Unemployment and psychological health
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Summary

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

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

Chapter 1

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

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

Chapter 2

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

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

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

Chapter 3

Unemployment has been described from a psychological perspective mainly because of the introduction of recent life event research. A number of several valuable concepts that eventually guided our empirical approach were derived from literature on attributional patterns (Learning theory) and external locus of control, and psychological distress when losing a job. On the one hand, factors as such as unemployment act as resistance factors, e.g. in psychological theories: perceived uncontrollability as an etiological factor. Essentially, each theory puts forward a different perspective, which is meant to explain the relationship between psychological distress and the uncontrollable situation such as unemployment.

Three approaches were outlined: the so-called correlational, transversal group comparison, which was designed for a different purpose in studying differences in psychological health between employed and unemployed individuals. The other approach was used to study change (i.e. employed, unemployed, re-employed, unemployed); a number of mediator variables (e.g. social support) were assumed to be related to employment status, whereas psychological health was assumed to be related to perceived uncontrollability and moderated by individual differences (e.g. social isolation, perception of control). The model was specified which focused on changes in employment status. A longitudinal model a stable and psychological distress were...
Unemployment has been described both from a sociological life-event, and from a psychological perspective. These two viewpoints tend to converge, mainly because of the introduction of psychological concepts (e.g. coping) in recent life event research. A theoretical discussion of unemployment yielded several valuable concepts to be incorporated in the approaches which eventually guided our empirical research. Vulnerability and resistance factors were derived from life event research. It has been demonstrated that psychological dispositions (e.g. low self-esteem, neuroticism, and an external locus of control) increase the persons' susceptibility to psychological distress when confronted with some negative life event. On the other hand, factors as social support or a particular coping style might act as resistance factors. Other concepts were derived from various psychological theories: perceptions of control (Critical Psychology), causal attributional patterns (Learned helplessness theory), expectancies and values related to a job (Expectancy-value theory), and particular ways of coping (Coping theory). These psychological theories emphasize the importance of uncontrollability as an etiological factor for psychological distress. Essentially, each theory puts forward some particular intervening variable which is meant to explain individual differences in reactions to an uncontrollable situation such as unemployment.

Three approaches were outlined to be empirically investigated: the so-called correlational, transversal, and longitudinal approach. Each of these was designed for a different data-set. The correlational approach was used in studying differences in psychological health within the groups of employed and unemployed professionals, respectively. This approach assumed that a number of variables (e.g. attributions, employment commitment) were correlated with psychological health. The transversal approach was used to study differences between employment status groups (i.e. employed, unemployed, students). In this approach a sharp distinction was made between moderator variables (i.e. psychological dispositions) and mediator variables (e.g. social support, perception of control). The former were assumed to be relatively stable and unaffected by changes in employment status, whereas the latter were not. Thus, it was hypothesized that psychological health was influenced by employment status in a direct and moderated way, and indirectly, through changes in mediator variables (e.g. social isolation, perceived uncontrollability). Finally, a longitudinal model was specified which was used to study the relationship between changes in employment status and changes in psychological health. In this longitudinal model a stable 'trait' and a changing 'state' component of psychological distress were distinguished.
Chapter 4

After providing some figures about professional unemployment in The Netherlands, two longitudinal field studies were described. In Study 1 635 graduated school-leavers were followed over a two year period from 1984 to 1986. The first time (T0) the respondents completed the questionnaire shortly before their final examination (response rate 41%). Follow-ups were conducted after six (T1), twelve (T2), eighteen (T3), and twenty-four (T4) months. The sample was representative for the Dutch population of graduated students with respect to sex and type of education. Drop-out rates ranged from 14% to 22%, whereas no systematic drop-out occurred. Study 2 was carried out among long-term unemployed professionals who were registered as unemployed at the Labour Office for a period of at least one year (T5). The response rate was the same as in Study 1 (i.e. 41%; N=467). Unfortunately, 32% of the original sample failed to return their addresses so that at the one year follow-up (T2) questionnaires could be sent to only 317 respondents (response rate 82%). Again, no systematic drop-out occurred with respect to biographical or psychological variables.

Chapter 5

The operationalizations of the variables used in the present study were discussed and a general model of scale construction and evaluation was presented. This model consisted of several steps and was used to create reliable and valid measurement instruments satisfying relatively high psychometrical standards of invariance, internal consistency, economy, and construct validity. At the end of our psychometrical analyses a dozen multi-item questionnaires of high psychometrical quality emerged. Unfortunately, it appeared that in some cases only one dimension of the multi-dimensional concept (e.g. coping and attribution) could be adequately measured.

Chapter 6

Compared with general population norms and with results of similar studies the school-leavers (Study 1) showed low mean levels of psychological distress, whereas the male long-term unemployed respondents (Study 2) exhibited higher mean levels of psychological distress. Although the latter finding may suggest that men and woman react differently to unemployment, this was not confirmed by statistical testing. Transversal analyses indicated that self-esteem and neuroticism moderated the effect of unemployment on psychological health only very weakly and inconsistently. The locus of control did not play a moderating role whatsoever. Mediating effects were only found in Study 2: prolonged unemployment was associated towards non-work. These were negatively related to psychological distress. The results from the correlational analyses are presented in Table 4.1. Unemployment was only (weakly) negatively related to duration of unemployment. Unemployment was also related to stigmaization (Study 2). Quality of job was negatively related to psychological distress. Generally, correlation analyses showed that the unemployed group, indicating these variables were important in explaining different levels of psychological distress. In addition, it was found that the long-term unemployed respondents, who experienced a positive transition from unemployment to non-work, exhibited lower mean levels of psychological distress than those who were already unemployed at T1 when asked about their current state of health. The former group had already experienced a positive transition from unemployed to employed. Although this suggests the operation of a kind of 'immune reaction' towards non-work, this finding may also be an artefact resulting from the relatively healthy state of the employed group.

Chapter 7

Two different kinds of longitudinal analyses were carried out. First, simple analysis was carried out in which the effects of status transitions on psychological health were examined (i.e., unemployment to employment, and employment to unemployment). School-leavers (Study 1) did not show higher levels of psychological distress than employed respondents who experienced a positive transition. In contrast, the long-term unemployed respondents who had been unemployed for their less than two years before T1 (Study 2) exhibited lower levels of psychological distress after a one year follow-up than the permanently unemployed, whereas a positive transition to employment already existed at T1. This result suggests the operation of a kind of 'immune reaction' towards non-work, indicating this intriguing issue in greater detail. The long-term unemployed respondents were found to have better psychological health when compared to the employed respondents. It should be noted that this result was not typically observed in longitudinal data, indicating this might be an artefact resulting from the relatively healthy state of the employed group.

In addition, in Study 1 a complex model was developed step by step. This model included a weighted indicator of the relevance of previous status transitions. An analogous model was developed in Study 2 since the model assumption was not supported. Unfortunately, the model did not improve the fit of the data. Based on the results of these analyses, preliminary conclusions were drawn tentatively.
unemployment was associated with social isolation and a positive attitude towards non-work. These variables in their turn were positively and negatively related to psychological distress, respectively. The results from the correlational analyses were somewhat disappointing. Unemployment was only (weakly) positive related to financial problems and negative appraisal of unemployment (both studies), and also weakly positive to duration of unemployment, useful spending of one’s time, and perceived stigmatization (Study 2). Quite surprisingly, the intensity of looking for a job was negatively related to psychological distress contradicting a frustrated motivation interpretation. As expected in the employed group, most indicators of job stress were positively related to psychological distress. Generally, correlations in the employed group were higher than in the unemployed group, indicating that job-related variables were more important in explaining differences in psychological distress than variables related to the unemployment situation.

Chapter 7

Two different kinds of longitudinal analyses were performed. First a rather simple analysis was carried out, based on previous employment status transitions. These transitions could have been either positive (e.g. from unemployment to employment) or negative (e.g. from employment or study to unemployment). School-leavers who had experienced a negative transition did not show higher levels of psychological distress than those who had experienced a positive transition after their graduation. In Study 2 the re-employed exhibited lower mean levels of psychological distress at the one-year follow-up than the permanently unemployed. This difference, however, already existed at T1, when all respondents were without a job. This finding suggests the operation of a kind of selection mechanism, resulting in jobs for the relatively healthy unemployed respondents and prolonged unemployment for their less healthy fellows. In Chapter 9, we returned to this intriguing issue in greater detail. Moreover, a general tendency towards better psychological health was observed for the employed as well as the unemployed respondents. It was argued that this phenomenon, which is typically observed in longitudinal studies using self-report questionnaires, might be an artefact resulting from social desirability.

In addition, in Study 1 a comprehensive structural equation model was developed step by step. This model included all four follow-ups and used a weighted indicator of the respondents’ actual employment status based on previous status transitions. (A similar analysis could not be performed in Study 2 since the model assumed at least three subsequent measurements.) Unfortunately, the model did not fit the data very well. Nevertheless, two conclusions were drawn tentatively: (1) the respondents’ actual employment
status did not affect the level of psychological distress, (2) the level of distress was strongly determined by a stable vulnerability component, which explained about two-thirds of the variance of distress. The former result was rather unexpected, whereas the latter finding agrees with recent studies using the same kind of models. In the next chapter we tried to shed more light on the nature of this vulnerability component by analyzing two extreme distress groups.

Chapter 8

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

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

Chapter 9

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

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

Chapter 10

Our analyses presented in this chapter were aimed at identifying factors that contribute to psychological distress and psychological well-being. The theoretical approaches presented in Chapter 3 were reconsidered in light of new empirical findings. The determinants of success and failure were studied by comparing future successful and unsuccessful applicants, and by predicting future success on the labour market. The results from both studies indicated persuasively that the future employed respondents were more job oriented than the future unemployed respondents. The first group, for instance, were more strongly committed to work, they spent more time on seeking a job, and were more often engaged in non-paid activities than those who had failed to find employment.

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

Chapter 10

Our analyses presented in the three previous chapters yielded many non-corroborative predictions. A critical reappraisal of the literature showed that similar unexpected findings have more often than is usually admitted been found in other studies. The theoretical approaches to unemployment which were discussed in Chapter 3 were reconsidered in the light of the results obtained by our analyses. It was concluded that the results do not fit smoothly in any particular theoretical framework. This is not very surprising, since all mentioned theories emphasize some kind of intervening (cognitive) variable. Unfortunately, in our study we did not find profound effects of unemployment on psychological distress. Accordingly, the role of intervening variables is to remain very limited.

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

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