *"If we can get through this, we can get through anything"*. Men also commented that unemployment allowed them to get to know their children, *"I suddenly realised how I didn't know my kids...it was amazing how I didn't know my children and their education"*.

For others however, the financial support from a wife was a source of embarrassment as they felt they were no longer the breadwinner of the family. The cultural expectation that the male provide for the family was source of stress and anxiety. One participant described how she had come to know her husband better since they were both unemployed, *"It was actually when my husband was made redundant and we wouldn't have spent much time together and then we're now at home and I realise he's a very noisy person"*. Another felt that there was now a strain on the marriage as they had to spend so much time together, *"there's just the two of us there, 24/7"*. Another participant described how relationships suffer, *"[it] affects your relationship with people 'cause you're thinking to yourself, 'Just leave me alone'"*.

One participant described how there was a lack of understanding amongst family members who did not understand her previous work or her interests. *"They know now to keep their mouths shut because I'm not going to respond very well"*. Family discord was a common theme in the discussions, *"Everybody is on the surface, very sympathetic, and everybody understands, at least that's the rhetoric coming across. But you absolutely know that they're looking at you like, "Mm, I don't think so. You need to do something. Why aren't you doing something?"*

That feeling of being judged by one's family ran through many of the groups, *"I am often reluctant to ask them for help because I do feel judged that you know that I'm not living up to my potential or "Why do you stay there if you can't find work?" you know"*. People felt that they were letting their family down. Another participant felt that his wife attributed a degree of blame to him for his unemployment. This had caused tension as the couple were also spending increased amounts of time together. Feeling judged by family pressure was common. Another participant described it as *"a pressure and it's making me angry...I feel angry towards them because of my perception of the way they're looking at me"*.

There was a perception that single people often fare much worse than those who are married. Both men and women who were single felt that the Dole system discriminated against those who lived alone, *"so when people think that you're a single guy, a single guy always has a thing, but it's even harder because we are hit much harder"*. Another participant felt it was extremely important not to become socially isolated, *"But you have to force yourself, you go out and maybe get a Ballygowan, but you have to get out there"*. Amongst one participant who was single, the need to be self-reliant was felt keenly, *"Because you've no one else to help you, only yourself"*. Another participant felt that she could not have a family until she had a job, *"I recently had a birthday and I'm on the slippery slope to 40 now. So if I want to settle down with my partner, have children and do all that kind of thing, I really have to start thinking about doing that now...I don't want a situation where there is hardship within a family, that causes real strain within relationships, when there are children involved, I just think that's irresponsible for me, but I have to get a job, for my own sanity, for my own life, to move forward"*.

#### 3.11.4 Job Search Colleagues

There was a sense that participants had in some way replaced their work colleagues with the people they met in their bid to gain employment. Workers in the job search centres became friends and there was a good deal of networking between those who did not have jobs. Networking was seen as an essential part of getting more work. One participant summed this up as saying, *“the more I speak to others and share my experiences and share other people’s experiences, I’m more likely to find a path and a strategy that will get me back to where I want to be”*. Participants had found job search centres useful and had learnt from each other, *“It’s a very educational time, you learn so much, you really do...like even socially. Like there’s so many people in the same boat”*. Participants benefited from the sense of social solidarity. Another participant said that those in the job search groups would look out for each other if they heard of employment. However in some ways the inadequacy of support groups was also highlighted, *“a support group isn’t going to put meals on the table”*.

### 3.12. Re-Entering Employment

#### 3.12.1 Losing Benefits and the Proliferation of Part-Time Work

Participants expressed concern that they may have to take a job that pays considerably less than their previous job. The potential loss of benefits was also of great concern to many participants. *“I actually don’t have any objection to washing floors and cleaning toilets, but if I was working and living on a wage of 400 Euro a week, I’d probably lose my medical card and that is more worrying to me than working in a low status job”*. Losing social welfare and benefits was a deep concern to participants.

The proliferation of part-time work is also a hindrance for those trying to re-enter the job market, one participant was offered a job which had 4 hours a week, *“like the experience and all was good, but I was never actually going to make anything out of the place”*. This was summed up by one participant who noted, *“if you have a mortgage, that type of money is no use to you. You have to pay the bills and that, especially only 20 hours a week. Anyone here wants to get out working full-time”*. One participant commented that it was not rational for him to work part-time as his Family Income Support benefit was cut, *“312 I was getting. And on the Social, I was getting 367. So to travel up to Tesco, of course you have to eat, you have to buy*



*your lunch, the whole lot. I came back then, after Christmas, I was down to 28 hours, then it was 24, then it went to 16....they wanted me to do 16 hours over 5 days. That was 5 days travel, 5 days food...I couldn't do it."* Another participant had a similar argument to make, *"I wouldn't be able to take that job if I really wanted to take it. I get rental allowance, I get a medical card, I'm asthmatic. I depend on my rent allowance, I depend on my medical card. If I was to take that job for 300 Euro a week, then I'd lose my medical card, I'd lose my rent allowance, I'd still be paying tax on the minimum wage, so I mean I'd be much better off staying in the situation that I'm in now"*. Another participant felt that, *"You will lose, for me, if I go working, any hours I worked are knocked off my rent allowance like that. So if I got a hundred Euro, my rent allowance is gone, so what are you working for, do you know?"*

The system was also criticised as participants felt that they might have to refuse short-term work as the hassle of signing on and off was a disincentive to work, *"You're thinking, "Right, if I go and do a 3 month contract, it took me a month and a half to get a receipt from the Social Welfare, when I'm finished that 3 month contract, I'm going to spend another month and a half after that, looking for me social welfare, looking for me benefits"...like I've got absolutely zero motivation to do any of those jobs"*. Another participant pointed out that, *"If you got a couple of hours work, and if you be honest about and say it to the social welfare, they make a big thing...10 hours work would be no good because it would cause too much hassle to pay it through the books"*.

### **3.12.2 Over-Qualification**

Participants also found it difficult to apply for jobs they were over-qualified for. This was a psychological concern for a number of participants but they also felt that they were discriminated against as they felt a boss would not employ someone with the experience or qualifications they had. As such their qualifications served as a barrier to re-entry into the workforce, *"People who are advertising jobs that are lower than that level will not look at me because I'm too expensive and it will cause conflict within the organisation because I'm a senior manager. You can't put me in with the office junior, that's going to cause a problem"*.

### 3.12.3 Discrimination

Participants expressed concern that the period of unemployment would itself hamper attempts to find employment, feeling that employers want to hire people who are already in full employment, *“If you have a job, it’s easier to find another job”*. One focus group expressed the view that potential employers discriminated against them on the basis of where they were from, *“I handed out all my CVs right and the three replies I got, had my girlfriend’s father’s address on it. I got three replies and I had twenty two of them with the address in X and I didn’t get any replies. Not a phone call nor a letter”*. This was felt in other focus groups held in poorer regions, *“the stigma attached to a particular estate...there’s definitely a stigma attached to council estates...and it’s so wrong like. It stops a lot of young people having a chance to move ahead”*.

Further barriers in gaining employment were in areas such as construction in which agencies regulated the hiring of individuals. Another barrier to employment was age. Older participants felt that they were trapped between employment and applying for a pension, *“I’m too old to work for somebody. I’m too young to go on a pension. So I’m stuck in limbo, you know. It’s impossible for myself to get a job”*.

One participant also felt that there was very little support for lone parents seeking to gain employment, *“a real job is what I’m aiming at but I find being a lone parent nearly blocks you in some ways. You have to be there for them. You have to be there in the evening so the whole full-time job thing is nearly impossible as a lone parent”*.

### 3.12.4 Number of Applicants

An important part of this anxiety was that large numbers of people are also competing for a limited number of places. Participants often recounted stories where vast number of people had applied for one or two positions. This led to feelings of insignificance and despondence. Not hearing back from potential employers heightens those feelings, *“You’re getting no feedback. You’re just wondering are you wasting your time?”* Participants felt that jobs were not being properly advertised, *“Two or three years ago, you could walk from one job to another. You could last a day and then say, “Oh no, I can go down the road and get a better one”. But*

*now there's nothing. You can't even do that. You can't walk in. Everywhere is full, "No, we don't want you. Sorry."."*

Some expressed a degree of resignation to this, *"I think some companies now, even to put a stamp on an envelope, they're not even doing that so you know, the recession must be really bad if they can't even do that you know?"* Because there were so many applicants, participants found that they were not getting replies from employers or feedback as to why they weren't considered. This caused a lot of participants to feel isolated and disillusioned. There was also a sense that without feedback participants couldn't improve.

### **3.12.5 Unfair Application Process**

Often participants felt that the jobs that existed were not actually advertised, *"30% of jobs are not advertised through any means"*. Others felt that the jobs that recruiting agencies advertise don't actually exist and are simply used as a way for these agencies to survive, *"I think they are struggling to have some buzz out there to get some attention"*. Participants also felt that an interview does not convey a person's skills well enough, *"They've no idea of what I can do unless they've been in the same environment that I'm describing in my CV"*. This was given as an example of why participants should do volunteer work as it allows employers to get to know them.

### **3.12.6 Threat from Outsiders**

In a number of focus groups, resentment was expressed towards migrants where it was felt that foreign people were more willing to work for a lower wage and were therefore more likely to be employed than an Irish person, *"They're coming in, taking our job, they're getting half our wages...so I felt like, 'What's the point?' Your confidence would be gone like"*. In a similar vein, annoyance was expressed that local county councillors contract out work like road building and landscaping. This anger was expressed by another participant who felt, *"there are a lot of tourists here and you know, they're doing the work alright, but they're taking your job, for cheaper money...they will take on other people and they will work because they want to stay here"*.

Migrants were perceived by some participants as not only a threat to employment but also a threat within the social welfare claims system where a number of participants claimed migrants made fraudulent claims.

### **3.12.7 Under-Qualified**

There was also a concern amongst those who do not have degrees or qualifications that they would have to compete for work with highly educated people, *“Like if anyone is going to get back to work it’s going to be all of them like before me. Nowadays the employers are looking for more qualified people that are willing to work in the same job for less money.”* Another participant noted, *“You need qualifications, you need foreign languages, do you know? So if you don’t have them, it’s “Good luck, good luck, good luck”.* Another participant was disillusioned by this, *“there’s always someone in front of you who does have the skills for the job that you don’t have”.*

### **3.12.8 The Minimum Wage**

Participants described how short term contracts and fewer hours meant that they were financially better off on the Dole, *“Another fella was packing Playstations into boxes...he was getting no money at all. You’d be better off on the Dole, getting more money, getting the same, maybe a little bit less, but it’s a lot less hassle as well, going out there, just packing boxes and getting no money at all”.* One participant had similar sentiment, *“If you figure it out, an average working week on the minimum wage after tax, PRSI, PAYE, you end up with only 64 Euro more and yet it would cost me more than that per week to actually get the bus to and from the places and that’s with a bus pass”.*

### **3.12.9 Cost of Re-Training**

For the people who said they would consider changing careers, re-training was an issue. The courses listed were said to be extremely expensive, priced well above what someone with no income could afford. One young man who had been a carpenter said, *“I thought I’d like to do something like physiotherapy or something like that, but you know, you think about it for a certain amount of time and you think, “Okay, that could be of benefit. I could work somewhere else” but then you just come across the same problems, trying to get fees to pay for courses”.*

Some participants also had negative views of the CE Scheme as a mechanism for re-entry into the labour market, *“They are good in some ways, but unless you are really prepared to up-skill, they are a bit of a doss as far as I’m concerned, even though they are good in some ways...they give you a bit of extra money...all these schemes, I wonder about their ability to be honest”*.

### **3.13. Social Welfare**

#### **3.13.1 Chaotic Environments**

Participants uniformly described social welfare offices as chaotic and unpleasant environments. The layout of the office was difficult to understand and it often took two or three visits before participants knew the ergonomics of the office. One participant described how frustration brewed in these environments, *“People getting thick with each other because you’ve jumped the queue and you mightn’t necessarily even mean to jump the queue because you don’t know where you are”*. One participant suggested that there should be a guide in every office who can show people how the office functions. One case was described where a new office had been built but was not opened and locals had to commute long distances to sign on, *“It’s a mess altogether”*. They also found that after queuing they were told they were in the wrong building. One participant suggested that radio ads be used to advertise changes of venues, *“like we listen to the radio as well”*.

#### **3.13.2 Lack of Information**

Often participants were unable to find out information relevant to their claim and many did not know the status of their benefit claims, *“It’s like trying to get blood from a stone sometimes”*. One participant summed it, *“There’s a policy here whereby if you lose your job, ‘Tough. We don’t give a shit about you’*. Another person likened the experience to, *“banging your head off the wall”*. Another found the process of collecting welfare dehumanising. There is a sense that the Social Welfare services have not moved with the times, some participants felt that they were, *“not up-to-date with what is going on”*.

Many participants believed that some social welfare offices were deliberately chaotic so that participants would stay away, *“Even when applying for grants that you’re entitled to, it’s just such a rigmorole”*. Frustration was the main result of this chaotic system, *“There’s so many*

*restraints with trying to deal with being on social welfare, never mind all the other aspects of trying to actually maintain a standard of living. It's just a nightmare".* It was also believed that there was no system of complaint, *"There is no accountability"*.

### **3.13.3 'Just a Number'**

Related to this feeling of being dehumanised, there was a feeling that social welfare officers did not know how to properly communicate. One participant described how he felt bullied when a welfare officer told him to sell his house, *"She said to me, "Well you just have to. Those days are gone, you just have to sell the house, that's it." And she was just so ruthless, she didn't even look in my face."* Another participant described getting social welfare as traumatic, *"There was about 100 people in front of me and 100 people behind me and by the time I got to the counter I was practically abused by the person behind the counter and it's just embarrassing and it's horrible...they don't make it easy and that's not very helpful when you're not working. It doesn't have to be that hard"*. One participant explained a bad experience at the welfare office, *"I was just another one at the end of a very long line of people...you're just a statistic, a number"*. Participants felt they should all be treated with respect, *"like we're all human"*. Another participant felt, *"People who have worked all their lives are being reduced to the level of beggars, you know, we're back to the Victorian idea of the deserving poor being looked after by the ladies"*.

### **3.13.4 Differential Services**

When participants described their experiences of social welfare it was marked with feelings of chaos and a lack of sensitivity amongst staff, *"They don't care about you. You're only a number"*. There seemed to be a degree of variation in service both between welfare offices and between individual welfare officers, *"it depends on individuals, who you come up against"*. In a similar vein it was felt that there was *"no type of uniform humanised empathetic treatment for people whose circumstances have fallen"*.

Participants expressed sympathy for the difficult job of officers but felt that they were often unfairly treated by individuals who did not realise how lucky they themselves were to be in employment. Most participants seemed to have mixed experiences, *"First, they're not always singing off the same hymn sheet but they tell you something entirely different, or as you're*

*speaking to them [they say], "I'm not sure"...if they're not sure!"* One participant described how they had received different information about rent allowance by phone from that on the formal literature provided. Some hear conflicting information from different workers indicating a lack of consistency in training of office workers, *"There's a young lad down there and he's deadly. He'll tell you what's going on, what to do, what not to do and there's an old woman in there and she won't tell you nothing...just two different people, working in the same office"*.

A number of participants also expressed the view that welfare officers treated people differently depending on whether they were Irish and their level of education, *"I don't want to say she treats non-Irish nationals differently and also treating Irish people who are maybe educated and have worked and had previous employment vary differently to her attitude. She was actually very polite to me...but a couple of weeks later I heard her roaring at this poor man and she was like, "It's not my problem you don't speak English properly"*. This may also be to do with biases amongst staff towards those they believe to be "career unemployed" and those they regard as unemployed as a result of the recession.

### **3.13.5 The Previously Self-Employed**

Self-employed people described their difficulty in obtaining social welfare, one participant said, *"I went through hell"*. Participants said that they had to wait almost a year without any payments so as to prove they were not earning an income. This period had been one of particular hardship, *"They think you've money under the carpet...but they don't realise you don't. I mean why would I be coming looking for money when you work for yourself...so that's another thing, psychological thing that can affect you"*.

## **3.14 Job Training and Placement**

### **3.14.1 Expense**

The majority of experiences of FÁS are negative. A large proportion of the study's participants were involved in or had been on FÁS courses. No one reported finding work as a result of the course, *"I've a daughter, sure all the courses, most of them, you have to pay for them. She can't get a job, she's after paying for every one of her courses. It's only all a joke"*.

The courses themselves were not only viewed as expensive, but the act of doing them also cost money, *“I came back in 2005 and I took a VTOS course to fill my time until I found a job. I not only ended up losing money, they refused to give me a travel allowance. I had to spend more money getting into town to do the class and ended up having to stop in the middle...they really don't give you any assistance”*.

### **3.14.2 Valueless Courses**

Participants felt that there was a lack of meaningful courses that would properly prepare them for the jobs market. A number of participants had expressed an interest in gaining lorry-driving qualifications, *“I enquired about a good few jobs, looking for coach drivers, stuff like that, but you need a D license plate...and like they're over 1,000 Euro to do a course and you don't know if you're going to get a job. If FÁS run courses like that”*. It was pointed out that FÁS do run some lorry-driving courses but that they take too long to qualify.

Of the courses that FÁS do run it was felt they were of little value, *“What's the point of doing it if you're not going to get work out of it?”* There were also reports that those people who needed the courses most weren't being offered places on them, while people with more qualifications were getting places, *“I didn't get any of the courses yet my neighbour who'd gone through UCC and had a degree in Commerce was taken on the same course that I was applying to. Now that just jaundiced my attitude to FÁS”*. Another participant had had a negative experience when he found the FÁS course he was on was too difficult, *“I wasn't ready for that course so I wasted my time and I wasted the money that the State paid”*.

### **3.14.3 Work Placement Programme**

There was a general negative reaction to the Work Placement Programme when mentioned. Participants were often confused about the details of the course and felt that FÁS officers were also confused, *“it was actually very difficult before Christmas to get a tiny little leaflet, about that size, kind of explaining to you what the WPP wants and then also finding out from Social Welfare what would happen if you went on one of these programmes or if you were doing volunteering work, how would Social Welfare consider that?”* The tools that FÁS use to communicate were also heavily criticised, *“The FÁS website is the worst I've ever seen in me life...I don't know if the jobs even exist like...like they're supposed to help jobseekers”*.



Many felt that the programme was simply a means of taking advantage of people and that it was a way for profitable companies to make money, *“I’d imagine that it is exploiting. As I said, somebody’s going to do that for 9 months and then they’re going to get rid of you and get someone else for 9 months”*. Participants also said that they felt that 9 months was too long a period to, *“work for nothing”*. Participants felt that there was an advantage to it, in that it would fill up your time but felt that remaining on Social Welfare for the duration of the scheme was unfair, *“If she’s working the same as everyone, she should be getting the same money as everyone else”*. Participants felt that if there was a guarantee or possibility of full employment at the end of 9 months it might be worth considering.

They also pointed out that the cost of travel and childcare that would be incurred from working made it an unattractive offer. Participants felt that by taking part in the programme they would be used as, *“cheap labour”*. There was also a sense that being on the WPP would cause inconvenience as you would have to sign off the Dole and if you weren’t offered work by the end of the programme you would have to reapply, *“You’ve to go back in and be begging for money whereas you had it in the first place”*.

#### **3.14.4 No Room for Graduates**

Participants felt that the existing services for graduates were inadequate. Those with degrees felt neglected and they were often told, *“Well we can’t help you because you’re more qualified than we are in this area”*. This was an isolating experience where participants felt there was no hope for the future. Another participant described how he had done a FÁS course but having a degree already, the course was too simple, *“[They tell you], “You’ll better yourself doing a course”. No you don’t. You go out of your tree”*.

## **4. Summary and Conclusions**

The paper documents a range of psychologically aversive experiences associated with unemployment. The evidence from the focus groups suggests that unemployment has an adverse effect on people’s financial, social and family life with subsequent consequences for people’s mental and physical health. Individuals struggled to create and maintain structure in their daily lives and to adapt to the routine of unemployment.

In particular participants struggled to come to terms with the loss of their 'working identity' and found it difficult to adapt to the new label of 'being unemployed'. Many participants felt they had experienced stigma as a result of being unemployed, both from their peer group and family as well as from public service operators. Many participants saw both public services and the political system as unfair, myopic and identified a severe lack of political interest in addressing the issue of unemployment. While the majority of the participants interviewed expressed a strong desire to return to employment as quickly as possible, many were resigned to the notion that unemployment would continue for a number of years.

Recent research has emphasised the potential economic consequences of loss of morale associated with unemployment, including its potential effect on reducing job search behaviour and effort, thereby creating self-fulfilling lower expectations (e.g. Krueger & Mueller, 2010). The wide range of negative experiences reported by respondents about the process of interacting with state training opportunities is another key feature of the report. Given the psychological effects associated with unemployment, it is likely that confusion surrounding the availability of training and requirements associated with different programmes will be exacerbated in terms of their effect on meaningful patterns of job search and training.

Ongoing research by the authors is examining in detail the statistical interactions between unemployment and a wide range of other life circumstances in determining well-being and psychological distress. The literature on well-being and economics is increasingly demonstrating that unemployment has an effect on well-being that far outweighs the monetary cost imposed on the individuals. The implications of this literature need to be developed further and integrated into modern labour market policies.

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## Appendix 1: Demographic details of focus groups

Focus Group	Number of Men	Number of Women	Total Number of Participants	Age Range	Average Number of Months of Unemployment
Killbarrack	2	4	6	20-48	6.5
Geary Institute	2	4	6	25-55	7.3
Limerick	4	0	4	33-56	8
Dublin Inner City	3	3	6	34-49	9.6
Dublin Inner City	2	1	3	36-38	9
Leixlip	3	2	5	33-63	10
Dublin Inner City	1	2	3	27-63	11
Cork	3	0	3	52-55	9.6
Swords	6	0	6	26-35	16.8
Letterkenny	4	2	6	26-55	12
Inner City Dublin	1	8	9	28-49	15.6
Waterford	6	3	9	18-62	15.3
Tuam	2	2	4	34-60	40.2
Total	39	31	70	18-63	13.14