Unemployment as Illness: An Exploration of Accounts Voiced by the Unemployed in Aotearoa/New Zealand

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In Aotearoa/New Zealand unemployment is a continuing social concern that has been linked to a range of negative consequences, including various psychological and physical ailments. Whereas findings linking unemployment to such consequences are highly prevalent, few studies have explored people’s experiences of unemployment. This article presents an analysis of 26 semistructured individual interviews with unemployed people in order to explore the social construction of unemployment. It is argued that the meaning of unemployment is in many respects analogous to what previous research on lay health beliefs has found regarding the meaning of illness. Prominent themes from literature on the meaning of illness are used to inform an analysis of the meaning of unemployment. The implications of constructing unemployment as an illness are explored in relation to the assignment of cause and responsibility and to the ways the unemployed are socially positioned. Tactics used by participants to preserve a sense of moral worth in response to the stigma of unemployment provide a key focal point for this article.

The consequences of unemployment have been documented in psychological research since the 1930s (Bakke, 1933; Jahoda, Lazarsfeld, & Zeisel, 1933/1972)

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and are well established in the contemporary literature (Bartley, 1994; Feather, 1990; Fryer, 1995, 1997; Hammarström, 1994; Winefield, Tiggeman, Winefield, & Goldney, 1993). These consequences, which include the onset of various ailments, have been attributed primarily to the material deprivation and psychological stressors often associated with unemployment. Research has shown that the relationship between unemployment and negative health outcomes is not uniform and can vary according to factors such as gender, ethnicity, social support, financial circumstances, living arrangements, and previous employment experiences (cf. Fryer & Payne, 1986; Woodward & Kawachi, 1998). Recent writing in the area of health inequalities also indicates that the effect of deprived material circumstances is mediated through people’s understandings of their situation and perceptions of social cohesion, conflict, emotional strain, and inequality (Elstad, 1998; Popay, Williams, Thomas, & Catrell, 1998; Wilkinson, 1996; S. J. Williams, 1998); that is, it is not solely material deprivation that has a negative impact on health. People’s experiences and feelings of social connectedness and justice also play a role.

Despite the need for research into the meanings people assign to their circumstances, only sporadic interest has been given to people’s experiences of unemployment (Drewery, 1998; Furnham & Hesketh, 1989), poverty (Harper, 1996), and health inequalities (Blaxter, 1997). For instance, Furnham (1982, 1988) investigated the range and type of accounts people provide of poverty and unemployment. He proposed that the structure of lay accounts consisted of three factors: individualistic (where people are held responsible for their own situation), societal (where structural, economic, and political factors are said to cause poverty and unemployment), and fatalistic (where poverty and unemployment are thought to be caused by uncontrollable factors such as fate). Drawing upon attribution theory, Furnham (1988) conceptualized these three factors as attributional patterns people use to make sense of these social concerns.

Such research provides valuable insights into the ways people assign responsibility for issues such as poverty and unemployment and has established the importance of psychosocial factors for the negative consequences of unemployment. However, such research is limited by its reliance on attribution theory. In the last 3 decades criticisms of such sociocognitive approaches have highlighted a lack of sensitivity to the social context and a corresponding inability to explain the complexity and fluidity of human thought. Researchers argue that sociocognitive approaches are limited because they reduce human experience to asocial hypothetical constructs isolated inside the heads of individuals (Farr, 1996; Flick, 1998a, 1998b; Gergen, 1985). Because unemployment is an inherently social phenomenon arising from inequitable societal structures, approaches that separate the individual from the social are inadequate for encapsulating the complexities surrounding its meaning and impact.
In an investigation of lay accounts of poverty, Harper (1996) argues that findings from research conducted within an attribution framework can be extended through research that explores the complex and socially derived character of people’s experiences. Given the psychosocial focus of recent health inequalities research (cf. Elstad, 1998; Wilkinson, 1996) and the emphasis on the link between understanding and social circumstance in determining health (cf. Popay et al., 1998), the use of a contemporary social constructionist approach is appropriate (cf. Drewery, 1998). Such work provides a way of moving beyond the investigation of people’s attitudes and beliefs as individualized cognitions to the investigation of the ways in which human thought is communally produced through social interactions within specific material circumstances. This involves a shift in focus from the internal cognitive structures of individuals to the wider social processes, belief systems, and cultural practices through which people construct their thoughts (cf. Flick, 1998b; Moscovici, 1994, 1998; Stainton Rogers, 1991).

For the purpose of this article we draw primarily upon Moscovici’s (1981, 1994, 1998) theory of social representations, which provides one alternative to models such as attribution theory. Social representations research explores human thinking as a communal process, rather than solely an individual enterprise (cf. Flick, 1998a). Social representations can be conceptualized as the shared ways of defining, categorizing, and understanding topics such as unemployment that are evident in the language, images, behaviors, and everyday practices of a given social group (cf. Purkhardt, 1993). These representations constitute collectively constructed, fluid and changing networks of ideas, values, and practices that people elaborate upon in order to orient themselves within the world (Moscovici, 1994).

From this theoretical perspective people’s views are conceptualized as reflections of common ways of making sense of events, rather than simply being the product of cognitive processes or individual personalities. It is important to note that people are not conceptualized as passive “cultural dupes” who simply parrot communal explanations in a predictable manner. A reciprocal relationship exists between social representations and individual thought (cf. Flick, 1998a; Joffe, 1997, 1999). The social mediation of human experience is the result of both socially shared explanations and the innovations made when people reflect upon such explanations and employ them in innovative ways. Social representations are incomplete communal projects that are worked through as people employ various socially shared explanations to make sense of disputed topics such as unemployment (cf. Flick, 1998b; Giddens, 1991).

Social representations encompass various complementary and contradictory explanations that are renegotiated as they are taken up within people’s life worlds (Flick, 1998a; Moscovici, 1994, 1998). When drawing on these explanations, people accept some ideas, reject others, and create new ideas as a means of making sense of complex events in their lives, such as when they or a friend becomes
unemployed (cf. Billig, 1993). In the process, some people may view the unemployed as lazy or incompetent, whereas others may consider them victims of an economic downturn or social injustice. The former perspective invokes notions of individual responsibility and can lead to the advocating of individualized solutions for unemployment. Conversely, the latter perspective invokes notions of social responsibility and collective solutions for unemployment. It is inadequate to conceptualize these divergent perspectives as solely reflections of stable attitudes held by individuals, because people who align themselves predominantly with one perspective also voice ideas associated with another (Hewstone & Augoustinos, 1998).

In creatively weaving together various explanations to construct their thoughts on social concerns such as unemployment, people are not restricted to an isolated set of ideas relating to a specific concern. For instance, previous lay health beliefs research has shown that people draw upon ideas from a range of life spheres, such as work and family life, to make sense of illness (cf. Pierret, 1993; Radley, 1993, 1999). In light of such cross-pollination between social spheres, it follows that common ideas associated with one social representation can also be applied in the construction of another social representation. Therefore, this article explores the ways assumptions formative to the social representation of illness are drawn on in the construction of a social representation of unemployment. In other words, the ways in which the social representation of unemployment is anchored in the social representation of illness are investigated.

The Research Process

In order to explore the meanings unemployed people assign to their situations in life, the first author and a research assistant conducted 26 semistructured individual interviews during August and September 1996. Both interviewers came from lower socioeconomic status backgrounds and had first-hand experience of unemployment. These personal experiences helped the interviewers to understand the issues involved from the perspective of the participants and influenced the sharing of experiences in the interviews. In an anthropological sense the interviewers had been socialized as members of this sector of society and “spoke the language.” In fact, the first author grew up in the community from which participants were accessed. However, the researchers did not know any of the participants prior to the study.

Participants were recruited through community groups that provided the unemployed with material resources, social support, and some educational services. A worker at each community group made the initial contact with potential participants. The community worker supplied the researcher with a list of names and telephone numbers of people who were interested in taking part in the study. The first author then telephoned these people and explained the purpose of the
study and what their participation would involve. If the person was interested in taking part in the study, a meeting was arranged so that informed consent could be gained. This procedure was approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee and complies with the New Zealand Psychological Society’s ethical guidelines.

The community groups were located in Hawke’s Bay, a semi-industrialized rural region on the East Coast of the North Island of New Zealand. Residents from the Hastings and Napier Districts (population of 58,675 and 55,044 people, respectively; Statistics New Zealand, 1998a) were recruited because large-scale job losses had occurred in these districts over the previous 2 decades. These job losses had contributed to the elevation of unemployment as a key concern for local people. The 1996 Census (Statistics New Zealand, 1998b) reported 5,370 people were unemployed in the Hawke’s Bay region. At the end of November 1996 the New Zealand Employment Service (NZES) reported 3,624 registered unemployed in Hastings and 3,468 in Napier (anonymous New Zealand Employment Service employee, personal communication, January 20, 1997).

Interviews (ranging in length from 45 to 60 min) were conducted with 15 men and 11 women (ranging in age from 17 to 55 years). According to their own self-categorization they included 14 New Zealand Māori, 11 New Zealand European, and 1 Polynesian. In terms of previous employment experience 4 participants reported that they had never been employed, 10 had experienced only seasonal work in the agricultural sector, 7 had worked as plant or machine operators/assemblers, and 5 had worked in the service industry (e.g., working in a bakery). The length of time participants had spent without formal employment ranged from 1 to 5 years. Younger participants had spent considerably less time unemployed. However, most of these participants had grown up in unemployed households and drew on their experiences as the children of unemployed parents. The interviews were designed to elicit general accounts of what unemployment meant to participants, the causes and consequences of unemployment, and participants’ interactions with government agencies. All interviews were audio-recorded, fully transcribed, and identified using pseudonyms.

When conducting the interviews the first author did not set out to explore similarities between the ways unemployment is constructed and the ways illness is constructed. During an initial analysis designed to identify recurring patterns in the

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1 Although important in shaping people’s understandings of the world, demographic influences such as gender and ethnicity are not a primary focus in this article. For those interested in issues of gender and ethnicity, an analysis of our female participants’ accounts can be found in Cullen (1997). Research into the experiences of unemployed Māori has also been conducted by Cram (1997). Howden-Chapman and Cram (1998) provide an accessible discussion of links between health inequalities, unemployment, gender, and ethnicity in Aotearoa/New Zealand. We plan to explore such issues in future publications.
participants’ accounts, the second author assisted the first author by “check coding” the transcripts. As the coding progressed similarities were identified between these accounts of unemployment and the accounts of illness being explored in a separate study by the second author (cf. Hodgetts & Chamberlain, 2000). As a result a secondary analysis was conducted to identify similarities between participants’ accounts of unemployment and findings from research into lay health beliefs.

Such a process is indicative of qualitative research, where investigators do not rigidly establish every research question to be explored in advance of the data collection (cf. Berg, 1995; Flick, 1998c). Rather, questions are often refined through the research process. This allows researchers to remain dynamic in their interactions with participants’ accounts and facilitates the development of flexible interpretations of the phenomenon being investigated.

In sum, to produce this article we worked inductively to develop emergent categories from the transcripts of participant interviews and developed these categories though the process of “constant comparison” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). We then worked abductively to interweave these categories with those reported in the lay health beliefs literature (cf. Rennie, 1999). The analysis involved the generation of insights through prolonged interactions with the transcripts, seeking literature to inform an overall interpretation of participants’ accounts, and the revision of the research focus to encapsulate subsequent findings (cf. Billig, 1997). The result is an argument that provides an interpretation of similarities between the social representation of unemployment and illness.

Setting the Historical Context

Before exploring our participants’ accounts in detail it is necessary to set the sociohistorical context within which the interviews were conducted. Such an overview is imperative because the meaning people assign to unemployment, strategies for addressing it, and its impact are products of historical trends. Primary attention is given to shifts in state responses to unemployment because, at least in theory, government policies are supposed to reflect wider “public values.” Additionally, it is government responses that play one of the most significant roles in determining the level of hardship faced by the unemployed (Cheyne, O’Brien, & Belgrave, 1997).

It can be argued that unemployment emerged in Aotearoa/New Zealand with the development of a European-style socioeconomic structure in the early 1800s. Subsequent government responses to unemployment have reflected an ongoing tension between two ideological formations (cf. Cheyne et al., 1997; Mulengu, 1994). The first relates to liberal ideas about the market as a self-regulating realm requiring limited government regulation or intervention (Cockett, 1994). The emphasis here is on individual responsibility for unemployment. The second
reflects Keynesian or communitarian ideas about the welfare state and the need for state intervention to regulate the market and to assist those who are unable to look after themselves (Shirley, Easton, Briar, & Chatterjee, 1990). The emphasis here is on communal responsibility and structural explanations for unemployment. The tension between these two ideological formations and resulting ambiguities in the assignment of blame has been found in New Zealand policy documents and news reports (Cheyne et al., 1997; Leitch, 1990). For instance, Leitch (1990) identified two competing ways in which the unemployed were represented in news reports: as “dole bludgers” (emphasizing individual responsibility) or as “victims” of the wider social transitions (emphasizing communal responsibility).

During the 1800s government responses to unemployment in New Zealand were dominated by the liberal agenda. Owing to unemployment’s being primarily attributed to personal inadequacies, an individual and his or her family, rather than the state, were held responsible for welfare provisions (cf. Mulengu, 1994). Such a view formed the basis of what is often referred to as the “principle of less eligibility.” According to this principle, because unemployment is an individual’s own fault, the unemployed should not be entitled to the same financial resources as the lowest-paid workers (Tennant, 1989). Although communitarian-oriented ideas were also evident at this time and were manifested in developments such as limited job creation schemes, it was not until the emergence of unprecedented levels of unemployment in the 1930s that communitarian ideas took center stage. The initial response by government to heightened unemployment in the 1930s was to continue treating unemployment as a temporary phenomenon and to emphasize self-reliance and individual responsibility (Mulengu, 1994). However, such policies did not last, because of mounting public pressure and civil unrest that reflected the growing acceptance of structural explanations for unemployment (Simpson, 1997). The liberal agenda that had dominated unemployment policy since the 1840s was undermined by policies that focused on the redistribution of resources to the unemployed (Cheyne et al., 1997). It was at this time that a universal unemployment benefit and job creation schemes were introduced as key components of a welfare state.

It was not until the 1970s that the return of unemployment to its prewar levels resulted in a partial erosion of the welfare state and the renewed dominance of liberal ideology within government. During the period when the interviews for this study were conducted, this shift was reflected in events such as the reduction of the unemployment benefit for a person aged between 20 and 24 years from $143.57 to $108.17 per week. Such benefit cuts were considered a necessary means of maintaining a difference between low-paid workers and the unemployed and were intended to reduce people’s dependence on the state by “motivating” the unemployed to join the workforce, the assumption being that there were available jobs for the unemployed (cf. Drewery, 1998). Because of a lack of available jobs,
however, such policies did not result in a reduction in unemployment, but in increased hardship and stigma for the unemployed (cf. Cheyne et al., 1997).

Preserving One’s Moral Integrity in the Face of Chronic Unemployment

After establishing the general premise that unemployment is constructed as an illness, we will explore how the ongoing tension between individual and structural explanations for unemployment is played out in our participants’ accounts. Of key concern will be the tactics through which the unemployed draw on these explanations in order to resist the stigma of unemployment and to maintain their moral integrity as worthy members of society. This focus allows us to demonstrate similarities to findings from research into lay accounts of illness (e.g., Blaxter, 1997; Herzlich, 1973; Hodgetts & Chamberlain, 2000).

Unemployment as Deviation From the Norm

Lay health beliefs research has documented how health is often constructed as part of life that is taken for granted, whereas illness is something that comes along and disrupts life. In other words, illness is often referred to as a deviation from a normal state of health that challenges one’s sense of normality and identity (cf. Charmaz, 1995; Cornwell, 1984; Pierret, 1993; Radley, 1994). As a result, when people become ill, they are forced to take a step back and draw on available explanations from society in order to make sense of their new situation. In a similar manner, our participants presented unemployment as a deviation from the norm (employment). They invoked a life world disrupted by unemployment. For instance, John (age 55) states:

I think everybody who is unemployed is sick. Especially when you are unemployed for 2 years. They are sick but they don’t want to tell you. They are trying to hide it. Because they are too. It’s a private thing in a lot of people; they don’t want to express themselves. Because people have pride and they are no longer who they were. When you get sick, you know, the depression. I don’t care sometimes. Sometimes I didn’t give a damn if the lights went out; you know, I don’t worry. It’s wrong and this is the illness this government is creating, unemployment. An idle mind is a devil’s advocate, that’s what it is. . . . I think unemployment is one of the biggest sicknesses to a lot of families and that it has got to the stage that it’s become a disease. It’s just the biggest disease, ’cause it’s changing so many lives.

This excerpt provides a powerful example of how overt the similarities between unemployment and illness are for participants. Here John is not just comparing unemployment to an illness. He is making sense of unemployment through a number of ideas that have been found to be central to lay accounts of illness.

Similar to the findings of Herzlich (1973) regarding the social representation of illness, unemployment is presented as an external social force that disrupts people’s lives. It is, as John says, “the illness this government is creating.” Unemployment is also associated with social stigma, shame, and moral evaluations (cf.
Eales, 1989) similar to those often associated with illness (cf. Blaxter, 1997; Pollock, 1993; G. H. Williams, 1993). It is positioned as a moral transgression to be hidden. Participants repeatedly talked about how the stigma of unemployment restricted their experiences of positive social interactions and feelings of connectedness to society. For instance, when explaining why he preferred not to engage in many social interactions, Matt (age 19) stated: “You have enough shit in life without having to take it from people when you go out... Being unemployed just stops you doing what you want.” Participants positioned themselves as outsiders who were restrained from normal participation in life. Reflecting a functional definition of illness (cf. Radley, 1994), unemployment prevents people from “doing things.”

What is important in such accounts is not just that unemployment is presented as preventing people from doing things, but that it restrains people’s ability to present themselves as morally worthy members of society. Within contemporary society being employed is a central source of “normal” identity (cf. Kelvin, 1984). Many people perceive and judge others on the criterion of what they do for a living. When unemployed, a person often lacks this socially approved role and the positive (self-)evaluations that go along with employment. This position in society tends to be one of lower prestige and shame, which generally does not provide a feeling of full membership in society (cf. Eales, 1989; Kelvin, 1984; Warr, 1987; Winefield et al., 1993). In terms of status and identity needs (McFadyen, 1995), not only are the unemployed deprived of material prerequisites for full participation in social life, they are also deprived of an important source of self-worth.

The importance of self-presentation is a central finding within health beliefs research. Researchers have demonstrated that when talking about illness people are not just constructing an ailment. They are constructing the self in such a manner as to preserve their own moral integrity in the face of social stigma (cf. Blaxter, 1997). Radley (1999) writes, “illness does not simply affect the various realms of everyday life. Instead, it is encountered there in the individual’s attempts to maintain or establish a viable identity and sense of moral worth” (p. 22). Unemployment challenges one’s sense of normal identity in a manner similar to a chronic illness (cf. Charmaz, 1995; Pollock, 1993; G. H. Williams, 1993). Like a chronic illness, unemployment is not just something one suffers from; it requires one to renegotiate a sense of identity and to account for the appropriateness of one’s strategies for bearing the affliction. The stigma of unemployment requires the unemployed either to hide or to modify their difference from the employed in order to present themselves as worthy members of society (cf. Radley, 1993). This “self-protective strategy” (cf. Goffman, 1959) is exemplified in the way participants recount specific life events in a manner that exhibits their motivation to work and invokes structural barriers to their obtaining employment. Such tactics for preserving one’s moral self-worth warrant further exploration.
Resisting Victim Blaming Through the Renegotiation of Individual and Structural Explanations for Unemployment

An explanation central to the social representation of unemployment proposes that it is a result of individual failings such as a lack of motivation, education, and skill. This explanation assumes that there are personal characteristics that determine why the unemployed have lower education and skill levels. They are “unmotivated” or “less intelligent.” To a certain extent our participants also invoke this explanation when admitting that they have virtually no educational qualifications and that this is a barrier to their gaining employment. However, they do not simply accept the idea that their lack of skill stems from individual inadequacies such as a lack of motivation or low intelligence. They renegotiated this dominant explanation by interweaving it with a structural explanation that presents unemployment as the result of wider social processes and government policies. As a result a lack of education and skill is associated with inadequacies in the education system and a lack of government support. Thus, a victim-blaming explanation is partially transformed into a critique of structural barriers to employment, which reside outside an individual’s control. An element of this process can be seen in the way government departments are presented as frustrating and restricting the unemployed’s efforts to overcome unemployment through education. Sandy (age 40) states:

I think they [Income Support, a government department that provided financial assistance to lower socioeconomic groups at the time the interviews were conducted] discourage us [the unemployed]. My daughter wanted to go to Polytech for art at nights. She couldn’t afford it. As soon as they said no, that was it, she was home. She was, “Well I can’t afford to go there so I won’t go anywhere,” and she just stayed home. I think they put us down a bit. I mean it’s OK to encourage these things but they’ve [Income Support] got to help us. What can we do with $100 a week? We can’t go to Polytech.

The assumption that the unemployed are unmotivated is a key component of popular depictions of unemployment (cf. Leitch, 1990). Participants avoid the stigma associated with such “personal factors” by renegotiating the association of unemployment with a lack of personal motivation. When talking about their own or significant others’ unemployment, all participants assign responsibility primarily to societal restraints. Rather than being presented as the cause of unemployment, inactivity and a lack of personal motivation are often presented as an outcome of the strains of unemployment and a lack of support.

This transfer of responsibility for unemployment to structural restraints is not all encompassing. Participants do not simply dismiss individual explanations. They negotiate an image of the cause of unemployment by creatively weaving together both individualistic and societal explanations in complex ways. Responsibility for one’s own unemployment and that of family members is placed at a structural level, where government policies are linked to an inadequately resourced education system and a reduction in the availability of jobs (cf. Furnham, 1988).
Highlighting the hegemonic status of individualizing explanations, participants sometimes place responsibility for other people’s unemployment with a lack of motivation. Expressing a variant of such thinking, Sonya (age 17) states:

I mean, you go and look for a job and so many of these people slap you in the face, you get tired of it after a while. You get sick of being bummed out all the time, you just want to give up. . . . I think it’s because people think we don’t get off our ass and go out there and look, because they think that we’re lazy and really we’re not. Oh I don’t know. All I know is that I’m not. I don’t know about other people. I mean, some people are, some people are like lazy, but other people, they’re just ashamed because they haven’t got a job. They just give up after a while.

Sonya has rhetorically negotiated a stronger moral position for herself, which preserves her identity as a worthy member of society, by stating that other people may be unemployed owing to a lack of motivation but that she is motivated and actively seeking work (cf. Drewery, 1998). She avoids moral ridicule by emphasizing that she values the same things in life as the employed and is responding to unemployment in a morally correct manner by seeking work and attempting to upgrade her skills. The excerpt above epitomizes the self-protective strategy of concealment of difference (cf. Goffman, 1959) as a way of minimizing the stigma of unemployment. In short, the unemployed may not be able to deny the influence of individual factors in unemployment, but they can demonstrate that such factors are of limited relevance to their own situation.

This distinction between self and other in the assignment of responsibility for unemployment was also evident in the illness accounts of working-class respondents in Cornwell’s (1984) study. One’s own illness was presented as being unavoidable. In contrast, other people’s ailments were often presented as being avoidable. Our participants draw on notions of the “deserving” and the “undeserving” poor when making the same distinction regarding unemployment. “The distinction between the ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ poor has been characterized as a demarcation between those who are seen as ‘copping out’ or ‘chipping into’ society” (Becker, 1997, p. 8). The undeserving poor are held in lesser esteem than the deserving poor, because they “do not want to work” and are content to live as “parasites on society.” Our participants present themselves as deserving poor who require assistance in their efforts to upgrade their skills and find employment.

Further reflecting complexity in the manner in which the tension between individual and structural explanations is played out in these accounts, an age-related difference emerged in the emphasis placed on these two explanations. Younger participants, such as Sonya, generally tended to emphasize individual factors to a greater extent, whereas older participants, such as Sandy, emphasized structural causes and rarely attributed the plight of others to individual failings. This difference in emphasis may be due to younger participants’ having grown up within a sociohistorical period in which individual explanations were at the fore of government policy and public debate (Cheyne et al., 1997; Leitch, 1990), whereas
older participants grew up in a period of near full employment. With the onset of an economic downturn in the late 1970s structural explanations emerged to account for the resulting large-scale job losses. Living through the onset of a drastic increase in unemployment may have contributed to older participants’ being less likely to emphasize individual responsibility for joblessness.

Resisting the Negative Consequences of Unemployment

Unemployment is given a degree of agency in these accounts. It is an enemy that is “wrecking havoc” in people’s lives. The use of such military metaphors to invoke the virtues of fortitude in the face of such adversaries is a salient finding in discussions of lay responses to illness (Charmaz, 1995; Crawford, 1984; Herzlich, 1973; Pollock, 1993). There is a well-documented moral imperative for people to resist the enemy (illness; cf. Blaxter, 1997). Individuals must muster their psychological fortitude to fight, cope with and not give in to an ailment. As G. H. Williams (1993) writes, “The vocabulary of fighting is part of a language of self-enactment through which virtue is displayed, but the forms it takes in a given instance are connected to concrete biographical experiences” (p. 104). The “moral imperative to be healthy” or respond to illness in an “appropriate manner” (cf. Blaxter, 1997; Crawford, 1984) is applied to unemployment.

Large proportions of the participants’ accounts are focused on how they attempt to withstand the pressures of unemployment. In a way that resembles the “willpower” explanation of illness (cf. Blaxter, 1997; Stainton Rogers, 1991), participants talk about being determined not to give in to unemployment. As Kylie (age 42) states:

Well, mentally I feel quite stable, mentally and physically, because I won’t let anyone defeat me, and I won’t let being unemployed defeat me also. I always try and beat it. . . . I’ve never ever been pushed to the edge of suicide, but I’ve thought if I get sick and tired of this there might be a chance. You know, I can’t say I’d never commit suicide, but then I can’t say that I would either, but it depends how far I am able to take this stress. . . . I hate being that weak, ‘cause I feel in this day and age you’ve got to be mentally strong and physically strong to cope.

The idea of having to fight or resist unemployment is presented early in this excerpt, and then the remaining three sentences function to warrant such action. Overall, the excerpt exemplifies how the unemployed present themselves as being “under siege” from adverse life circumstances that can wear down the most active and hardy individuals, rendering them fatigued and vulnerable (cf. Herzlich, 1973; Hodgetts & Chamberlain, 2000; Stainton Rogers, 1991). In asserting her ability to fight unemployment, Kylie acknowledges that her resistance may decrease the longer she experiences the material and social restrictions unemployment places on her. By voicing her ability to cope Kylie is able to demonstrate her moral fortitude. Additionally, by also talking about the uncertainty of her ability to cope and the
way unemployment wears her down, Kylie is able to emphasize the seriousness of the unemployment epidemic.

The style of resistive talk evident in illness accounts is elaborated in its application to unemployment. For instance, war metaphors are used to raise notions of friendly allies (cf. Charmaz, 1995), such as family and friends who provide support in times of need. Reflecting the infiltration of psychological concepts within the unemployed’s life worlds, participants present themselves as being able to survive unemployment better if they have access to psychological resources such as social support. Correspondingly, a key strategy in the fight against unemployment is an ability to reframe the situation and to adopt a socially legitimate role. As an aid to his resistance, Malcolm (age 27) reframes his unemployment and focuses on some of the more positive consequences:

I used to worry a lot about what other people think, but over the years I have got to the stage where I don’t give a damn about them. As long as my kids are fed and my wife’s happy... Actually sometimes I am better off being unemployed because I can help her [his wife] out and do quite a lot of other things. The funny thing about it, every time I have been unemployed I have spent with my children, and it’s been good for them and good for me. ‘Cause I like spending time with the kids... My two, they like it when I spend time with them. And so that takes away a bit of it, but there is still all the pressures of getting a house, getting a good job, and all that.

A central element here is the way in which Malcolm renegotiates his identity from worker to that of a good husband and father in order to reframe his situation. In the process, unemployment is reconceptualized as an opportunity for Malcolm to spend quality time with his family. Sustaining a positive outlook and the ability to withstand unemployment is aided by one’s access to socially legitimate roles, in this case that of fatherhood. This excerpt reflects the illness accounts of mothers explored by Blaxter (1993). The women Blaxter studied reported neglecting their own health for the sake of their families. Presenting oneself as a good parent, one who has to make sacrifices for one’s children, is an effective way of warranting one’s moral integrity (cf. Hodgetts & Chamberlain, 2000).

Such reframing appears to serve a similar function to that expressed in the account of a male participant in a study by Radley (1993). This participant had recently undergone coronary graft surgery and used the digging of his garden as a way of expressing his ability to act in the world as a man. The digging enabled him to preserve his masculine identity. In a similar manner, Malcolm talks about being actively involved in family life and in the care of his children. This enables him to present himself as a productive member of society who is concerned with the welfare of others (cf. Charmaz, 1995; Willcott & Griffin, 1997). He may not be the “breadwinner,” but he is a “good father” who can provide support for his wife and spend “quality time with his children.” In a similar manner to the unemployed mother interviewed by Drewery (1998), Malcolm is crafting a respectable life world for himself through the creative reframing of dominant social expectations.
Although the perspective on unemployment voiced by Malcolm is more positive than that voiced in earlier excerpts, things are still uncertain for participants such as Malcolm. Despite invoking the power of positive thought and reframing his situation, Malcolm does question his ability to continue focusing on the positive consequences of unemployment. There are limits to the “power of positive thought.” Malcolm states:

You can try to stay positive and focus on your family and it works for a while, but at the end of the day does it change anything? Does it give me any say in whether I’m unemployed or not? Well it changes it for my kids and my wife, but it gets pretty hard and sometimes I wonder if it’s all worth it.

These two excerpts from Malcolm’s account also exemplify how participants can revise and add to their stories as they work through the meaning and impact of unemployment. Like a chronic illness, unemployment can have both negative and positive consequences that are not mutually exclusive and that are rendered meaningful within the life worlds of those affected (cf. Charmaz, 1995).

**Discussion**

If we are to understand the meaning and impact of unemployment, then we need to explore it from the perspective of the unemployed. Our analysis demonstrates the value of people’s accounts in establishing the creative means by which people “get by” in a life disrupted by unemployment. These accounts provide rich insights into how cause, responsibility, and the consequences of unemployment are enacted within everyday life. In focusing on the moral component of participants’ accounts we have shown that their understandings of and responses to unemployment are constructed in relation to societal values and expectations surrounding employment and economic failure (cf. Eales, 1989). Such values and expectations appear to influence how the unemployed position themselves and how they must act in the face of such adversity. In short, apart from corroborating the struggle and anxieties associated with being unemployed, this analysis reveals some of the inherently social processes through which this social phenomenon is rendered meaningful.

The preference given to structural explanations in these accounts is consistent with the findings of previous research into the meaning of unemployment (e.g., Feather, 1985; Furnham, 1982, 1988; Gaskell & Smith, 1985). The potential exception is Feather’s (1985) finding that respondents identify a lack of skill as the most prominent individualizing explanation for unemployment. Our analysis adds context to this finding and offers another interpretation. A lack of skill may not simply be attributed to individual failing. Within the accounts we explored, explanations for unemployment were not voiced in isolation. Rather, the “individualistic,” “societal,” and “fatalistic” explanations identified in previous research (cf. Furnham, 1988) act as shared resources that are renegotiated as participants...
refigure their identities in an attempt to bring order to their lives. Participants present themselves as actively seeking work and wanting to “upskill” despite being hampered by a lack of educational resources, employment opportunities, and institutional support.

The use of social representations theory has provided us with a framework for taking up the call for psychologists to trace the views of individuals back to the shared explanations from which these views are created. Our analysis demonstrates how human experience is the result of both existing social representations and the innovations made by people as thinking beings. In the past, social representations research has tended to map out the representation of a specific topic, such as illness, within and across specific social groups (cf. Flick, 2000; Joffe, 1999). This has meant that social representations research has tended to remain domain specific. By investigating similarities across two domains, our analysis demonstrates some of the ways in which people draw upon the social representation of illness when making sense of unemployment. The key point here is not whether unemployment is really like an illness. The point is that people can draw upon explanations central to the social representation of illness and tailor them in complex ways in order to make sense of their own situations in life (cf. Flick, 1998a; Moscovici, 1998). It is through the exploration of such processes that researchers can foreground the contingent, shifting, and dialectical character of social representations and the processes through which they are constructed.

The construction of unemployment as an illness is not only evident in the accounts of the unemployed. Elements of this representation also appear in both well-intentioned academic models developed to explain unemployment and government policies developed to address unemployment. For instance, Warr (1987) proposes a “vitamin model” to explain the effects of environmental features on the unemployed’s mental health as being analogous to mechanisms by which vitamins affect physical health. Such work has been instrumental in highlighting the plight of the unemployed and providing a basis from which to lobby for improvements (cf. Cullen, 1999). However, it also encompasses the idea that unemployment is an “abnormal” situation and can be used to justify conservative public policies.

During the historical period in which this research was conducted, government policies in New Zealand emphasized individual explanations and downplayed the structural causes of unemployment (Cheyne et al., 1997). The result was the construction of unemployment as a transgression that is to be dealt with in a way that encourages the “persistent offender” to take action by seeking work and to take responsibility for gaining new skills as an aid to recovery. Such policies focus on reducing the dependency of the “undeserving” unemployed and exposing them to the benefits of work (cf. Becker, 1997; Harper, 1996). One strategy is to set benefit levels well below the poverty line as a means of forcing the unemployed into underpaid and demoralizing work. Such victim-blaming strategies have proved unsuccessful in alleviating the negative consequences of
unemployment because they neglect the material restraints placed on people’s lives (cf. Becker, 1997; Cheyne et al., 1997). If we are to improve the lives of the unemployed, we need to instigate a shift from such punitive responses to more participative responses. As Becker (1997) writes:

Rather than punishing the poor in an effort to get them off benefits and reduce “dependency”—a policy which has been destructive to individuals and families, socially divisive and ultimately self-defeating—the poor need to be respected as agents and experts in their own right, “partners” rather than “villains.” Welfare provision must be seen as a badge of citizenship rather than a mark of failure. (p. 165)

This requires the construction of a new social representation of unemployment: a representation that does not pathologize the unemployed.

The first step in the construction of such an alternative representation is a critique of the existing social representation of unemployment. This article contributes to such an agenda but is by no means sufficient. Although we have highlighted some of the complexities and contradictions in our participants’ accounts, our analysis has not dealt with all the complexities surrounding the social representation of unemployment as an illness. In fact, no single article could grapple with all of these complexities and possible variations. Our aim has been to initiate a critical engagement with this social representation and to highlight some of its implications for the unemployed. Future work needs to explore the social reproduction and circulation of this representation within cultural artifacts such as official documents and media coverage. Such work would benefit from an exploration of the ways such artifacts are interwoven within the life worlds of various employed and unemployed groups.

References

Unemployment as Illness


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