

**THE UNEMPLOYMENT  
BLUES:  
PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS  
OF UNEMPLOYMENT ON  
THE INDIVIDUAL**

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## ABSTRACT

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Unemployed persons typically experience a range of negative psychological symptoms, referred to summarily as the 'unemployment blues'. The paper reviews psychological theories of unemployment which seek to explain the origins of the blues and the role of personal control and social support systems in dissipating them. The vexing question of the interrelationship between psychological and economic deprivation is explored. Drawing on survey data collected during the period 1987-89 among over 1300 unemployed black South Africans resident in three metropolitan areas, the paper describes individual experiences of the blues and personal efforts to overcome them. It is observed that persons who feel confident of their self-worth and feel they have control over their lives are capable of sustaining morale during unemployment. However, society undermines self-confidence in subtle ways. It is demonstrated that persons out of jobs incorporate society's views of unemployment into their individual reactions to their situation. A case is made for removing the social stigma attached to unemployment and providing better social and economic support systems for jobless persons. The aim is to soften the negative psychological effects of unemployment with a view to absorbing persons out of jobs into society's mainstream.



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## INTRODUCTION

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Unemployment is known to have a negative effect on subjective well-being. The unemployment blues manifest themselves in a variety of psychological and psycho-physical symptoms, such as worry, fatigue, lack of concentration, sleeplessness, listlessness, feelings of loneliness and boredom among others.

There is local evidence of the unemployment blues in a study of over 1300 unemployed urban black South Africans contacted during the period 1987 and 1989 (Møller, in press). In all, 286 men and women were contacted for the 1987 pilot study and 1053 for the 1989 representative sample survey in three urban areas (Soweto, Durban, and Mdantsane outside East London). A selection of psychological and quality of life indicators applied in a 1989 sample survey showed that substantial proportions of the unemployed expressed negative psychological affect (see table 1).

**Table 1: 1989 UNEMPLOYMENT SURVEY  
INDICATORS OF NEGATIVE AFFECT**

Often or sometimes feels:

Down or depressed	.....	57%
Angry	.....	54%
Unable to concentrate	.....	50%
Nervous or tense	.....	50%
Difficulties falling asleep	.....	50%
Easily upset	.....	50%
Without energy	.....	40%

n 1053

Comparative studies indicate that subjective well-being among the unemployed is significantly lower than among the total population. Only 9 percent of the unemployed interviewed in the 1989 survey compared with 32 percent among urban blacks contacted a year earlier in a nationwide sample survey (Møller, 1989) indicated that they were

satisfied with life as a whole. Similarly, 16 percent of the unemployed compared to 38 percent of urban blacks stated that they were happy with their life situation. Satisfaction with life-as-a-whole and global happiness are frequently applied measures of subjective well-being (Diener, 1984).

Which psychological symptoms in combination are most closely linked to overall subjective well-being? Results from regression analyses applied to the 1989 survey data suggest that apart from psychological affect measures, which may be regarded as constituent factors of subjective well-being, indicators of personal locus of control or efficacy and social integration have a positive influence on well-being. Both young and mature unemployed persons who denied feeling helpless (53%) and useless (64%), and those who felt that they were able to perform tasks for their family (88%) scored higher on subjective well-being. The more mature unemployed who indicated that they were not ashamed to take casual jobs (69%) appeared to be better adjusted.

Our findings suggest that in order to maintain morale during unemployment, it is essential that individuals feel confident of their worth and that they have some measure of control over their lives. That is, the person's degree of personal control in the unemployment situation - the extent to which the self is seen as the active agent - may help to alleviate the blues. Equally important is that the unemployed receive messages from their families and the community to confirm that they are pulling their weight. In this manner positive psychological affect which goes hand in hand with morale is mediated by support in the immediate social environment.

In order better to understand the roles of personal control and support systems in improving the quality of life in unemployment, we now turn to the psychological theories which explain the origins of the blues and the role of personal control and social support factors in dissipating the blues. Before introducing theoretical issues it may be worthwhile to consider briefly the implications of our approach to the study of unemployment.

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## ETHICAL ISSUES

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Critics might justifiably argue that focus on well-being in unemployment is misplaced. Seeking to isolate factors which make unemployment bearable is tantamount to condoning mass unemployment and condemning people to the state of joblessness and the deprivations attached to it. In reply, one might venture that research which deliberately overlooks the factors contributing to well-being in unemployment is equally callous. It is estimated that over 4 million South Africans are unemployed. Given the economic outlook on South Africa's future, we can expect more people to experience periods of unemployment in their life careers. Until South Africa's unemployment problem is solved, the more we know about simple means of easing the negative symptoms of unemployment, the better for the individuals affected and society as a whole.

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## THEORIES OF THE BLUES

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**Deprivation models.** Where do the unemployment blues come from? The psychological theory of unemployment is not well developed. As one critic commented, the theories offered are hardly more advanced than a lay person's insights. Perhaps the best known systematic descriptions refer to the phases through which an unemployed person passes after losing his or her job (Kelvin & Jarret, 1985). The various phase models of unemployment describe how morale deteriorates until individuals sink into such great depths of despair that they become completely alienated from society and unemployable. Suicide represents the extreme case. Major steps include disbelief that one is jobless; anger, followed by a brief period of optimism when one is still confident of finding alternative employment; followed by despondency when the job search fails; and eventually hopelessness and despair. The individual gives up the job search altogether in the final phase.

According to the literature, depressed well-being results not only from the loss of income and lack of monetary rewards but also from the intangible psychological aspects of working in a job. The factors contributing to the steady decline of morale among the jobless are

identified in Jahoda's (1982) theory of deprivation which applies equally to young work seekers and retrenched workers. Over and above the economic deprivation suffered by the unemployed, Jahoda cites five non-economic aspects of work, of which the individual is deprived. Persons without a job have no access to the following categories of experience:

- Work in a paid job imposes a time structure on the day and the week;
- it affords a variety of social contacts beyond family interaction;
- it means participation in a collective purpose;
- it confers social identity and status; and
- enforces regular activity.

There is a longstanding debate in the literature regarding the relative importance of different types of deprivation which the unemployed experience. Jahoda (1982) maintains that the unemployed person is not so much ashamed of being unemployed as being poor. The stigma of being unemployed is rooted in the poverty associated with joblessness. The pride versus poverty thesis was put to the test in the European case. The classical study of workers losing their jobs in Mariannthal before the introduction of social security in the 1930s was compared with the situation of unemployed persons on the 'dole' in Great Britain in the 1980s. It was concluded that the unemployed in both eras suffered from loss of pride. However, in spite of the greater economic hardship endured by the unemployed in the thirties, the latter day unemployed suffered equally from relative financial deprivation.

In social welfare states the experience of absolute poverty has given way to relative poverty. However, economic hardship still remains a problem for the unemployed. In both cases the psychological problems appear to be equally great. South Africa's situation approximates that of the depression era in that unemployment insurance offers only temporary relief to some categories of retrenched workers.

Some would argue that the distinction between economic and psychological deprivation is academic, a chicken and egg question. The easing of psychological deprivation may give the unemployed person the requisite boost of ego strength to gain entry into the job market or

to find alternative means of easing economic hardship. Conversely, relief from economic hardship might boost self-esteem and feelings of competence which sustain morale. Evidence from social welfare societies suggests that psychological deprivation lingers on even after economic hardship is removed. On the other hand, the two dimensions of deprivation may be so intimately intertwined that easing one or the other can have positive results.

The respondents participating in the 1989 study of unemployment tended to agree with the viewpoint that unemployment and poverty are twin concepts. Respondents in the 1987 pilot study stated emphatically that poverty was at the root of many of their psychological problems as is suggested in the following excerpts from the interviews: 'Usefulness comes through money.' 'You can't even help yourself without money.' 'Love goes with money.' 'Money is the main bond of friendship.'

On the other hand, respondents reported that any economic achievement or temporary economic relief registered in increased feelings of well-being, at least temporarily, which spurred them on to continue their economic endeavour.

Judging from these findings, intervention programmes which address both the psychological and the economic deprivations associated with unemployment simultaneously, may be most beneficial in improving perceived quality of life for the unemployed.

**The resilience model.** Theoretical approaches are often more illuminating of the author's viewpoint than the subject under study. The phase model and psychological deprivation approaches described above reflect a simplistic 'doom and gloom' perspective to the study of unemployment (Hartley & Fryer, 1984). O'Brien (1986), in his review of the unemployment literature, reaches the conclusion that the research evidence on which these theories are based provides just as much support for a resilience model of unemployment. The unemployed demonstrate remarkable ingenuity in adapting to their new circumstances and overcoming their economic and social disadvantage. In spite of all the disadvantages suffered by the unemployed, suicide rates and less extreme indicators of psychological depression are

surprisingly low.

In our 1989 study there were many signs that some unemployed individuals showed remarkable resilience. Respondents reported that they themselves were surprised at their resourcefulness and competence when it was put to the test. Some 60 percent of younger (under 25 years) and 70 percent of the more mature (33 years and older) individuals indicated that 'unemployment had taught them to stand on their own feet.' 'I realised that I can depend on myself.' Discovering personal strength was one of the few positive experiences of being unemployed. Results suggested that mature individuals who believed that the economic future was bleak expressed higher levels of subjective well-being. This group may have felt compelled to increase their own endeavours to solve their predicament rather than to wait for the job situation to improve. In spite of unemployment, the self esteem of most respondents remained intact. Only one-fourth to one-fifth stated that they had lost confidence in themselves, did not take pride in their achievements, felt 'no good', or that they were not respected by others.

As is the case with other setbacks in life, unemployed persons adapt to their new life circumstances. Just as most retired people adjust to a lifestyle without paid work and reorganise their daily routines, so do school leavers and the retrenched. In the pilot study the respondents gave accounts of how they spent their days which suggested that most managed their time well. There were indications that unemployed persons tend to model their days on the regular working day by committing themselves to certain activities. Thus the unemployed, like their employed counterparts, make a distinction between work and leisure. Nevertheless, boredom is still a serious problem for over one in two unemployed persons.

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### **BOREDOM: THE CURSE OF UNEMPLOYMENT**

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Boredom is a problem which appears to affect the younger unemployed to a greater extent than others. Thirty-nine percent of the younger unemployed participating in the 1989 survey indicated that they 'just sat around.' Sixty-two percent stated that they were often or sometimes bored. Our findings suggest that young black school leavers may be

caught in a Catch-22 situation. It may pay for the more privileged among the young unemployed to 'sit out' their unemployment so as to be optimally placed to get a suitable job when a vacancy occurs (Hofmeyr, 1985). However, the price to pay for this privileged position is boredom. Judging from multiple regression results, the young persons who scored above average on measures of psychological well-being tended to be the proverbial layabouts. This suggests that they are holding out with family support until the right job becomes vacant. By contrast, the better adjusted older unemployed person adopted an active lifestyle, seeking casual work and creating self-employment.

Persons who found alternative paid work in the informal sector as hawkers and retailers hoped to graduate to become regular small business people who earn enough to make their efforts worthwhile. Some participants in the pilot study had taken this route out of unemployment. The 1989 survey excluded the regular self-employed. However, respondents involved in some form of self-help activity ranging from sale of handwork to participation in a production co-operative, regardless of how lucrative their activities proved to be, did score better on the various indicators of subjective well-being. This result suggests that the psychological benefits of casual work identified by Jahoda may be equally important to the economic returns.

Moulder (1990) maintains that South African youth are not equipped to enter into informal unemployment. The waiting stance therefore makes good sense. It appears that youth all over the world experience a certain degree of boredom. Restlessness, indicative of an open career path, may be part of growing up. However, other research (Møller, 1991) into the leisure patterns of township youth suggests that the boredom experienced by unemployed school leavers is excessive. Furthermore, the leisure research revealed that young women may be equally if not worse affected than young men. Although numbers were small, higher percentages of young housewives than young jobseekers complained of feelings of boredom and lack of constructive leisure.

Intervention projects may ease boredom. Many self-help schemes which seek to bridge the gap between school and work for school

leavers and assist retrenched workers provide alternative ways of fulfilling Jahoda's categories of work experience. Some of the unemployed surveyed in 1989, particularly those resident in Soweto, had managed to restructure their lives around such schemes. Whether such schemes will provide temporary or permanent solutions to the psychological problems associated with unemployment is a crucial question for policy formation.

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### **THE NEED FOR SOCIAL SUPPORT**

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In the light of our research findings it is proposed that the unemployed may have the personal integrity and stamina to ward off the despair and alienation described in the unemployment literature. However, no individual has unlimited personal resources. Some persons interviewed in the 1989 unemployment study reported that they had been unemployed for over nine years. Being jobless is not a socially acceptable occupational designation. People cannot take pride in being unemployed as such. Sixty-three percent in the 1989 unemployment study stated that they felt 'ashamed to be unemployed.' Just under 60 percent in the mature category agreed with the statement 'only the employed people are respected in the community.' There is obviously a need for social support to sustain the feelings of self-worth which the unemployed manage to muster. By the same token there is a need for society to meet the unemployed half way to reciprocate the positive determination of the jobless.

The unemployed in the survey expressed surprisingly little bitterness about their situation. Unemployment was attributed to economic and historical factors such as apartheid and the sanctions campaign resulting from government intransigence. On the other hand, there were signs that the unemployed felt that they were pawns in the sanctions game, whose sacrifices were not recognised by society. The 1989 survey respondents felt isolated and neglected as is evident from the following indicators:

Feel lonely (often / sometimes)	. . . . .	59%
Feel people avoid me (often / sometimes)	. . . . .	46%
'Employed people don't really care about the unemployed' (agree)	. . . . .	55%

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## STIGMAS AND STEREOTYPES

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We mirror ourselves in society. Demoralisation in unemployment arises not only from individual psychological disposition but also from community reactions to unemployment and its victims. Victim blaming may be as hurtful to the unemployed as poverty. The psychological problems of the unemployed in part reflect public opinion. In times of economic prosperity the unemployed are very likely to be misfits in society and the negative stereotypes apply. In times of mass unemployment the jobless begin to resemble a cross-section of the population and the stereotypes are misplaced. However, stereotypes die hard and the unemployed are placed under additional strain not to exhibit any signs of conforming to type.

Society stereotypes the unemployed as lazy layabouts, implying that unemployed individuals themselves are to blame for their situation. Part of the social stigma attached to being unemployed arises from the misconception that the unemployed are unable or unwilling to utilise their spare time to the best advantage of the individual and society. The literature on victim blaming describes how society safeguards its interests by making the life circumstances of the unemployed uncomfortable. The unemployed are deliberately kept short of funds, and handouts are given in such a manner that they humiliate the recipients. This attitude is meant to force the unemployed to re-enter the work force.

The unemployed in our survey were careful to distance themselves from the stereotypes attached to the jobless. They had little regard for layabouts and scroungers and 'won't works'.

Only one quarter of the participants in the pilot study were of the opinion that the unemployed were lazy. Respondents explained that the unemployed only appeared lazy in that they did not have the money to look for work daily. According to the respondents, the jobless tried to employ alternative more cost-effective means of looking for work through their social networks. Judging from results of the 1989 survey, unemployed individuals who can externalise blame achieve higher levels of subjective well-being.

In response to a provocative statement the participants in the pilot study were more likely to agree that the unemployed were troublemakers. Over half conceded that some unemployed fitted this description. The respondents themselves had been cast in this role and had suffered loss of self-esteem at the hands of friends and neighbours who shunned them. At the same time participants in the pilot study had great understanding for the unemployed who through economic necessity crossed the line between legitimate and socially deviant or criminal means of earning a living. Although the respondents admitted only to 'thought' crimes and minor transgressions, they indicated that the temptation was great if real opportunities arose.

Participants in the pilot study stated a marked preference for self-reliance. They rejected charity and community handouts. Unemployment relief appears to be a family affair - most unemployed are dependent on family income - and it appears that most unemployed would wish to keep it that way. However, the strain placed on the household budget makes it imperative that outside economic assistance is channeled through the family.

The unemployed are very aware of the critical role of family support. They are reliant on family income to survive (60% cited income from relatives as their main source of income) and on handouts from relatives to continue the job search. In turn the unemployed try to contribute to family welfare as best they can. Almost all respondents (91%) in the 1989 survey stated that they felt loved by their families in spite of being out of work. However, it appears that unemployed persons might not take family affection for granted. Some respondents participating in the pilot study felt they were not entitled to full family benefits while they were out of work. Just under two-thirds agreed with the statement 'people who lose their jobs cannot expect to get as much love from their families as they did when they were working.' Some participants in the pilot study even indicated approval for withdrawal of certain family privileges. They argued that negative incentives forced them to continue the job search and this activity helped them to sustain morale. Nevertheless, regardless of the method employed, the stick or the carrot, the family is regarded as the key support group.

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## CONCLUSION

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The South African evidence shows that psychological effects of unemployment must be seen in the context of social interaction at the level of the family, the community and society. A positive psychological disposition, which might sustain morale in adverse life conditions such as unemployment, may be insufficient if the family denies the individual emotional support and the financial incentives to get on with living, if friends and neighbours shun the unemployed and if the society continues to typecast the unemployed as a marginal person.

Given the proven track record of the unemployed to survive mainly by socially legitimate means, the onus must be on society to remove the stigma attached to unemployment. Social support may be as important as economic props as a means of assisting the unemployed to shed their negative status and to move on into the ranks of the self-, informally or formally employed.

It is telling that the designations which the trade unions have adopted for their unemployed constituency emphasise the temporary nature of unemployment. With the inclusion of the term 'worker' in their title, the unemployed workers unions, cooperatives, and movements restore the unemployed to the mainstream. The jobless can identify themselves as workers who are only temporarily removed from their places of work (Møller, 1990).

Shaping appropriate and meaningful new roles for the unemployed which also provide social recognition will be one of the most challenging tasks for policy makers in the future.

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