The Psychological Impact of Continuing Unemployment: Some Longitudinal Data and a General Model

P. Warr

Introduction

This chapter has two principal aims. First it will describe some longitudinal findings from research with unemployed British men. These results point to a psychological and behavioural adjustment to long-term unemployment, albeit at levels which would widely be regarded as “unhealthy”. Second, the paper will propose a general model of the factors giving rise to deterioration or improvement during unemployment. This model may permit a broad-ranging interpretation of differences between people in the degree to which unemployment has psychological consequences. It may also serve to provide a framework for the development of more systematic international comparisons.

Summary of SAPU Longitudinal Studies

The research to be summarized here has been carried out by the Social and Applied Psychology Unit at the University of Sheffield. It examines changes across time as people move from initial into longer-term unemployment.

The results to be described were of course obtained in a particular economic and cultural setting, the United Kingdom in the 1980s. We do not know how findings would vary between countries, but substantial differences in the availability of welfare benefits would probably give rise to different longitudinal patterns. In the United Kingdom, “supplementary benefits” are paid to unemployed and other people according to scales of personal and family need, and payments continue indefinitely. It appears that unemployed men in Britain receive on average between 45 and 60 per cent of their employed income (see, for instance, Payne et al. 1984; Warr and Jackson 1984). However, there are differences between families, and in a small proportion of cases (perhaps 3%-5%) family income can exceed that received in a previous low-paid job. Nevertheless, supplementary benefit payments are intended to meet only basic needs; although continuing indefinitely, they reach only a low level of provision.

Availability of money is a central factor in the general model to be presented later. Longitudinal changes in psychological and physical health during unemployment are likely to be particularly responsive to changes in this factor. Within
the United Kingdom, benefit payments remain largely unaltered despite lengthening periods out of work.

Against that financial background, results will be summarized for three cohorts of continuously unemployed men. These are as follows, where ‘T1’ refers to time-one, the initial interview, and T2 and T3 refer to time-two and time-three, respectively.

**Sample A:** 195 men previously in unskilled and semi-skilled jobs, aged between 16 and 64 at T1. Median duration of unemployment at T1 was 2 months (range, 1 to 3 months). T2 interviews took place 9 months after T1.

**Sample B:** 132 men previously in unskilled and semiskilled jobs, drawn from the same population as Sample A but having been unemployed at T1 for a longer period. Median duration of unemployment at T1 was 9 months (range, 4 to 24 months). T2 interviews took place 9 months after T1, and T3 interviews 10 months after T2.

**Sample C:** 75 men previously in unskilled, semiskilled and nonmanual jobs, aged between 25 and 39 at T1. Median duration of unemployment at T1 was 9 months (range, 6 to 11 months). T2 interviews took place 12 months after T1, and T3 interviews 12 months after T2.

In addition, the Unit has carried out several investigations into the impact of unemployment upon male and female teenagers (Banks and Jackson 1982; Banks et al. 1984; Jackson et al. 1983; Stafford et al. 1980; Ullah and Banks 1985; Ullah et al. 1985; Warr and Jackson 1983; Warr et al. 1982, 1985). However, detailed results from these samples will not be presented here.

### Changes in General Distress with Continuing Unemployment

First, let us consider changes in overall scores on the General Health Questionnaire. This was designed to measure minor psychiatric morbidity (Goldberg 1972), and can here be considered a measure of general psychological distress.

We had expected to observe a steady and continuing increase in General Health Questionnaire (GHQ) scores as the period of unemployment for the people we sampled became longer and longer. However, that was not found to be the case. A substantial deterioration was present during the first 6 months out of work (in addition to the significant decrement occurring around the time of job loss), but thereafter no further decline occurred (Warr and Jackson 1985). Indeed, a small reduction in GHQ distress scores was observed between 6 and 30 months of unemployment.

This longitudinal pattern matched that observed in earlier cross-sectional analyses (Jackson and Warr 1984; Warr and Jackson 1984). However, it was markedly different from the pattern found for teenagers. Cross-sectional analysis had indicated that, although unemployment was associated with substantially raised levels of distress among teenagers, no further deterioration occurred beyond that visible at the time of job loss (Jackson and Warr 1984; Warr et al. 1982, 1985). This constant effect has been confirmed in subsequent longitudinal research with teenagers, which has not yet been published.