

EDITORIAL

Psychological aspects of employment and unemployment¹

The central role of employment in society and in individual lives is increasingly being addressed by specialists from several disciplines. For the psychologist and psychiatrist concerned to understand and assist everyday functioning, issues of personal effectiveness and relationships in occupational settings clearly warrant careful examination; and for the epidemiologist and sociologist investigating environmental stressors, life events and vulnerability factors, a range of important work-related themes have emerged. Issues of contemporary concern may be considered under two general headings. I shall first examine some features and processes of paid employment, before moving on to illustrate the links between these and psychological aspects of being unemployed. The latter are of particular concern at present, when the number of people in Britain registered as unemployed and seeking work has almost doubled in a single year.

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL MEANINGS OF PAID EMPLOYMENT

Six benefits of having a job may be identified: the provision of money, activity, variety, temporal structure, social contacts, and a status and identity within society's institutions and networks.

The major importance of the first of these, financial gain, has sometimes been underemphasized by psychological and medical writers, yet a job is clearly essential for most people as their principal source of income and as a means to consequential gains of many kinds. Secondly, employment provides outlets for physical and mental energy, and offers rewards through the development and exercise of personal skills. One basis of mental health may be considered to be the establishment and attainment of realistic goals, and it is partly through work that these may be achieved.

Thirdly, a job provides variety by taking one out of unchanging domestic surroundings and permitting access to facilities and tasks which are not otherwise available. Paid employment serves, fourthly, to divide time into segments, each with its own built-in structure and goals. To move between employment responsibilities and routines and the greater freedom and ease associated with leisure activities provides a contrast which can enhance the value of both. Fifthly, the majority of jobs require social interactions, giving access to a range of shared experiences and supports, as well as providing opportunities for social comparisons which are important for stability and change in self-concept. Finally, employment also provides a personal identity and status within social institutions. The employed person occupies a role, with associated rights and obligations which are not possessed by those out of work; in a sense the latter are not full members of society as it is currently organized.

However, we should also note the psychological costs of being employed. In the first place, many jobs are unquestionably tedious and unattractive. Research has recently focused upon the 'intrinsic' features of tasks such as their variety, autonomy, identity and feedback of results, often observing a marked absence of these characteristics in contemporary employment settings. Strong associations have been recorded between the extent to which they are present and employees' job satisfaction, work motivation, job involvement, commitment, alienation, and measures of mental health and individual or work group effectiveness (e.g. Kornhauser, 1965; Hackman & Lawler, 1971; Coburn, 1978; Wall, 1978). As a result there has been much interest in 'job redesign', suggesting that work tasks may be reorganized to increase their intrinsically valued components and thus yield psychological benefits as well as greater productivity (e.g. Den Hertog, 1976; Hackman & Oldham, 1980). Controlled experiments in this area are difficult, and too many studies which introduce operational

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changes (rather than merely recording correlations at one point in time) are scientifically flawed. However, there is growing evidence that the redesign of jobs can enhance mental health generally, as well as increase specific satisfactions with work (e.g. Wall, 1980). Several authors have stressed that it is lack of personal control of one's work activities which is most strongly predictive of low psychological well-being, especially in circumstances of high task demands (e.g. Karasek, 1979).

Other negative features of employment which have recently been examined include overload, conflict, role ambiguity, excessive responsibility for people, environmental turbulence and uncertainty, bad working conditions, and troubled interpersonal relationships (e.g. Kasl, 1978; Fletcher & Payne, 1980). These negative aspects of having a job have provoked an extensive literature on 'occupational stress', in which a large number of job-related correlates of strain reactions have been suggested. However, this literature needs to be approached with care. Without doubt some jobs are stressful and some job-holders are often under strain, but there are few jobs which cause continuing psychological strain for all people who undertake them.

In their search for stressors and strain reactions, many authors cite merely the correlations between reported job characteristics and reported psychological problems. Apart from the methodological limitation that these studies examine only self-reports, it is important to note that authors rarely cite average values of the variables examined. On those infrequent occasions when mean occupational stressor or employee strain scores are published, they are typically quite low.

Estimated prevalence of course depends upon where the threshold is set, but several sources of evidence suggest that about 5% of employees are at any one time under work-related strain severe enough to warrant help. Some are likely to be seriously impaired, and over a period (a year, for example) the absolute number of cases becomes substantial. Among those cases will be many who have succumbed to repeated failure in attempts to cope with chronic job pressures. In that respect it is important to view occupational stressors in conjunction with non-occupational difficulties. (Conversely, the medical practitioner exploring non-occupational stressors should also investigate employment difficulties.) It is when problems accumulate from both domains that strain reactions are most probable.

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT OF UNEMPLOYMENT

Research over many decades has indicated that the large majority of people say they would continue to work even if they could afford not to, so that it would appear that the psychological benefits of employment outweigh the costs. On this basis those who become unemployed may be expected to suffer.

Their suffering would be due to withdrawal of the positive features described earlier: money, activity, variety, temporal structure, social contacts, and a status and identity within society's institutions. Furthermore, we might expect the negative effects of unemployment to combine together, so that (for example) lack of money, social contact and self-confidence would aggravate each other to yield a cumulatively large deterioration and a reduced ability to find fresh work. This process might be accentuated by the generally dispiriting consequences of prolonged uncertainty, anxiety and self-doubt.

Such effects of unemployment are indeed reported from studies of two general kinds. A wealth of case study material has been gathered, illustrating in detailed narrative form the psychological deterioration which accompanies a period of unemployment (e.g. Jahoda *et al.* 1933; Bakke, 1940; Marsden & Duff, 1975; Sinfield, 1981; Swinburne, 1981). Parallel studies from a more quantitative base have used inventories of depression, anxiety, life satisfaction, minor psychiatric morbidity, self-esteem, and positive and negative affect, and have consistently revealed substantial decrements for the unemployed (e.g. Warr, 1978; Dooley & Catalano, 1980; Hepworth, 1980; Stafford *et al.* 1980). For example, research from the Social and Applied Psychology Unit in Sheffield has found unemployed teenagers to be at least twice as likely as those with jobs to suffer from minor psychiatric disorder (e.g. Warr, 1981).

However, although in general terms the psychological correlates of unemployment are established

as strongly negative, there are many important specific questions waiting to be answered. Several of these concern possible moderating variables: what other features influence the strength of the association between employment status (having or not having a job) and psychological health? A number of these will be considered next.

Length of unemployment is an obvious candidate for study: do unemployed people become progressively more impaired with time out of a job, or do processes of adjustment reverse an initial decline? Sadly, we have no detailed information here. Several sequences of response stages have been suggested (e.g. Eisenberg & Lazarsfeld, 1938; Hill, 1978; Schlossberg & Leibowitz, 1980), but these differ considerably between themselves and are not based adequately upon longitudinal data. This area is particularly difficult, since direction and speed of development are dependent upon many factors, such as job-seeking success, financial resources or social supports. One variable of interest is age: for example, it may be that unemployed people in their 50s come to adjust to the idea of 'early retirement', whereas younger people with dependent children find continuing unemployment increasingly painful. Differential hypotheses of this kind have not yet been tested.

It should be emphasized that there is a disturbing lack of psychological research into longer-term unemployment (more than 12 months is one definition). Long-term unemployed people differ from those out of work for shorter periods in a number of respects, for example being older, less healthy and having fewer qualifications and skills (Colledge & Bartholomew, 1980). Generalizations to this group from present psychological data are unlikely to be fully justified. By the same token, we lack adequate information about possible long-term irreversible effects of unemployment; research has not looked for these in any systematic way, concentrating more upon measures of current psychological state during periods of unemployment up to a few months.

One variable which has been shown clearly to moderate the impact of short-term unemployment is 'work involvement', the degree to which having paid employment is salient within a person's system of values. It is firmly established that the negative psychological effects of unemployment are greater for those people with high work involvement (Warr, 1978; Stafford *et al.* 1980). In a general motivational sense this is not surprising, but it has several important practical implications. For example, the strength of influence of this variable means that in examining psychological correlates of unemployment we should attempt to assess average work involvement levels in each sample; without that information, comparisons between studies in terms of the degree and mechanisms of impairment are extremely difficult.

A second practical implication of the importance of work involvement is seen in therapy and counselling interventions. Much counselling of unemployed people aims to assist them to cope with present problems through sustained job-seeking motivation and better self-presentation, in effect through the maintenance or enhancement of work involvement. Yet research findings make clear that this very process will increase distress if the person fails to find a job. Solutions to this counselling dilemma will presumably hinge upon a separation between several different bases of self-esteem, some employment-related but others having no occupational content.

Work involvement is also important in considering possible sex differences in the impact of unemployment. The literature on women's employment and mental health is generally excessively simple-minded (notable exceptions being the projects by Brown & Harris (1978) and Bebbington *et al.* (1981)), but the literature may be interpreted to suggest that for women who see themselves as being in the labour market, employment and unemployment are as influential in determining mental health as they are for men. Women who currently see themselves as out of the labour market (many mothers of young children, for instance) appear, in general, to show no differences in mental health associated with employment status, although having a job may be psychologically important for particular disadvantaged groups. Unfortunately, very little research in this area has examined personal work involvement, and these generalizations require further testing (cf. Warr & Parry, 1981).

To the possible moderating variables of length of unemployment, age, work involvement and sex may be added those of occupational status, financial position, family unemployment, social support networks, local levels of unemployment, hobbies and personal interests. Almost no research has

included these in examinations of the psychological consequences of being out of work. Other desirable research developments would extend the range of dependent variables which are examined. Up to now there has been an emphasis upon measures of well-being and of job-seeking activities. This has been appropriate and valuable, but hints that unemployed people may become less able to retain and retrieve information, to concentrate for long periods, or to make difficult decisions have not yet been followed by empirical enquiry. These cognitive aspects of personal functioning deserve early attention.

Also important is the possibility that in comparison with certain psychologically harmful jobs (of the kinds mentioned earlier) unemployment might in some cases be beneficial. It is likely that the next decade will see substantial changes in traditional work patterns, so that we shall have to build upon the positive features of being out of work as well as to search for alternative sources of those benefits which jobs themselves provide. Financial rewards from an employment relationship are not easily replaced in full, but the other five psychological benefits from work summarized above could increasingly be generated by new forms of social institution. What these will be is at present unclear, but one possible step towards their specification may be to examine to what degree and through what mechanisms shorter work-weeks or forms of work-sharing can increase psychological health, especially for those in undesirable jobs.

Most studies from a more traditional perspective have been of a cross-sectional kind, comparing outcome measures for unemployed and employed samples. These leave open the question of causality: perhaps the cross-sectional findings are a result of self-selection, such that people with lower psychological health are likely to become or remain unemployed, whereas their counterparts with higher scores are liable to retain or find work. This is another issue in urgent need of empirical investigation, although the small amount of evidence available argues against the self-selection interpretation. For example, we have recorded a significant increase in minor psychiatric morbidity among a small group of employed people when they subsequently become unemployed, and the opposite effect for another small sample moving from unemployment to employment (e.g. Warr, 1981). Incidentally, we have observed that, in terms of psychological well-being, government schemes to provide short-term training and work experience for young adults are as effective as genuine employment. (There are of course differences of other kinds, in terms of occupational role, duration, payment levels and so on.)

Finally, some comments should be made about aggregate time-series studies. Investigations reviewed above have all been at the level of the individual person, but there is an important tradition of research which examines relationships between national or local economic conditions and aggregate medical data, for example in terms of suicide rates or hospital admissions. Several recent studies of this kind have been based upon econometric prediction methods, crucial to which is the identification of an appropriate time lag between an economic change and the outcome measure.

The work of Brenner (1973, 1980) has been influential in this field. For example, one study found a strong relationship between changes in the manufacturing employment index and admissions to New York State public mental hospitals between 1914 and 1967, after an appropriate temporal lag had been introduced. Such research has important implications for the planning and provision of services, and it deserves extension. However, the findings reported so far in respect of psychiatric indices are not without problems. For example, the investigators' omission of data from private mental hospitals and state general hospitals has been criticized, and variations between years and discrepancies between subgroups have been noted to weaken the general argument. There are also problems associated with the capacity of hospitals (a natural constraint on admissions), and the matching of community areas for economic and medical indices. The model assumes a cyclical pattern of relationships, such that improvements as well as decrements in economic conditions both yield higher morbidity, and there has been controversy about that possibility. Another issue of contention is the validity of assessing hospitalization rather than community prevalence. These themes have been discussed by Catalano & Dooley (1977), Dooley & Catalano (1980), Marshall & Funch (1979, 1980), Ratcliff (1980) and others. It seems appropriate to accept that, despite the problems, some relationships of the kind described do exist in North American data, but that

further exploration is required. The important point here is that uncertainty about the validity or otherwise of aggregate time-series data does not prevent a conclusion at the individual level; as described above, it is clear that unemployment is in general associated with individual psychological distress.

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