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Unemployment: Its Meaning and Impact in Contemporary Society

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Abstract

Unemployment is a continuing concern within Western society that has been linked to material deprivation, social isolation, restricted agency, lowered future aspirations, and a range of negative health consequences. This thesis investigated unemployment in the Hawke's Bay region. The objective was to gain an understanding of the impact of unemployment and its meaning to a sample of employed and unemployed respondents. In conducting this investigation it was important to set the historical and social context, because the meaning of unemployment, strategies for addressing it, and its impact are historically variable across different periods in New Zealand's history. Official definitions, public policies, and public conceptualisations of unemployment from the 1840s to the 1990s were examined, as a means of backgrounding this thesis. Two main frameworks for conceptualising and addressing unemployment were identified. The first relates to liberal ideologies about the free market, including the principle of less eligibility. The second reflects socialist ideologies about the need for state intervention to assist those who are unable to look after themselves. In further establishing the context for this thesis, a review of psychological research into unemployment from the 1930s to the present day revealed that the primary focus has been on its impact. It is argued that the impact of unemployment and the ways it is coped with vary according to factors such as people's perceptions of their situation. Therefore, there is a need for research into both the impact and meaning of unemployment.

This thesis set out to contribute to the existing psychological literature by providing further evidence of the impact of unemployment and complementing this evidence with an analysis of the meaning of unemployment. A combination of both quantitative and qualitative techniques were utilised as part of a multimethod research design, which was grounded in two main studies. Study One involved a quantitative survey of 177 employed and unemployed participants on various

psychological dimensions, including affective connotation (meaning), anxiety, relative deprivation, perceived social conflict, and values. This study had two main objectives: to provide an understanding of the psychological meaning of employment status in employed and unemployed groups; and to investigate whether interrelationships existed between employment status and various psychological dimensions. Overall, both employed and unemployed groups displayed similar patterns of response. These groups expressed values and interpreted target concepts relating to a person's employment status in a comparable manner. This may be owing to either a shift in public perceptions of the unemployed, where they are now seen in a more favourable light, or a self-report bias. However, there were some key differences between employed and unemployed participants' responses. The unemployed group reported significantly higher levels of relative deprivation, perceived social conflict, and anxiety. Unemployed participants' viewed themselves as being less competent and skilled, and reported living in more adverse circumstances than employed participants.

Key psychological dimensions from Study One, such as the meaning of unemployment, relative deprivation, and perceived social conflict, along with additional dimensions were then investigated in a qualitative study. Study Two explored the social meaning systems unemployed people drew on to make sense of their situation and to explain the ways they live with unemployment. Twenty-six unemployed people took part in semi-structured individual interviews. Of this group, 21 also took part in one of three focus group discussions. This study focused on the experiences of the unemployed and the ways they made sense of the consequences of unemployment. Even though the findings were presented under two main categories, meaning and impact, unemployment was assigned meaning in terms of its impact as an unhealthy state. The unemployed's accounts provided complex and insightful explanations of the causes and consequences of unemployment. Participants generally resisted being labelled with negative stereotypes that stigmatise the unemployed as inactive dole bludgers. However, there was a tendency to draw on such stereotypes to stigmatise others and justify

one's own legitimacy as a proactive member of society. Participants drew on a mix of individual and communal assumptions to make sense of unemployment, its consequences, and their situation in life. A prominent theme was financial hardship and the life struggles associated with life on the dole. Participants provided explanations of the ways they asserted themselves in the face of social stigma and persistent negative societal perceptions. In doing so they emphasised the ways in which unemployment restricts people's agency and can lead to health problems and social conflict.

These two studies revealed how unemployment is predominantly an alienating and socially isolating experience. Common social belief systems within society still stigmatise the unemployed as lazy dole bludgers. This thesis supports calls for considering both material and psychosocial factors when exploring the consequences of unemployment and developing adequate responses. In light of the fact that there are no signs of a significant reduction in the level of unemployment, this thesis provides a timely reminder that social phenomena such as unemployment have very real consequences on people's lives. Emphasis needs to be placed on unemployment as both a social and an individual phenomenon as a means of reducing tendencies towards victim-blaming.

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