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The impact of labor force history on self-esteem and its component parts, anxiety, alienation and depression

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Abstract

Psychologists Erikson (1959), Jahoda (1979, 1981, 1982) and Warr (1987) have offered theories to explain how experiences such as joblessness may lead to a decline in mental health. Other psychologists, including Rotter (1966) and Rosenberg (1965), have designed and validated survey instruments capable of measuring various aspects of emotional health including self-esteem. Using such construct measures the correlation between unemployment and self-esteem has been estimated. Unfortunately, the accuracy of these estimates is marred by three statistical problems: omitted variables, unobserved heterogeneity, and data selection. Therefore, the failure of a consensus to emerge regarding the impact of unemployment on self-esteem is not surprising.

This paper offers new estimates of the relation between unemployment and self-esteem using a methodology that controls for the three potential sources of bias identified. The data are drawn from the U.S. National Longitudinal Survey of Youth which provides detailed information on the personal characteristics of individuals in the sample, including their self-esteem, as well as their labor force experiences.

We find clear evidence that having recently completed a spell of joblessness, due either to unemployment or time spent out of the labor force, damages an individual's perception of self-worth. Exposure to bouts of both forms of joblessness also significantly harms self-esteem,

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and the effect of such exposure persists. Our decompositional analysis suggests that joblessness damages self-esteem by generating feelings of depression. Clearly, policies designed to lessen joblessness will also yield a psychologically healthier labor force.

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JEL classification: E24; J6

Keywords: Unemployment; Self-esteem; Depression

1. Introduction and statement of the problem

The unemployed are expected to confront pecuniary costs as well as an assault on their psychological well-being. Social science research since the 1930s (Bakke, 1933; Eisenberg and Lazarsfield, 1938; Brenner, 1973; Catalano and Dooley, 1983) has revealed that joblessness and mental health may be related. However, only in the past decade have psychologists started to address the task of scientifically examining the relationship between labor force experiences and psychological health.

Psychological well-being is a multidimensional concept, thus, the impact of unemployment on mental health is likely to be manifest in many forms, including denigration of self-worth or self-esteem. During the Great Depression, psychologists Eisenberg and Lazarsfield (1938, pp. 359) noted that as the duration of unemployment lengthened

The individual's prestige is lost in his own eye, and as he imagines, in the eyes of his fellow man. He develops feelings of inferiority, loses self-confidence, and in general, loses his morale.

They described deterioration in self-esteem.

Psychologists have offered theories to explain how experiences such as joblessness may lead to a decline in mental health. They also have designed and validated survey instruments capable of measuring various aspects of emotional health including self-esteem.¹ Although cross-sectional and time series investigations of the impact of unemployment on self-esteem have been conducted, no clear relationship has emerged. Feather (1990) attributes this to the convention

¹ For an excellent description and psychometric evaluation of the most commonly used measurement instruments of self-concept, which include aspects of emotional well-being, see Wylie (1989).

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