

Do the long-term unemployed adapt to unemployment?

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The literature on the psychological consequences of unemployment suggests that an adaptation process takes place among the long-term unemployed. Their psychological well-being decreases strongly at the beginning of unemployment, to stabilize at a lower level after a certain time. This stabilization is due to an adaptation process, in which the unemployed decrease their job search behaviors and lower their employment commitment. In this cross-sectional study from Belgium, 563 short-term and 195 long-term unemployed are compared on psychological well-being, the experience of unemployment, employment commitment and job search behavior. The results are in line with the hypothesis of an adaptation process among the long-term unemployed. The short-term unemployed experienced more psychological distress than the long-term unemployed. The short-term unemployed also showed stronger employment commitment and more often applied for jobs. The results of some retrospective questions, in which the respondents had to compare their actual behaviors and well-being with those in the past, suggest that an adaptation process took place. Some policy recommendations are discussed.

Keywords: long-term unemployment, short-term unemployment, job-seeking behavior, psychological well-being, adaptation, employment commitment

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Research on the psychological consequences of unemployment has documented the detrimental consequences of unemployment (McKee-Ryan, Song, Wanberg & Kinicki, 2005; Mohr & Otto, in press; Paul & Mosera, 2009). Several longitudinal studies show that unemployment has a negative impact on the psychological well-being of a majority of the unemployed (Warr, 1987; Brenner & Levi, 1987; Verkleij, 1988). When reviewing the evidence in a variety of countries, a typical pattern can be observed (for an overview: De Witte, 1993). In a first phase, the psychological well-being of the unemployed decreases rather strongly after losing their job. After a while, this decrease however stops and their well-being stabilizes at a lower level. Some studies suggest that the well-being of the unemployed can increase slightly after some months (Fryer & Payne, 1986; Warr & Jackson, 1987). In other studies, their well-being seems to fluctuate, combining upwards and downward turns. The well-being of the unemployed does not get restored, however, during their unemployment period: as long as they are unemployed, they do not reach the level of well-being typical for their employment period. These results are in line with the 'adaptation hypothesis', advanced by e.g. Warr and Jackson (1987), which suggests that the unemployed – to a certain degree – 'get used' to unemployment.

This adaptation process consists of two components. First, the unemployed need to *adapt* to a new 'role': being 'unemployed' (Warr, 1987). The role change from employed worker to unemployed individual initially

contains a lot of uncertainty, caused by the new expectations and procedures of this role. How do they have to look for jobs? What is the regular procedure to register and what kind of administrative forms does one have to fill out? How to reach a new balance within the family? After a while, these expectations and procedures become clear and a new kind of routine starts to develop, which reduces the strain and uncertainty associated with the new role. As a consequence, the decrease in psychological well-being stops, and stabilizes at a lower level. One could conclude that the unemployed get acquainted with the (frustrating) situation of being unemployed.

Adaptation to a new role relates to a temporary transition. The second component relates to a more fundamental aspect of the adaptation process. Unemployment is a frustrating experience when one is strongly focused on finding a job. After a while, the unemployed discover that it is very difficult, perhaps even impossible to find a job. This necessitates the unemployed to develop a specific coping strategy: *psychological withdrawal* from the labor market. A review of the literature suggests that this withdrawal process reveals itself in at least two phenomena: a change in employment commitment and in job seeking behavior (De Witte, 1993).

When one scores high on employment commitment, unemployment becomes a frustrating experience, leading to an increase of psychological distress (Fryer & Payne, 1986). A recent meta-analysis indeed shows employment commitment (also labeled as 'work-role centrality') to be associated with unwell-being among the unemployed

(McKee-Ryan et al., 2005). This seems obvious, as one is constantly reminded that the actual situation (unemployment) is not accordance with the aspired one (having a job). When one remains unemployed after many attempts to find work, the reduction of the value of work (and thus employment commitment) becomes a possible strategy to reduce the negative experience of unemployment, and to learn to cope with unemployment.

The most important illustration of the withdrawal process, however, concerns job-seeking behavior. Actively looking and applying for jobs without finding any, negatively affects the well-being of the unemployed (Miltenburg & Woldringh, 1989). Constantly being rejected strongly demotivates the unemployed and as a consequence, they reduce their application behaviors over time once the duration of their unemployment increases (for longitudinal evidence, see e.g.: Donker Van Heel, 1989). This fits the hypothesis of learned helplessness (Seligman, 1975). The reduction of job-seeking behavior can be understood as a coping strategy. By not applying for jobs, the unemployed avoid the confrontation with negative outcomes, such as continuous failure and rejection by employers.

The adaptation process outlined above is a strategy aimed at the reduction of the psychological burden of long-term unemployment. Psychologically, one could even interpret this reaction as an attempt to protect oneself against the constant frustration and rejection typical for the experience of unemployment (De Witte, 1993). This adaptation process reduces the burden of unemployment and stops and stabilizes the downward trend of the psychological well-being of the long-term unemployed.

The duration of unemployment is however not the only determinant of the psychological well-being of the unemployed. Other *demographic* variables such as gender, age and the level of education also influence the experience of unemployment (Warr, 1983 and 1984). This is important for two reasons. First of all, longitudinal research suggests that demographic variables influence the probability of finding a job (Donker Van Heel, 1989; De Witte & Wets, 1996): women, elderly workers and low skilled unemployed have less chances of being recruited by employers. Employers use these demographic variables as selection criterion, and have the tendency to rank order candidates for a job according to these objective criteria ('queue theory', see e.g. Kloostermans, 1987). This means that one will find differences in composition for demographic variables between a sample of short and long-term unemployed, due to selection on the labor market.

Next, as a consequence, these demographic variables are also associated with the experience of unemployment and with the psychological well-being of the unemployed. Research suggests that unemployment is slightly more problematic for men than for women. Unemployment reduces the psychological well-being of both men and women (Lahelma, 1989). Lahelma's research however shows that men show a stronger decrease in well-being than women. Research in Belgium also shows that women with children experience less problems with their unemployment than men (De Witte & Wets, 1996). Unemployment is as problematic for women as for men when they are single or wage-earner of the family (Warr, 1983 & 1984). Unemployment is most problematic for the middle-aged between 30 and 50 years old, because they experience more financial strains, are more strongly committed to employment and experience fewer opportunities to find a new job than youngsters (De Witte,

1989). Low skilled workers experience more problems when unemployed, because of e.g. their limited financial resources (Schaufeli, 1992).

Objectives and hypotheses

This study focuses on the differences in experience and psychological well-being related to the duration of unemployment. We compare short-term and long-term unemployed on three aspects: (1) the experience of unemployment and psychological well-being, (2) employment commitment, and (3) job-seeking behavior. Previous research outlined above suggests that the duration of unemployment is associated with these three aspects. We thus hypothesize that the long-term unemployed (compared to the short-term unemployed) will: (1) experience fewer problems and will show a higher level of psychological well-being, (2) will show a lower level of employment commitment, and (3) will show less frequent job-seeking behavior. These aspects are all related to the adaptation process associated with long-term unemployment. Variables such as gender, age, educational level and family situation also influence the experience of unemployment. These demographic characteristics need to be kept under control while testing our hypotheses, in order to assess the relative impact of unemployment duration.

This study is cross-sectional, which does not allow testing for causal relations. All differences between the short-term and long-term unemployed could therefore be due to a selection effect, in which the long-term unemployed remain unemployed because of e.g. a low level of employment commitment. In the surveys used, however, some retrospective questions were asked, allowing tapping the (perceived) evolution in e.g. experience and job-seeking behavior. If an adaptation process took place as hypothesized, then the long-term unemployed should report a decrease in job-seeking and an increase in well-being throughout their unemployment period.

Method

Participants

Two groups of unemployed are compared: one group of short-term unemployed (less than one year) and a group of long-term unemployed (one year or longer). The short-term unemployed (n = 563) were surveyed when they were unemployed for exactly 10 months. They completed an anonymous written questionnaire. The long-term unemployed (n = 195) were interviewed at home for a study on the psychological consequences of long-term unemployment. The mean duration of unemployment for this group was 5 years and 6 months. Both samples were representative for the population of the short versus long-term unemployed respectively.

The differences in demographic composition between both groups were as expected. The long-term unemployed were more often female, were less skilled and older than the short-term unemployed. The majority of the long-term unemployed were women (82 %), versus 'only' 57% of the short-term unemployed. About 75 % of the long-term unemployed had a low level of education (not more than lower secondary education) versus about 55% of the short-term unemployed. Almost 39% of the short-term unemployed were younger than 25 years (versus 12%

among the long-term unemployed). The average age of the short-term unemployed was 29,1 years, versus 33,6 years among the long-term unemployed. The short-term unemployed more often lived with their parents and only 23 % of them were women with a partner and children. 54 % of the long-term unemployed were women with a partner and children.

Measures

The questionnaire was identical for both groups regarding the core variables in this study.

The unemployed had to rate 18 items concerning the *experience of unemployment*. These items were self developed, based on the various functions of work distinguished in Jahoda's latent deprivation model (Jahoda, 1982). Principal components analysis (with Varimax rotation) discovered three dimensions: (1) 'negative experience of unemployment' (e.g. "My life seems empty since I'm unemployed"), (2) 'positive experience of unemployment' (e.g. "I'm pleased with my (extra) leisure time") and (3) 'financial problems' (e.g. "I have to save on my personal expenses"). Items belonging to the same dimension were summed and transformed into an 11-point scale (from '0' (maximal disagreement with the content of the scale) to '10' (maximal agreement with its content), and '5' as the neutral midpoint). The scales measuring a negative experience and financial hardship were reliable (Cronbach's Alpha respectively 0,85 and 0,78), whereas the scale 'positive experience of unemployment' was slightly less reliable (Cronbach's Alpha: 0,68).

Psychological well-being was measured with the *General Health Questionnaire* (GHQ-12; Goldberg, 1972). This internationally validated scale is often used in unemployment research (see e.g. Banks et al., 1980). Items were summed to indicate a global score for well-being (scores between '0' and '36'; Cronbach Alpha: 0,88), with a high score referring to *low* psychological well-being. A critical value can be calculated, indicating a problematic low level of well-being.

Employment commitment was measured with 8 items (Jackson et al., 1983). All items loaded on one factor and were combined into an 11-point scale, reflecting the importance of employment for the respondent.

We measured *job-seeking behavior* by asking how many times during the last three months they applied for a job by using five different job-seeking methods (e.g. "apply spontaneously for a job", "look up some ads", "write letters in reaction to an ad"). All items were scored on a 5-point scale, ranging from 'never' to 'at least 10 times'. All items loaded on a single factor after performing a principal components analysis, and were combined into an 11-point scale. A higher score indicates a higher level of job-seeking behavior.

Finally, the evolution of the experience of unemployment, and the evolution of job-seeking behavior were measured by two *retrospective* questions. For the experience of unemployment, we asked to give the most problematic period of their unemployment: the first three months, between three and twelve months, after a year, all the time or never. For the evolution in job-seeking behavior, we asked to compare their actual behavior with their behavior at the beginning of their employment. Do they at present apply 'more', 'just as much' or 'less' than in the past?

Analysis

We first test the differences between the short-term and long-term unemployed by means of an analysis of variance (ANOVA) for continuous variables or a chi-square test for nominal variables. Since both groups differ regarding demographic variables (such as level of education and age), we also perform a multiple classification analysis in which all demographical variables are kept under control (Nie, Hull, Jenkins, Steinbrenner & Brent, 1975). This analysis allows using nominal variables in a kind of regression analysis, in which standardized regression coefficients are produced to express the importance of a specific variable (e.g. short versus long-term unemployment). Gender will be combined with aspects of the family (like having a partner and having children), as research suggests that this variable is only relevant in combination with aspects of the family situation (see above). The differences between the short and the long-term unemployed on two retrospective questions are analyzed by means of chi-square test.

Results

Comparison of the short-term and long-term unemployed

We first of all examine the difference between the short and long-term unemployed without controlling for demographic variables. Table 1 displays these results. The long-term unemployed differ significantly from the short-term unemployed regarding all scales. First of all, the long-term unemployed score lower on the scale 'negative experience' and 'financial problems', and higher on the scale 'positive experience'. This corroborates our hypothesis that the short-term unemployed will experience their unemployment in a more negative way, whereas the short-term unemployed will show signs of adaptation. The difference on the GHQ-12 complements these findings, suggesting that the long-term unemployed show higher psychological well-being than the short-term unemployed. In table 1, we can also find the results of the comparison in employment commitment and job-seeking behavior. Here again, the results corroborate our hypothesis. The long-term unemployed score significantly lower for employment commitment, and especially job-seeking behavior, compared to the short-term unemployed.

Table 2 shows the results of a further comparison of both groups regarding their GHQ-12 scores, in order to complete their profile. Especially the percentage scoring above the cut-off point of the GHQ-12 is relevant here. Among the short-term unemployed, no less than 45% score above this cut-off point. This means that their psychological well-being is problematically low. Among the long-term unemployed, 'only' 26% score above this cut-off point, a statistically significant difference. Table 2 contains some additional information, since it also allows us to compare the results of the unemployed with results of a sample of working respondents in Flanders (Belgium). In another survey, data were gathered regarding e.g. psychological well-being of employed respondents (De Witte, 2005), using the GHQ-12. These working respondents (n = 323) were all low skilled (blue collar or lower level white collar) workers, which allows us to compare their scores with those of the unemployed.

Table 1. Differences between the short-term and long-term unemployed

	Short-term unemployed	Long-term unemployed	F	Eta
<i>Experience of unemployment (1)</i>				
Negative experience	3,2 (510; 2,4)	2,4 (192; 2,2)	16,4***	0,15
Positive experience	5,5 (506; 2,3)	7,3 (186; 2,2)	79,8***	0,32
Financial problems	5,9 (549; 3,6)	4,6 (193; 3,9)	16,5***	0,15
GHQ-12 (2)	12,7 (537; 3,2)	10,6 (194; 5,9)	16,1***	0,15
<i>Employment commitment (1)</i>				
	5,4 (548; 2,1)	4,3 (191; 2,3)	32,8***	0,21
<i>Intensity of job-seeking behavior (1)</i>				
	4,6 (542; 2,1)	1,7 (194; 1,7)	297,3***	0,54

(1) 11-point scale. A higher score indicates higher agreement with the content of the scale. The number of respondents and the SD are mentioned between brackets.

(2) 36-point scale. A higher score indicates *lower* psychological well-being.

*: $p \leq .05$; **: $p \leq .01$; ***: $p \leq .001$

Table 2. Comparison of the scores on the GHQ-12 of the short versus long-term unemployed and a sample of employed workers in Flanders

	Short-term unemployed (a)	Long-term unemployed (b)	Employed (c)	t-value or χ^2 (2)	
				Difference between (a) & (c)	Difference between (b) & (c)
GHQ-12 (1)	12,7 (537; 3,2)	10,6 (194; 5,9)	10,8 (323; 5,0)	6,79***	0,41 ^{n.s.}
Score above the critical value of the GHQ-12 (%)	45,3	26,3	31,5	15,72***	1,62 ^{n.s.}

(1) 36-point scale. A higher score indicates *lower* psychological well-being. The number of respondents and the SD are mentioned between brackets.

(2) The score on the GHQ-12 (First row) was tested via a t-test; the percentage scoring above the critical value via a χ^2 -test.

*** $p \leq .001$; ^{n.s.}: not significant

The results in table 2 first of all show that the psychological well-being of the short-term unemployed is significantly lower than that of the employed. Also the percentage of those scoring above the cut-off value of the GHQ-12 is significantly higher for the short-term unemployed compared to the employed (respectively 45% versus 31%). The GHQ-12 scores and the percentage scoring above the cut-off value of the long-term unemployed do not differ significantly from those of the employed. The scores between the long-term and the short-term unemployed do differ statistically, however, as mentioned above. This seems to suggest that the long-term unemployed 'restored' their well-being at a level typical for employed individuals.

Independent effect of unemployment duration?

Table 3 displays the results of an analysis of the effect of the duration of unemployment after controlling for demographic variables, such as age and level of education. By means of a multiple classification analysis, the means of the short versus long-term unemployed were recalculated, after statistically extracting the impact of all other demographic variables. These means are almost identical to those listed in table 1. As a consequence, we do not display them in table 3, but only mention the standardized regression coefficients and the multiple regression coefficients of these analyses.

The results in table 3 show that the differences in the negative experience of unemployment are only related to the duration of unemployment. The long-term unemployed experience their unemployment in a less negative way. The positive experience of unemployment is largely determined

by the combination of gender and family: women with children report more positive aspects than other groups. We however also find an autonomous effect of the duration of unemployment: the long-term unemployed experience their unemployment in a more positive way. All demographic variables contribute to the experience of financial hardship. The most important variables are gender (in combination with family), family income and duration of unemployment. Again, the long-term unemployed show less financial problems compared to the short-term unemployed. Psychological well-being (as operationalized by the GHQ-12) is only associated with two variables: gender (in combination with family) and unemployment duration. The short-term unemployed display a lower level of well-being than the long-term unemployed. Employment commitment is associated with three variables: unemployment duration, gender (combined with family) and level of education. The long-term unemployed score lower on employment commitment. This is also true for the more highly educated and for women with a working partner. Job-seeking behavior is associated with unemployment duration and gender (in combination with family). This time, duration is by far the most important variable: the long-term unemployed score lower on job-seeking intensity. The same is true for women with children. We can thus conclude that the difference between the short and long-term unemployed is not due to their different composition regarding demographic variables. Duration has an independent 'impact' on all variables discussed, after controlling for relevant demographic variables such as age, gender and level of education.

Table 3. Analysis of the independent impact of short versus long-term unemployment after controlling for demographic variables (results of a multiple classification analysis after performing an analysis of variance) (1)

	Negative experience	Positive experience	Financial problems	GHQ-12	Employ. commitment	Intensity of job-seeking
Short versus long-term unemployed	0,14***	0,21***	0,15***	0,13**	0,16***	0,46***
Age	0,08	0,03	0,11*	0,08	0,07	0,03
Level of education	0,07	0,06	0,10*	0,08	0,13**	0,04
Gender and family situation	0,07	0,28***	0,21***	0,15*	0,14*	0,19***
Income of family	0,09	0,07	0,20***	0,08	0,11	0,03
R	0,22	0,43	0,41	0,27	0,31	0,58
R ²	0,05	0,19	0,17	0,07	0,10	0,34

(1) Standardized β -coefficients*: $p \leq .05$; **: $p \leq .01$; ***: $p \leq .001$ *Adaptation process or selection effect?*

The differences between the short and long-term unemployed could be due to an adaptation process, as outlined in the introduction of this chapter. The short-term unemployed experience more problems with being unemployed, and exhibit a lower level of psychological well-being. This *could* suggest that the long-term unemployed adapted to their situation and regained a higher level of psychological well-being as unemployment continued. The adaptation hypothesis is further supported by the more positive unemployment experience of the long-term unemployed, as well as by their slightly lower employment commitment. Finally, the long-term unemployed are also less intensively looking for jobs, which also seem to fit the adaptation hypothesis.

Our cross-sectional design does however not allow testing this process. The differences between both groups could also be due to a selection process, in which those with e.g. a lower employment commitment or lower job-seeking behavior remain unemployed. In order to find some indications for adaptation (or selection), we finally compare both groups regarding the two retrospective questions on the evolution in (a) the experience of

unemployment and (b) job-seeking behavior. These results are shown in table 4.

Both groups first of all differ significantly regarding the evolution of the experience of unemployment. About one fifth of both groups state that they never experienced a difficult period. The absence of a difference between both groups suggests an adaptation process. If selection had taken place, the amount of respondents without problems should have been larger among the long-term unemployed. Unemployed individuals who do not experience problems when unemployed, are probably not intensively looking for work, and may remain unemployed for a longer while, thus increasing the amount of respondents who show this type of reaction among the category of the long-term unemployed. The results in table 4 also show that most long-term unemployed experienced their most difficult period in the past. Their most difficult period is 'over the hump'. They felt bad during the first year or after that first year. Among the short-term unemployed, a considerable amount of respondents state that 'all periods are equally difficult' thus far. This seems obvious, as the duration of their unemployment spell is still rather limited. They are probably in the midst of experiencing problems. Taken together, our results are indicative for adaptation, rather than selection.

Table 4. Evolution of experience and job-seeking behavior (in %)

	Short-term unemployed	Long-term unemployed	χ^2	Cramer's V
<i>Most difficult period</i>				
< 3 months	22,0	28,7	177,0***	0,49
3 - 12 months	29,2	18,0		
After one year	0,0	25,1		
All period equally difficult	27,8	6,7		
No such period	21,1	21,5		
<i>Evolution in job-seeking behavior</i>				
More than before	20,0	20,5	39,1***	0,23
No change ('just as much')	53,4	30,3		
Less than before	26,6	49,2		

***: $p \leq .001$

The results on the evolution in job-seeking behavior are even easier to interpret. About half of the short-term unemployed state that they are looking as intense as always ('no change'). About half of the long-term unemployed,

however, state that they are looking less intensively for jobs than before. A large proportion of the long-term unemployed thus state that their job seeking behavior is decreasing. This seems to suggest that they reduce their

application behavior because of the duration of their unemployment. They are most probably giving up hope, which reduces their motivation to apply for jobs. These results indicate an adaptation process, rather than a selection effect.

Discussion

A review of the literature suggests that an adaptation process takes place among the long-term unemployed (De Witte, 1993). The psychological well-being of the unemployed decreases at the beginning of their unemployment, to stabilize at a lower level after a certain time. This stabilization is due to an adaptation process, in which the unemployed decrease their job search and lower their employment commitment. In this cross-sectional study short-term and long-term unemployed in Flanders (Belgium) are compared on psychological well-being, the experience of unemployment, employment commitment and job search behavior. The results are controlled for age, educational level, gender (in combination with family situation) and family income. The hypothesis that the long-term unemployed will be adapted to their situation was confirmed. The short-term unemployed have more negative feelings about their unemployment and experience more psychological distress. The long-term unemployed more often than the short-term unemployed state that being unemployed also has a positive side. The short-term unemployed are more strongly committed to employment and apply more often for a job.

The differences between short-term and long-term unemployed can be caused by two processes: selection versus causation (Kokko, Pulkkinen & Puustinen, 2000). Selection implies that the long-term unemployed remain unemployed because of e.g. positive feelings towards

unemployment and low employment commitment. Causation suggests that an adaptation process took place, in which the unemployed over time adapt to unemployment. The results of some retrospective questions, in which the respondents had to compare their actual behaviors and feelings with those in the past, suggest that an adaptation process took place. Most long-term unemployed experienced their most difficult moment in the past, and more often applied for jobs in the first part of their unemployment.

The results of this study have some implications for practice. One could argue that the long-term unemployed risk ending up in a *vicious circle* (De Witte, 1993). For many, long-term unemployment seems to cause a decrease of their psychological well-being. By withdrawing from the labor market, they try to adapt to this difficult situation. Adaptation however risks lengthening their unemployment duration, because the adaptation process reduces the probability to find new employment. This is due to e.g. their lowered employment commitment and – especially – their reduced job-seeking behavior. This might ‘lock’ the long-term unemployed in a situation that is associated with limited opportunities and a lower level of psychological well-being. Research however suggests that finding a new job has the capacity to restore the well-being of the unemployed (Murphy & Athanasou, 1999). The probability to find new employment however decreases due to the adaptation process, which explains why the long-term unemployed run the risk to get trapped in a vicious circle. All this suggests that a *preventive policy* is preferable to a policy that sanctions the unemployed on the basis of the length of their unemployment. The unemployed need to be integrated into the labor market *before* they lose heart and *before* they learn to adjust to their situation.

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