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Psychological distress during unemployment and beyond: social support and material deprivation among youth in six northern European countries

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Abstract

Psychological distress is a serious problem among unemployed youth, and may lead to various social and psychological problems. In this study, we examine patterns of distress among previously unemployed youth that have experienced five different labor market outcomes over a period of 6 months in Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Scotland and Sweden. We find that moving beyond unemployment is associated with less distress, in particular among those who have found permanent employment, but also among those who have found temporary employment, have returned to school, or are staying at home. Perceptions of material deprivation and parental emotional support directly affect distress in all labor market outcomes, and mediate the effects of various other factors on such distress. The effects of socio-demographic characteristics, living arrangements, unemployment history and attitudes, and parental support are found to be specific to gender and labor market outcomes, while the effects of material deprivation are uniform across all such categories. Further studies are needed to disentangle structural and individual effects, the causal complexities involved in processes of social support, and to determine the extent to which such models equally predict psychological distress among the unemployed and other groups of youth. © 2002 Published by Elsevier Science Ltd.

Keywords: Unemployment; Youth; Social support; Material deprivation; Cross-national; Nordic countries

Introduction

The societal and individual costs of unemployment are well known. On the societal level, the economic costs of unemployment include the collective burden of unemployment benefits and other social welfare expenditures, wasted production potential and lower tax revenues (Sigurdardottir, 1998). Furthermore, the political and social costs of high unemployment rates may include racial and gender inequalities, political passivity and technological conservatism (Sen, 1997). On the individual level, unemployed people experience various social, psychological, and physical problems (e.g. Bjorklund & Eriksson, 1998; Dooley, Catalano, &

Wilson, 1994; Jin, Shah, & Svoboda, 1997; Perry, 1996; Smari, Arason, Hafsteinnsson, & Ingimarsson, 1997; Warr, Jackson, & Banks, 1988). Similar to their older counterparts (Fryer, 1997), unemployed youth suffer from depression, anxiety and low self-esteem (Banks & Jackson, 1982; Dooley & Prause, 1995; Hammer, 1993; Hammarstrom & Janlert, 1997; Hannan, O'Riain, & Whelan, 1997). Unemployed youth are also more likely to engage in self-destructive behaviors related to psychological distress, including heavy use of tobacco, alcohol and illicit substances (Gunnlaugsson & Galliher, 2000; Hammarstrom, 1994; Hammer, 1992; Julkunen & Carle, 1998; Olafsson & Svensson, 1986). They also have a significantly elevated mortality rate, in particular, by suicide and accidents (Hammarstrom, 1994; Jin et al., 1997; Morrell, Taylor, Quine, Kerr, & Western, 1999).

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Causes of psychological distress during unemployment and beyond

Conceptually, unemployment could be expected to cause psychological distress, while mental problems might conversely lead to the loss of employment. Empirical research does, however, suggest a relatively unidirectional causal effect of unemployment on psychological distress. Longitudinal studies have found psychological distress to follow job loss, and subsequent re-employment to be associated with a corresponding decrease in distress (Claussen, 1999; Dooley et al., 1994; Kessler, Turner, & House, 1989; Morrell et al., 1994; Perry, 1996). Furthermore, such studies have failed to support the notion that pre-existing levels of psychological distress may cause individuals to later drift into unemployment (Dooley et al., 1994; Kessler et al., 1989; Perry, 1996). Among youth, psychological distress in compulsory school does appear to be somewhat predictive of future unemployment (Hammarstrom & Janlert, 1997). However, as with adults, psychological distress among youth *during* unemployment is not predictive of future occupational status (Creed, 1999). The strong empirical association between unemployment and psychological distress does not therefore appear to be generated by selection processes.

There is considerable cross-cultural evidence of emotional support counteracting the effects of unemployment on psychological distress. Close relations with spouse, friends and relatives have been found to be associated with reduced distress in such diverse groups of unemployed people as chronic pain sufferers in London, Ontario (Jackson, Iezzi, & Lafreniere, 1997), minority single mothers in Chicago housing projects (Sloan, Jason, & Addlesperger, 1996), white male autoworkers in the Midwestern United States (Vosler & Page-Adams, 1996), wood industry workers in Finland (Viinamaki, Koskela, & Niskanen, 1993), women over 50 in the United States (Rife, 1995), men from Pakistan and Bangladesh living in Sheffield, England (Shams, 1993), and local men in Northern Ireland (Kilpatrick & Trew, 1985). Among unemployed youth, the level of parental social support has, in particular, been associated with less psychological distress in a variety of countries (Chakrapani, 1996; Hammer, 1993, 2000; Hendry & Raymond, 1986; Lackovic-Grgin, Dekovic, Milosavljevic, Cvek-Soric, & Opacic, 1996; Sigurdardottir, 1998; Ullah, Banks, & Warr, 1985).

The type and context of social support has important implications for individual well-being (Bjarnason, 1994; Thorlindsson & Bjarnason, 1998). For instance, Ratcliff and Bogdan (1988) find that close and extensive social networks are only effective in reducing psychological distress when they are supportive of the goals of

unemployed individuals. Similarly, Rife (1995) found that among unemployed women, support from unemployed friends had a more positive effect than support from family members or friends who are employed. The distinction between positive parental support and negative parental pressure has been found to be particularly important among unemployed youth (Hendry & Raymond, 1986). Thus, while parental support *decreases* psychological distress among unemployed youth, parental advice is associated with *increased* distress (Sigurdardottir, 1998; Ullah et al., 1985), perhaps because of the perception of adverse pressure to find a job.

The main effects of unemployment on psychological distress have not been found to differ consistently between males and females (Ensminger & Celentano, 1990), but social support appears to offer a more effective protection against distress among unemployed females than among their male counterparts (Hammer, 1993; Walsh & Jackson, 1995). Furthermore, while prior research has found unemployed women to be significantly more distressed than working women or women who are homemakers, the support of family members and friends significantly reduces such differences in psychological distress (Brown & Gary, 1988; Schwartzberg & Dytell, 1988).

The economic hardship frequently associated with unemployment has direct, negative effects on the psychological well-being of the unemployed (Grossi, 1999; Vinokur, Price, & Caplan, 1996; Rantakeisu, Starrin, & Hagquist, 1999; Whelan, 1993, 1994). In addition, the economic strain of unemployment may indirectly increase psychological distress by gradually eroding social support structures (Atkinson, Liem, & Liem, 1986; Kong, Perrucci, & Perrucci, 1993; Vinokur et al., 1996). Among youth, unemployment appears to be particularly distressful for those who have dropped out of school in part because they have fewer resources and less certain labor market prospects (Hannan et al., 1997; Schaufeli, 1997).

The effects of reemployment on psychological recovery appear to be in part determined by the characteristics of the new job. In a study of long-term unemployed Norwegians, Halvorsen (1998) found that reemployment only reduces psychological distress when the new job is secure and stable. Similarly, Wanberg (1995) found that moving from unemployment to satisfactory employment was associated with increased mental health among workers in the United States, but that those who found dissatisfying jobs remained as distressed as the continuously unemployed. Unemployed youth who enjoy parental support are more likely than others to find a job (Julkunen & Carle, 1998; Sigurdardottir, 1998), but little is known about the effects of economic deprivation and social support across labor market outcomes among youth.

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