

# Unemployment and mental health in well- and poorly-educated school-leavers

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## 1 Unemployment and mental health

### 1.1 INTRODUCTION

The first studies dealing with the impact of unemployment on mental health were conducted more than half a century ago, during the Great Depression. The most elaborated and famous study was carried out in the early thirties by Jahoda, Lazarsfeld and Zeisel in a small Austrian town called Marienthal.<sup>1</sup> The closure of the local textile factory left the vast majority of the families from that town with an unemployed wage earner. The descriptions of these unemployed and their families have become classical ever since. Just before the Second World War, Eisenberg and Lazarsfeld reviewed 112 studies on the psychological effects of unemployment.<sup>2</sup> The authors discussed not only how unemployment affected the individual's mental health and personality, but also his or her socio-political attitudes, and the families and children of the unemployed.

A major problem with the studies carried out in the thirties involves the interplay of unemployment and poverty. Besides, most pre-war studies do not meet modern methodological and statistical standards. Nevertheless, the basic findings from these early investigations have more or less been confirmed by recent studies, particularly since the middle of the seventies, when a second wave of psychological unemployment research could be observed. Since that time, the number of studies doubled about every five years or so. Up to this moment approximately one hundred post-war studies on unemployment and mental health have been published.

What kind of conclusions can be drawn from these modern studies on the consequences of unemployment, particularly as far as mental health is concerned? We will summarize the results only briefly, a more detailed review is presented elsewhere.<sup>3</sup>

First of all it has been shown quite unambiguously that unemployment causes psychological distress, rather than the other way around. In several recently conducted investigations sophisticated longitudinal research designs are employed which permit conclusions about the direction of causality. Particularly, studies carried out by the leading research teams led by Peter Warr in Great Britain and by Norman Feather in Australia have clearly shown that unemployment deteriorates mental health.<sup>4</sup>

Secondly, mental health improves after re-employment. Those who succeed in getting regular jobs show an improvement in mental health, whereas the reverse occurs in the chronically unemployed. Sometimes a small negative but temporal after-effect is observed.<sup>5</sup> It is remarkable that attending job schemes, like the British Youth Opportunities Programme, only temporarily alleviates the detrimental psychological consequences of unemployment. The level of mental health of ex-trainees who are again unemployed decreases rapidly.<sup>6</sup>

Thirdly, no linear relationship exists between the length of the unemployment period and the level of mental health. For example, Warr and Jackson showed that the mental health of short-term unemployed workers declined more strongly than that of long-term unemployed workers. They suggest that there is a *plateau* of ill health, which is reached after about 1½

years. Then an adaptive response sets in, resulting in a stable or even a slightly improved level of mental health.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, a number of risk factors has been identified which increase the negative impact of unemployment. The five most prominent risk factors are: (1) financial strain, (2) strong employment commitment, (3) negative non-work attitude, (4) lack of social support, and (5) lack of self-esteem. Unemployed people who are in financial trouble, who have been highly committed to their jobs, who hold strong negative attitudes towards non-work and being unemployed, who are socially isolated, and who experience a weak sense of self-esteem are particularly vulnerable to negative consequences of unemployment.

Although these four conclusions look rather impressive at first glance, at least three critical remarks have to be made. The criticisms pertain to the absence of theoretical frameworks in most studies, the weakness of the observed relationship between employment status and mental health, and last but not least the lack of generalizability of research findings, the latter particularly with respect to level of education. These criticisms, which serve at the same time as starting points for our investigation, are elaborated on in the remaining part of this section.

## 1.2 EMPLOYMENT STATUS AND MENTAL HEALTH: A THEORETICAL MODEL

A firm theoretical body is lacking in most studies on the effect of unemployment on mental health.<sup>8</sup> Typically, single concepts are taken from a general theoretical framework and are used as instant tools to justify a priori choices or post hoc explanations. Only rarely is an attempt made to develop a consistent theoretical framework that is tested empirically. In this article such a conceptual framework is developed and empirically tested. Since no volume on 'the' psychology of unemployment has been written yet, we cannot draw upon a well established psychological theory about the effects of unemployment. Accordingly, we have to put the available bits and pieces together in trying to develop our own theoretical approach, guiding our investigations. Basically, this approach describes two ways in which employment status (employed/unemployed) can affect mental health, directly and indirectly (Figure 1).

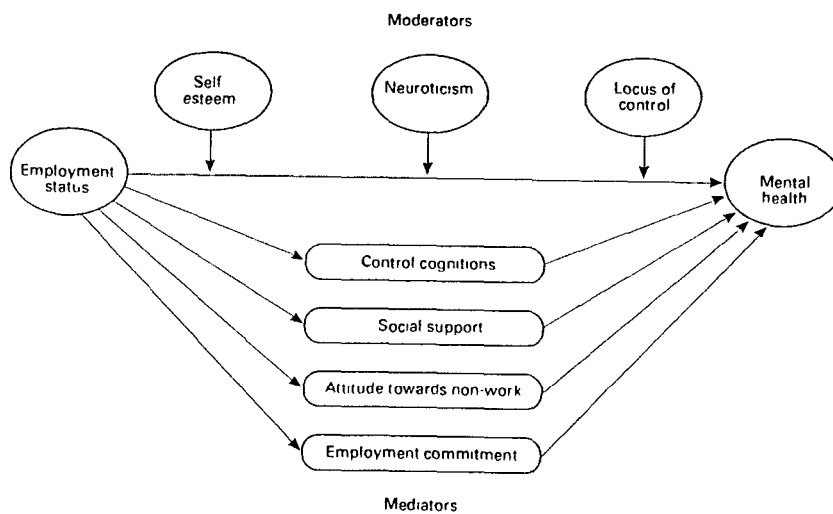


Figure 1 The theoretical model

In line with Baron and Kenny, a sharp distinction has been made between moderator and mediating variables.<sup>9</sup> The moderator variables are conceived as relatively stable personality dispositions that are not influenced by the individual's current employment status. It is hypothesised that these personality characteristics have an impact on the *relation* between employment status and mental health. The mediator variables, on the other hand, are supposed to be influenced by the individual's employment status. In their turn, these mediators influence the individual's level of mental health. Consequently, it is believed that unemployment has a direct but moderated impact, as well as an indirect (mediated) effect on the individual's level of mental health.

The seven risk factors pictured in Figure 1 have been inferred from the literature and can be classified in either of these two categories. There is substantial evidence that certain personality dispositions can be considered as vulnerability factors. For instance, unemployed individuals with lower self-esteem are more susceptible to psychological distress than those with higher levels of self-esteem.<sup>10</sup> The same applies for high and low levels of neuroticism or emotional instability.<sup>11</sup> Finally, an external locus of control has been identified as a vulnerability factor. The expectation that things happening in one's life are influenced by outside forces (external locus of control) as opposed to one's own actions (internal locus of control) is associated with poor mental health in unemployed individuals.<sup>12</sup>

As far as the mediating variables are concerned, it is hypothesized that unemployment reduces the individual's perceived control over the situation and is accompanied by social isolation.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, after job loss the individual's non-work orientation is strengthened and employment commitment decreases.<sup>14</sup> Ullah and Banks referred to this adaptive response as 'labour market withdrawal'.<sup>15</sup> From the general psychological literature we know that uncontrollability and lack of social support are associated with poor mental health.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, it has been observed in unemployed youngsters that a strong valence of employment is positively related to psychological distress.<sup>17</sup> Putting these research findings together it is assumed that control cognitions, social support and certain work values (in this case, the attitude towards non-work and employment commitment) play a mediating role between employment status and mental health.

### 1.3 EMPLOYMENT STATUS AND MENTAL HEALTH: THE STRENGTH OF THEIR RELATIONSHIP

In most studies the strength of the relationship between employment status (i.e. employed or unemployed) and mental health is not explicitly indicated but has to be inferred from the data. Fryer and Payne calculated from a number of studies that only about 10 to 15% of the variance in mental health is explained by employment status.<sup>18</sup> In other words, the relationship between employment status and mental health is rather weak. Moreover, it is consistently found that between 10 and 15% of the unemployed people show an *improvement* in mental health after being sacked. This is not very surprising, since many people work under bad conditions and in stressful jobs. Fletcher and Payne conclude from a literature review that 10% to 15% of British workers show physical or mental symptoms which call for immediate professional help.<sup>19</sup> From this perspective, unemployment might be experienced as a relief rather than a strain, at least in the beginning. It is probably no coincidence that the proportion of workers with serious mental or physical symptoms is in the same range as the proportion of unemployed individuals whose health has improved.

It is the contention of this article to estimate the strength of the relationship between employment status and mental health by employing a dynamic equilibrium model.<sup>20</sup> This model assumes that each person has his or her 'normal' level of mental health. This so-called

equilibrium level may change as a result of exogenous forces, like unemployment. In other words: exposure to negative life events cause symptom levels to deviate from their characteristic 'normal' equilibrium levels. These changes are likely to be temporary; after a certain period the symptoms return to their 'normal' levels. As a matter of fact, the dynamic equilibrium model breaks down the 'normal' level of mental health into two components: a stable component which remains unchanged in time, and a changing component which is affected by negative life events such as unemployment. The strength between employment status and mental health can be estimated quite accurately by this model since the contaminating influence of the stable symptom level on current mental health is eliminated.

#### 1.4 UNEMPLOYMENT, MENTAL HEALTH AND LEVEL OF EDUCATION

Most unemployment research is highly specific in nature. The bulk of the studies have been conducted among white, married, male, and blue collar workers. The impact on other groups like ethnic minorities, single persons, women, and well-educated individuals (e.g. professionals) has hardly been investigated. Our research will concentrate on the relationship between level of education and impact of unemployment among youngsters. First we will pay attention to the less qualified school-leavers who have been extensively studied. Considering the relatively poor attention given to a number of categories mentioned above, the main contribution of this study, however, will be that we concentrate on well-educated unemployed school-leavers. It will be made clear that the generalizability of research findings is limited by showing that the impact of unemployment on these two groups differs from the results obtained in blue collar adult samples.

The poorly-educated leave school at a relative young age of about age 16, during their adolescence. This developmental phase is accompanied by many psychological and social stresses that make these young people more vulnerable to negative consequences of unemployment. Getting a job is considered to be a crucial part of social integration and identity formation.<sup>21</sup> It is therefore not surprising that many empirical studies show that employment has a beneficial effect on psychological functioning.<sup>22</sup> That getting a job does not necessarily lead to an improvement of mental health was shown by Feather and O'Brien in a number of studies among Australian school-leavers.<sup>23</sup> They conclude that low qualified jobs and bad working conditions can counteract the potentially beneficial effects of employment, particularly among the less qualified school-leavers. The above-mentioned studies also indicate that unemployment does *not* lead to poor mental health – as is the case in adults – but merely to stagnation in normal psychological growth. Or as Gurney stated:

*Unemployment has the effect of inhibiting development in school-leavers, rather than of inflicting trauma as is sometimes popularly supposed*<sup>24</sup>

In several other studies, however, a negative impact of unemployment was observed on the mental health of young people.<sup>25</sup>

There has been quite a lot of speculation about the impact of unemployment on well-educated individuals. These speculations can be summarized in two alternative hypotheses. According to the first hypothesis, they are particularly vulnerable to unemployment stress. It is believed that the well-educated unemployed experience considerable status inconsistency, which is likely to result in poor mental health. This hypothesis has been phrased by the American pioneer of psychological unemployment research Bakke as: 'The higher the climb, the harder the fall'.<sup>26</sup> There is some rather weak and out-dated empirical evidence for this

assumption<sup>27</sup> According to the alternative hypothesis, the well-educated can cope rather well with their unemployment, since they can draw upon considerable educational resources. In this view the well-educated unemployed are regarded as extraordinarily 'good copers'. Consequently, unemployment will have hardly any negative effect on their level of mental health. This alternative assumption is also supported to a limited degree by empirical findings.<sup>28</sup> Accordingly, it is unclear from the literature to what extent the mental health of well-educated individuals is affected by involuntary unemployment

## 1.5 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This article presents the results of two studies, employing quite specific and homogeneous samples, well- and poorly-educated school-leavers. The main purpose is to evaluate whether or not the effect of unemployment on mental health differs in relation to the individual's level of education. The first study deals with graduated school-leavers. Since the literature about unemployment among the well-educated is not conclusive, we can only speculate about the impact of unemployment on the mental health of graduated school-leavers. The second and similar study examines a group of poorly qualified and somewhat younger school-leavers. The literature provides a clearer picture for this group. Accordingly, we hypothesize that unemployment in poorly qualified school-leavers leads to an increase, or at least a stagnation in symptom levels, whereas employment leads to an improvement in mental health.

More specifically, the following three research questions will be answered:

1. Is the relationship between employment status and mental health moderated and mediated as described in Figure 1?
2. What is the strength of the relationship between employment status and mental health?
3. Does the relationship between employment status and mental health differ depending on level of education?

## 2 Method

In this section a brief description is presented of the samples, the procedure, and the measurement instruments. The reader is referred to Schaufeli and to Van der Heijden and Schaufeli for more detailed information concerning the graduated and the less qualified sample, respectively.<sup>29</sup>

### 2.1 SAMPLES AND PROCEDURE

Table 1 summarizes the main features of both studies, which have been conducted in the two most northern provinces of The Netherlands (Groningen and Friesland). Both samples completed the first questionnaire shortly before their final exams. The well-educated school-leavers (study 1) did so in the spring of 1984, their less qualified fellows (study 2) filled out the first questionnaire in the spring of 1988. The sample of study 1 consists of students, who at T<sub>1</sub> were enrolled in schools for Higher Professional Education ('Hoger Beroeps Onderwijs'). Study 2 includes students who, at T<sub>1</sub> either followed vocational training ('Lager Beroeps Onderwijs') or were enrolled in a secondary school (MAVO).

In the graduated school-leavers study, four follow-ups (T<sub>2</sub> to T<sub>5</sub>) were conducted at regular intervals of six months. Accordingly, the graduates were followed during a two-year period, from 1984 to 1986. At the end of this period 493 graduates were still included in the study.

Table 1 Some characteristics of both studies

	Study 1	Study 2
Number of respondents	635	767
Response rate	42%	59%
Sex:		
Male	63%	49%
Female	37%	51%
Mean age	22.8 years	16.2 years
Number of follow-ups	4	1
Time interval	6 months	12 months
Response rate after:		
6 months	86%	--
12 months	85%	68%
18 months	79%	--
24 months	77%	--
Unemployed after:		
6 months	36%	--
12 months	18%	3%
18 months	13%	--
24 months	12%	--

This is a remarkably high response rate (77%), given the considerable mobility of these young professionals. In the poorly qualified school-leaver sample only a one-year follow-up (T<sub>2</sub>) was carried out, in 1989. The response rate is somewhat lower than that in the similar period in the graduated school-leavers study. Nevertheless, also in this sample no selective dropout was observed as far as the measures discussed below are concerned. As expected, the school-leavers of the second study are on the average about six years younger than the graduates of the first study. Most important, however, is the very low percentage of unemployed school-leavers in the follow-up of study 2. Only 3% (N=14) did *not* succeed in getting a job during the first year after they left school. Compared to study 1 (18%, N=96) unemployment after one year is remarkably low. Probably even more important is that almost 80% of the poorly qualified sample continued their education, as opposed to only 17% in study 1. The graduates of study 1 almost exclusively continued their education on a more theoretical level at the university. The vast majority of the poorly-educated school-leavers also continued their education on a higher level. About one-quarter of this group in study 1 reported that their decision to continue their education had been influenced decisively by the fear of not being able to find a job.

## 2.2 MEASURES

Moderating and mediating variables have been measured with multi-item questionnaires, which satisfy the appropriate psychometric standards.<sup>30</sup> For example, internal consistency coefficients (Cronbach's  $\alpha$ ) ranged from .72 to .92.

The level of mental health was measured in the well-educated group by employing the Dutch version of the Symptom Checklist-90 (SCL-90)<sup>31</sup>. However, it appeared that the 8 symptom dimensions of the SCL-90 (e.g. depression, anxiety, anger) substantially correlated with the total score ( $.59 < r < .93$ ) and that the symptom dimensions could not be validly

distinguished from each other. Therefore, starting from T<sub>3</sub> only a sub-set was administered of 17 items that constitute the psychological distress-scale of the Hopkins Symptom Checklist (HSCL) instead of the whole SCL-90.<sup>32</sup> In the second study, mental health was assessed with the 12-item version of the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12), because this measure has been validated in a similar population of poorly qualified school-leavers in Great Britain.<sup>33</sup> Besides, the wording of the GHQ items is somewhat less 'pathological' than that of the SCL-90/HSCL.

### 3 Results

The results are presented in three sections that correspond with the research questions that were posed at the end of the introduction. First the theoretical model is considered. Unfortunately, it is impossible to test this model in the less qualified sample because the number of unemployed school-leavers is too small. Secondly, the strength of the relationship between employment status and mental health is evaluated. Only in the well-educated sample can the dynamic equilibrium model be tested, because, mathematically speaking, measurements at three points in time are required at least. Given the small number of unemployed poorly-educated school-leavers, conducting a second follow-up was not judged feasible. Finally, results are presented about the nature of the relationship between unemployment and mental health in both samples.

#### 3.1 EMPLOYMENT STATUS AND MENTAL HEALTH: A THEORETICAL MODEL

Table 2 summarizes the moderator effects of the three psychological dispositions found after carrying out a moderated regression analysis.<sup>34</sup>

Table 2 Moderator effects in study 1\*

	T <sub>1</sub>	T <sub>2</sub>	T <sub>3</sub>	T <sub>4</sub>
Self-esteem	-	+	-	+
Locus of control	-	-	-	-
Neuroticism	0	0	+	+

\* Note: + = moderator effect, - = no moderator effect; 0 = not administered

Neuroticism and self-esteem do moderate the relationship between employment status and mental health in the well-educated sample. The latter only on two of the four occasions in which questions on this matter were asked, however. The locus of control plays no moderating role whatsoever.

Table 2 only indicates the *existence* of a moderator effect, but not its *nature*. In order to investigate the latter, an additional analysis is necessary. In this analysis, two approximately equally sized groups are composed, consisting of individuals with high and low levels of self-esteem or neuroticism. Within each group, the relationship between employment status and mental health is studied separately. Figure 2 displays the nature of the moderator effect of self-esteem at T<sub>2</sub>.

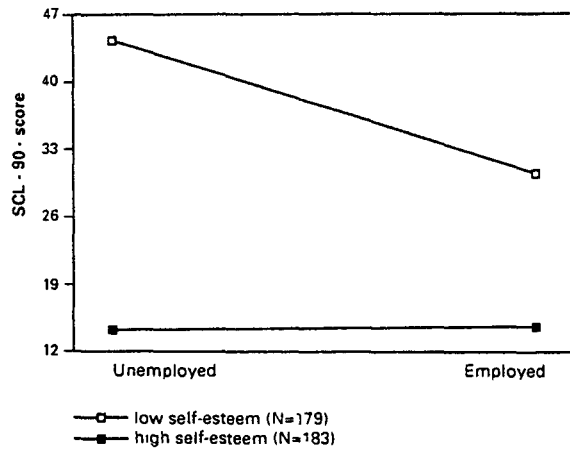


Figure 2 The stress-buffering role of self-esteem (study 1, T<sub>2</sub>)

As can be seen from the top line, well-educated unemployed individuals with low levels of self-esteem are significantly more distressed than their employed counterparts, who show a comparably low level of self-esteem ( $\beta = -.20$ ,  $p < .01$ ). The dashed line below indicates that well-educated school-leavers with high levels of self-esteem are not very distressed, irrespective of their employment status ( $\beta = .01$ , n.s.). Accordingly, Figure 2 illustrates the stress-buffering role of self-esteem. The remaining moderator effects at T<sub>3</sub> and T<sub>4</sub> displayed in Table 2, show by and large the same picture: high levels of self-esteem and a low level of neuroticism act as protective agents against unemployment stress.

Unfortunately, the results from the mediated regression analyses are rather disappointing: no mediating effects were observed in the well-educated sample.<sup>35</sup> Obviously, employment status does not have an indirect effect on mental health through changes in control cognitions, social support, non-work attitudes and employment commitment.

### 3.2 EMPLOYMENT STATUS AND MENTAL HEALTH: THE STRENGTH OF THEIR RELATIONSHIP

The dynamic equilibrium model that is employed to estimate the strength of the relationship between employment status and mental health has been tested by carrying out a longitudinal LISREL analysis. The mathematical details of this procedure have been described elsewhere.<sup>36</sup> The model was developed in several steps in one-half of the sample and was then cross-validated in the other half in order to avoid statistical artifacts, such as chance capitalization.<sup>37</sup>

In Figure 3, the observed level of mental health ( $MH_i$ ) is divided into two independent components or latent variables: a stable component ( $MH_s$ ) and a changing component ( $MH_{ci}$ ). The former is by definition stable across time and can be considered as a 'trait', whereas the latter reflects the actual 'state' level of mental health. The changing component is assumed to be influenced by the individual's current employment status ( $ES_i$ ). The numbers in Figure 3 represent proportions of explained variance.



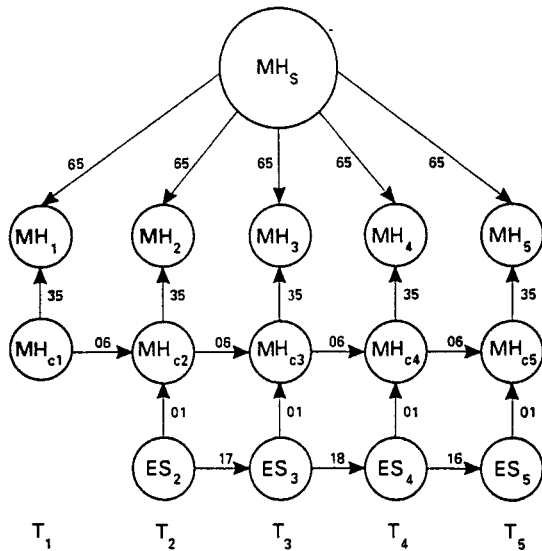


Figure 3 The relationship between employment status and mental health (study 1,  $N=360$ )

\*Note:  $MH_s$  Stable component of mental health  
 $MH_i$  Observed mental health  
 $MH_{c_i}$  Changing component of mental health  
 $ES_i$  Employment status

Unfortunately, only a minor and insignificant proportion of 1% of the variance in mental health is explained by the school-leaver's actual employment status. This is far less than the 10 to 15% which is generally found in other studies, as was indicated above. The model allows for another interesting conclusion. The observed level of mental health is mainly determined by the stable component. As a matter of fact, 65% of the variance of mental health is explained by this component against only 35% by the changing component. This means that some individuals happen to be more vulnerable to deteriorations in mental health than others, irrespective of their actual employment status.

### 3.3 UNEMPLOYMENT, MENTAL HEALTH AND LEVEL OF EDUCATION

In the poorly-educated school-leaver sample, three groups can be distinguished according to their actual employment situation at the one-year follow-up: employed ( $N=99$ ), unemployed ( $N=14$ ), and those who continued their education ( $N=392$ ). In Figure 4 the level of mental health of the three groups is pictured, as indicated by the GHQ score at  $T_1$  and  $T_2$ .

Figure 4 shows clearly that unemployment has a strong negative effect on the mental health of poorly-educated school-leavers. As expected, mental health decreases significantly for the unemployed group ( $t_{(13)}=-2.76$ ,  $p<0.05$ ), it should be noted regarding Figure 4 that increasing GHQ scores indicate poorer mental health). At the same time, getting a job or continuing education improves mental health (i.e. GHQ scores drop). The GHQ scores for those who continue their education and for employed school-leavers are quite comparable at  $T_1$  and decrease similarly and significantly ( $t_{(94)}=3.12$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) and ( $t_{(387)}=2.62$ ,  $p<0.01$ , respectively). Accordingly, both lines at the bottom of Figure 4 overlap. Statistical testing reveals a significant group effect ( $F_{(2,502)}=4.13$ ,  $p<0.01$ ). This means that the level of mental health of employed, unemployed and school-leavers who continue their education differs. Most

important, however, is the significant group x time interaction effect ( $F_{(1,502)}=4.50$ ,  $p < .001$ ). This effect indicates that unemployment in poorly-educated school-leavers leads to a deterioration in mental health, whereas employment or continuing education leads to better mental health.

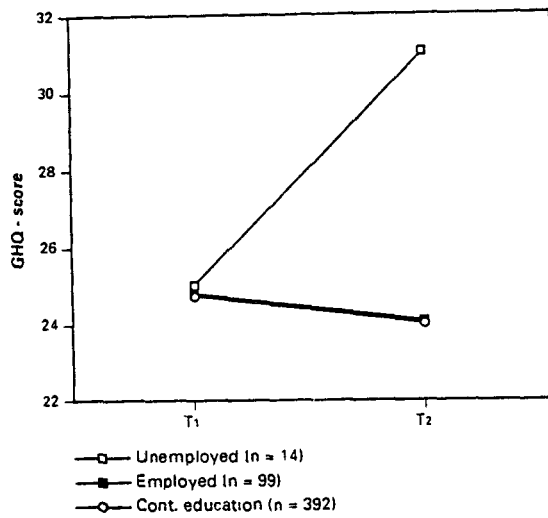


Figure 4: Employment status and mental health (study 2)

The picture in the well-educated sample is quite different. In order to make the best possible comparison with the poorly-educated sample, changes in mental health scores between T<sub>1</sub> and T<sub>3</sub> (one year follow-up) are analysed. Moreover, only well-educated school-leavers are included who have been *continuously* employed (N=147), unemployed (N=61) or studying (N=46). Figure 5 displays the mean levels of mental health of the three employment status groups at T<sub>1</sub> and T<sub>3</sub>

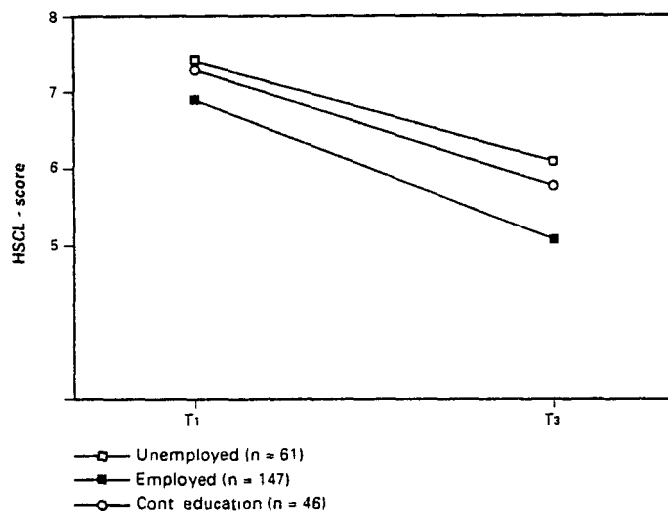


Figure 5: Employment status and mental health (study 1)

The three groups do not differ in levels of mental health ( $F(2,251)=.79$ ; n.s.). Most striking, however, is that the level of mental health of all groups improves significantly from T<sub>1</sub> to T<sub>3</sub> ( $F(1,251)=21.13$ ;  $p<.001$ ). The rate of improvement does not differ between the three groups ( $F(2,251)=.49$ , n.s.) A possible explanation for this rather surprising finding can be that the school-leavers are recovering from the stress involved in their final exams. It will be remembered that they filled in the first questionnaire shortly before their exams (as did the poorly-educated school-leavers). It can be speculated that the exam was more stressful for the well-educated than for the poorly-educated.

In conclusion: unemployment has a negative effect on the mental health of poorly-educated school-leavers, whereas well-educated school-leavers are not affected by unemployment. Quite to the contrary, it looks as if leaving school has a beneficial effect for the latter group, no matter their current employment status.

#### 4 Conclusion and discussion

This final section starts with the main conclusions of our investigations. Next, three kinds of explanations for the somewhat surprising research findings are presented, in which the particular social position of unemployed people in The Netherlands is highlighted.

##### 4.1 MAIN CONCLUSIONS

What answers can we give to the three research questions that were posed at the beginning of this article?

1. The relationship between employment status and mental health is moderated by two (of the three discussed) personality characteristics in well-educated school-leavers. A high level of self-esteem and a low level of neuroticism or emotional lability serve as protective agents against unemployment stress.

Mental health is not indirectly influenced through changes due to unemployment in perceived controllability, social support, attitude towards non-work and employment commitment.

2. Regarding well-educated school-leavers, we may conclude that the relationship between employment status and mental health is insignificant. Only 1% of the variance in mental health scores of this category is explained by their employment status.
3. Unemployment has a negative impact on the mental health of young and poorly-educated school-leavers. Getting a job or continuing the education has a positive effect on their mental health. Graduates, who are some years older when leaving school, do *not* experience any negative or positive effects of their employment status on their level of mental health. Well-educated school-leavers seem to be good copers. Apparently, the level of education (in conjunction with age) strongly influences the psychological reaction to unemployment.

Another additional conclusion can be drawn concerning the role of personality characteristics. It appeared that relatively stable psychological dispositions are essential in explaining individual differences in mental health, at least as far as the well-educated group is concerned. The relevance of these dispositions is illustrated by two types of results. Firstly, it was shown that self-esteem and neuroticism have a stress-buffering effect. Secondly, in the LISREL model the stable component proved to be essential in explaining differences in actual mental health. The importance of psychological dispositions in unemployment research has only reluctantly been recognized by some authors.<sup>38</sup>

Unfortunately, the number of unemployed poorly-educated school-leavers was very small in the one-year follow-up. For this reason no second follow-up has been planned. This small number of unemployed school-leavers influenced our study in at least three ways. First of all the theoretical model could not be empirically evaluated. Secondly, the dynamic equilibrium model could not be tested. Finally, the power of the statistical testing has been relatively weak. We can only speculate about the cause of this unexpectedly small number of unemployed poorly-educated school-leavers as compared to their well-educated fellows. The fact that the second study took place five years after the first study might play a role. Meanwhile the economy has improved and unemployment of youth under age 23 in The Netherlands has decreased dramatically from 28% in 1984 to 14% in 1989. Nevertheless, only 3% of the poorly-educated school-leavers in our sample were still unemployed after one year.

#### 4.2 THREE KINDS OF EXPLANATION

Let us once more return to the heart of the matter and try to answer the intriguing question of why unemployed Dutch professionals, contrary to their less well-educated fellows, show no impairment of their mental health. Several contextual, socio-cultural, as well as psychological explanations have to be taken into consideration. Each type of explanation will be illustrated briefly.

##### 4.2.1 Contextual explanations

Three contextual factors are quite typical for The Netherlands. First of all, unemployment benefits and social security allowances are relatively high in this country compared to other comparable countries. This applies particularly for the well-educated sample. Most unemployed graduates received *more* financial assistance than during their professional training. Consequently, serious financial problems were very rare in this group. It should be emphasised that the government has meanwhile cut social security allowances, so that the picture might look quite different now. On the other hand, the poorly-educated unemployed school-leavers generally still live with their parents. Although they get some social assistance, they are financially dependent upon their parents. Needless to say, this might create tensions within the family, as has been shown in young and less qualified unemployed Germans.<sup>39</sup>

Secondly, in The Netherlands, unpaid work as a volunteer is institutionalized and a special consent is given in order to avoid a reduction of unemployment benefits. As a result, in many work settings, as in the human services, the distinction between paid and unpaid work is blurred. Particularly well-educated unemployed work as volunteers in jobs they have been previously trained for. In the present study, about 40% of the graduated school-leavers were engaged in some kind of unpaid activity. For poorly-educated unemployed the possibilities are very limited for finding any kind of attractive unpaid work as a volunteer.<sup>40</sup>

Finally, during the past 10 to 15 years a cultural change has been taken place in The Netherlands towards what has been called a 'normalization of unemployment'. Maassen and De Goede showed that public acceptance of unemployment increased, particularly between 1980 and 1984, when unemployment rates rose drastically.<sup>41</sup> This phenomenon was specifically observed among the better educated.

These three contextual explanations suggest that the psychological effects of unemployment in The Netherlands might be somewhat less severe than in other countries. It is therefore not surprising that most English and German speaking researchers use more serious terms to describe the negative effects of unemployment in their countries than their Dutch colleagues.<sup>42</sup> This is illustrated by Spruit, who, after an extensive review of the literature, concluded that

when describing the effects of unemployment 'Dutch researchers use fewer severe terms than their English-speaking and German colleagues'<sup>43</sup> The contextual explanations also suggest that it is likely that poorly-educated unemployed experience more adverse effects than their well-educated counterparts Because of the institutionalisation of unpaid work in combination with relatively favorable financial arrangements, and a growing public acceptance of unemployment, the well-educated Dutch unemployed are essentially able to satisfy the latent functions of employment According to Jahoda employment offers temporal structure, social contacts, a sense of purpose, activity, social status and identity.<sup>44</sup> Since nobody among the poorly-educated school-leavers is engaged in any purposeful unpaid activity, they are not able to satisfy the latent functions of employment. Consequently, they will suffer more from being jobless than their more educated fellows who work in unpaid jobs.

#### 4.2.2 Socio-cultural explanations

It can be argued that well-educated school-leavers occupy a socially and culturally privileged position They have adequate information available about alternatives for paid work, like training programmes or unpaid activities, they have learned to spend their leisure time in a useful and satisfying way, they generally have broad cultural interests, and so on. For the poorly-educated unemployed, there is, subjectively speaking, simply no acceptable alternative for paid work.<sup>45</sup> Because of this lack of alternatives, unemployment is particularly stressful for this group Employment, on the other hand, leads to 'normal' psychological growth and increases mental health in this relatively young group

#### 4.2.3 Psychological explanations

Finally, two psychological explanations can be offered for the fact that the mental health of the poorly-educated school-leavers is negatively affected by unemployment, whereas that of their well-educated fellows is not Firstly, it is well-known that the level of education is positively related to a number of favorable personality characteristics, like self-esteem.<sup>46</sup> As we have seen, such dispositions play a stress-buffering role. Accordingly, it can be expected that the higher the education, the better the psychological coping potential.

Secondly, from about one hundred additional depth interviews, we know that the unemployed graduated school-leavers behave in what Fryer and Payne called a pro-active manner.<sup>47</sup> That is to say, they act upon their unemployment situation in ways which reveal opportunities in valued directions, rather than becoming apathetic or merely resigned to it. In short: the well-educated unemployed are active agents, not passive victims. They are constantly looking for alternatives for paid work instead of hanging around and doing nothing. As mentioned above, some 40% of the well-educated unemployed worked in unpaid jobs, ranging from a couple of hours in duration to a full-time working week But also those who were not engaged in such unpaid activities were busy in some way or another. The picture among the poorly-educated unemployed looks quite different Although they have not been interviewed additionally, one gets the impression from the questionnaires that they are overwhelmed by boredom and inactivity

In conclusion as expected, the mental health of the poorly-educated school-leavers is impaired by their unemployment experience. The well-educated unemployed are jobless, but by no means workless In their active search for meaningful alternatives to paid work, they can draw upon educational and psychological resources, and they are supported by a beneficial social security system and a positive social climate

## Notes

1. Jahoda, Lazarsfeld and Zeisel, 1933.
2. Eisenberg and Lazarsfeld, 1938
3. Schaufeli, 1988, pp 17-53.
4. Warr, Jackson & Banks 1988; Feather, 1989 Similar conclusions have been drawn from other longitudinal investigations in Britain (Donnovan, et al 1986), Australia (Patton & Noller, 1984; Tiggemann & Winefield, 1980, 1984, Winefield & Tiggemann, 1985, 1989), Israel (Shamir, 1986), the German Federal Republic (Schwefel 1986, for a review), Denmark (Iversen & Sabroe, 1988), Finland (Lahelma, 1989), Sweden (Hammerstrom, Janlert & Theorell, 1988), the United States (Dooley, Catelano & Brownell, 1986; Ensminger & Celantano, 1988) and The Netherlands (Jaspers & Heesink, 1985; Van der Horst, 1988; Verkleij, 1988)
5. Verkleij, 1988, pp 103-108.
6. Stafford, 1982, pp 16-17.
7. Warr and Jackson, 1985, pp. 800-802.
8. Schaufeli, 1986, p 69
9. Baron and Kenny, 1986, p 1173
10. Lunn, Sandifer and Stein, 1985, pp 12-15; Shamir, 1986, pp 67-69.
11. Kirchler, 1985, pp 17-18; Payne, 1987, pp 12-15; Payne, 1988, pp. 129-131
12. Winefield and Tiggemann, 1985, pp. 235-236; Feather and O'Brien, 1986, pp. 467-473
13. Furnham, 1982, pp 342-344 and Tazelaar and Sprengers, 1984, pp 63-68
14. Iversen and Sabroe, 1988, pp. 145-146 and Warr, Jackson and Banks, 1988, p 56
15. Ullah and Banks, 1985, pp 54-56
16. Steptoe and Appels, 1990, pp. 145-163 and Turner, 1983, pp 134-144
17. Stafford, Jackson and Banks, 1980, pp. 295-298
18. Fryer and Payne, 1986, pp 283-289.
19. Fletcher and Payne, 1980, pp. 21-23.
20. Ormel and Schaufeli, 1991
21. Matland-Edwards, et al , 1981, pp. 28-38 and Erikson, 1968, pp 32-68.
22. Donovan et al , 1986, pp 69-72; Gurney, 1980a, pp 208-210 and 1980b, pp 83 and 85-89; Jaspers & Heesink, 1985, pp 11-13; Tiggemann & Winefield, 1980, pp 273-275 and 1984, pp 37-39; Winefield & Tiggemann, 1985, pp 232-236 and 1989, pp 81-83
23. Feather and O'Brien, 1986
24. Gurney, 1980a, p. 212
25. Hammerstrom, Janlert and Theorell, 1988, pp 1026-1032; Patton and Noller, 1984, pp 404-407; Warr, Jackson and Banks, 1988; Wilhelm-Reiss, 1980, pp 82-112
26. Bakke, 1940, p 232
27. Goodchilds and Smith, 1963, p 289; Vagt and Stavemann, 1980, pp 515-516
28. Little, 1967, pp 268-270; Hepworth, 1980, pp 141-145 and Fineman, 1983, pp 121-134
29. Schaufeli, 1988, pp. 104-109 and Van der Heijden and Schaufeli, 1991, pp 86-87
30. See Schaufeli, 1988, pp 115-142
31. Arrindell and Ettema, 1986
32. Luteijn, et al , 1984
33. Banks, et al , 1980
34. Cleary and Kessler, 1982
35. Regarding this type of analysis, see Judd and Kenny, 1981
36. Ormel and Schaufeli, 1991, pp 289-291
37. Schaufeli, 1988, pp 169-190
38. Kirchler, 1985, pp 137-176; Payne, 1987, pp 12-15 and 1988, pp 129-131; Shamir, 1986, pp 67-69
39. Schober, 1978, pp 207-210

- 40 Engbersen, 1990, pp 100-106
- 41 Maassen and de Goede, 1987, pp 106-108
- 42 Spruij, 1983, pp 137-176; Jaspers and Heesink, 1985, pp 8 and 11-13; Verkleij, 1988, pp 95-127; Van der Horst, 1988, pp 116-201 and Miltenburgh and Woldringh, 1989, pp 263-381.
- 43 Spruit, 1983, p 63
- 44. Jahoda, 1982, pp 65-89
- 45 Ten Have and Jehoel-Gijsbers, 1983, pp 91-114
- 46 Pukey, 1970, pp 182-205
- 47 Fryer and Payne, 1984

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