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DOLE BLUDGERS OR ECONOMIC VICTIMS?  
AN EXAMINATION OF FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH LAY EXPLANATIONS  
FOR UNEMPLOYMENT.

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## ABSTRACT

Societal reactions to unemployment are linked, in part, to how the cause of unemployment is perceived. This study investigated the underlying structure, and determinants of lay explanations for unemployment in four socio-economic groups; namely student, retired, employed, and unemployed groups. The study examined which types of explanations were rated most important, and the extent to which demographic and personality factors were associated with the types of explanations endorsed. Results showed that overall, societal factors were rated most important, followed by individualistic, then fatalistic factors. Significant effects were found for group membership where individualistic factors were rated less important by the unemployed, societal factors were rated less important by students and the retired, while fatalistic factors were rated less important by the employed. Significant effects were found for education, religious activity, vote, and length of unemployment. The Protestant work ethic, conservatism, and belief in a 'just world' were related to individualistic explanations for unemployment. Findings were discussed with reference to the increase in unemployment, the influence of the media, and to developing public policy, and programmes in relation to unemployment.

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## INTRODUCTION

### OVERVIEW

Societies throughout the Western world have traditionally placed much emphasis on paid employment. Consistent with this emphasis previous research has associated paid employment with a number of positive outcomes; these include an imposition of time structure, an opportunity for social interaction, and to develop identity and self esteem (Shirley, 1990). Also provided is an opportunity to participate in a legitimate relationship with society where individuals receive economic reward for their labour (Hartley, 1980).

Given the emphasis on paid employment it is not surprising that unemployment is associated with negative outcomes such as social stigmatisation and isolation. Such outcomes occur because the unemployed have traditionally deviated from the majority of the population who are "earning a living", or "making a worthwhile contribution to society" (Craig, Briar, Brosnan, & Obrien, 1992).

Such reactions to the unemployed are linked, in part, to how the cause of unemployment is perceived; specifically whether the cause is attributed to the person or society. Research which has examined commonly offered explanations for unemployment suggests that these lay explanations are multidimensional, and that such dimensions broadly pertain to individualistic, societal and fatalistic factors.

Research further suggests that lay explanations for social phenomena such as unemployment are associated with demographic factors such as age, sex, education,

employment status, length of unemployment and political vote. These explanations are also associated with personality factors such as conservatism, the belief in a 'just world', and the Protestant work ethic.

Lay explanations concerning the cause of unemployment are influenced by societal factors where underlying many official regulations is the notion that the unemployed should be spending time looking for work (Watts,1983). Furthermore, government policies to reduce unemployment, such as work and training schemes, implies that the unemployed lack the skills and training needed to get a job and are therefore responsible for their plight (Campion, 1992).

One factor which influences societal reactions to the unemployed is the level of unemployment. In times of full employment there is an expectation that everyone can obtain work. This gives rise to a tendency to blame the unemployed for their plight where failure to obtain work is attributed to factors such as lack of skill and low work motivation. This in turn contributes to the stereotyped "dole bludger" image (Shouksmith & Hesketh, 1984).

Previous research suggests that increased unemployment serves to promote more sympathetic attitudes towards the unemployed. This trend occurs because as unemployment increases so does public and media interest in its economic origins; factors which are beyond the control of individuals. Also increased in times of high unemployment is the probability that individuals from a wider range of backgrounds will be effected. Such socio-economic conditions make it more difficult for the unemployed



to be considered a deviant minority, or to be attributed as responsible for their plight (Kelvin, 1980).

The level of unemployment in New Zealand has increased markedly; from 4% in 1987 to 10% in 1992 (Dept. of Statistics, 1992). Hence, the focus of the present study was to investigate public perceptions about the responsibility for unemployment by determining whether the cause of unemployment is attributed to societal or individual factors. Such an investigation is deemed useful given that the development of social and economic policy, and programmes to assist the unemployed stems in part from how the cause of unemployment is perceived within the general population. The present study also investigated the extent to which lay explanations for unemployment were associated with demographic and personality factors with a view to extending the findings of previous research.

To follow is a review of previous research which has examined the underlying structure of lay explanations for social phenomena. Also reviewed are two psychological theories which provide useful conceptual frameworks within which to examine lay explanations for social phenomena; these are attribution theory and the theory of social representations. Following this is a review of societal factors which mediate these lay explanations, namely culture, the level of unemployment, and the mass media. This is followed by a review of the demographic and personality variables which have been associated with lay explanations for unemployment. Concluding this review are the objectives and hypotheses of the present study.