STRESS AND MANAGERIAL UNEMPLOYMENT

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This article reports on an investigation of the level of stress experienced by a group of unemployed managers. Stress is a phenomenon which pervades our daily lives, and generally represents a productive state provided it remains within individual threshold levels. Beyond these levels it assumes a psychological response state characterised by a high and persistent level of experienced anxiety. There is evidence to suggest that the high anxiety states which characterise stress may in time bring about disease [Levi, 1971]. While stress is a consequence of modern-day living specific stressors have and can be identified as major contributors to elevated levels of anxiety/tension. Here we might consider major events in the individuals life space such as bereavement, retirement and even promotion. Unemployment is also such an event.

Stress and Unemployment

There is a growing research literature implicating unemployment with reduced standards of mental health. At the aggregate level downturns in the business cycle are associated with elevated levels of selected health indices, such as suicide and mental health admissions [Brenner, 1973; 1979; 1980; Dooley and Catalano, 1980]. Quantitatively oriented studies have used measures of self esteem, life satisfaction, depression and minor psychiatric morbidity to demonstrate impairment of psychological functioning for the unemployed [Hartley, 1980; Warr, 1979; Kasl, Gore and Cobb, 1975; Jackson and Banks, 1980]. It should not be assumed that it is unemployment per se which precipitates change in the individual, as the concomitants of unemployment may exercise an equally powerful effect. Concomitants which should be noted include changes in financial state, changes in activity levels, and in certainty and alterations in patterns of social interaction.

Unemployment may be a confusing and disturbing period for the manager as he adjusts to several changes in the use of time and resources. Work and work-related activities may have previously involved extensive time commitments [Parker, 1971] particularly for managers [Pahl and Pahl, 1971], yet in unemployment these activities are no longer available. McGann and Kenny (1977) found that many managers experiencing the stigma of unemployment voluntarily withdraw from certain social rela-

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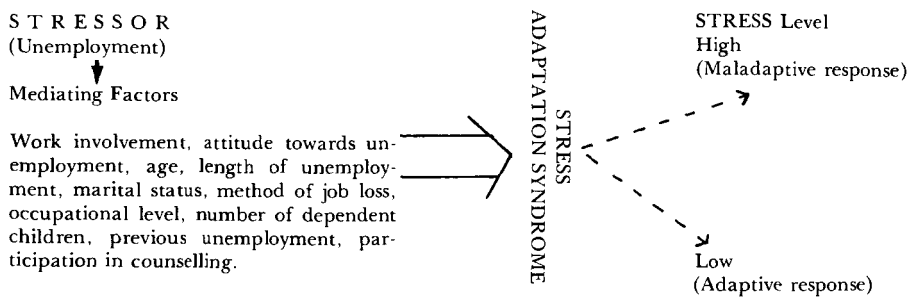
tionships, especially social life outside the family. This results in tremendous pressure on the family, which may already be under severe strain, and deprives the unemployed manager of potential support from work colleagues. Other changes in the individual arising from employment deprivation and its concomitants include changes in morale, self concept and stress levels.

We noted earlier that it is commonly reported that unemployment is associated with stress and anxiety. For example, in reviewing the literature of the 1930's, Eisenberg and Lazarsfeld (1938) note:

> "When all efforts fail the individual becomes pessimistic, anxious and suffers active distress."

The emotional "felt state" of anxiety has been described by Lewis (1967) as an emotion of extremely unpleasant character, having the subjective quality of alarm fear and trepidation. Fineman (1978) points out that the present position places the concept of stress firmly in terms of what a person is feeling and experiencing, which can be reflected in self descriptions such as being "very unhappy", "losing sleep through worry", "feeling depressed", "overwhelmed" and "worthless". Seyles position is that stress is basic to all adaptive reactions. Moreover, the same stressor that has adaptive consequences in one case may have maladaptive results in another. The adapted paradigm of stress utilised in the research reported is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: *A General Paradigm of Stress Applied to the Unemployment Situation*



In order to understand variations in the impact of unemployment it is important that we take account of certain background characteristics of a sample. Such details are necessary because of their potential function as plausible interpretations of the processes involved in unemployment. Particular variables selected for investigation were as follows: age, length of unemployment, work involvement and personality.

Age: An individual's age has long been mooted as a major moderator of the psychological effects of unemployment. Daniel (1975) avows that age is critical to the experience of unemployment while Hepworth (1979) denies it. Warr (1970) and Warr and Lovatt (1975) have found particularly low scores on their three measures of subjective well-being in redundant steel workers.

Length of Unemployment: The length of unemployment has frequently been noted as a prime variable which affects the experience of unemployment. The experience may change over time in either of two ways. Firstly, the psychological "stage" at which the individual is at, may influence his perceptions and attitudes towards unemployment [Beer and Swaffin Smith, 1976]. Secondly, there are changes in the environment over time. With increasing length of unemployment, financial problems become more pressing, family tensions and boredom may increase and self-esteem may decline [Jahoda et al, 1971].

Work Involvement: It has been widely suggested that the experience of unemployment needs to be understood in terms of the value of the job which has been lost. As an occupational group, managers and professionals are likely to suffer from the loss of work since they may have derived considerable satisfaction from both the instrumental and expressive elements of their particular job. However, it would seem to be necessary to seek explanations beyond the level of the occupational group; there may be differences amongst managers in the personal satisfaction derived from work. Fineman (1978) found that high stress associated with unemployment occurred when there was "a prior high personal involvement in the job and a belief in one's personal competence in that job." By contrast, low stress occurred where personal involvement in their previous job was low.

Personality: Little consideration seems to have been given to measuring personality in studies of unemployed individuals. The early work by Komarovsky (1940) was concerned with the disintegration of personality as a consequence of unemployment rather than measuring personality as such. However, some personality *variables* have been considered as particularly influential in stress-related responses. One of these is trait anxiety, which refers to an habitual predisposition to be anxious in a wide variety of situations. A personality variable, long neglected in the opinion of the authors, is that of attitude and its influence on the individuals experience of unemployment. The fact that attitudes are 'multi aspect' in nature was of particular importance in constructing the attitude scale for this study.

Research Method

A cross-sectional design was chosen to assess the impact of unemployment

upon a sample of displaced executives attending a career development programme. A variety of measurement instruments were utilised in order to determine the effect of certain mediating variables upon the stress levels experienced by the managers. These included a General Health Questionnaire (GHQ), a Work Involvement Measure and on Attitude Towards Unemployment Questionnaire. The GHQ is a self-administered screening test designed for detecting diagnosable non-psychotic psychiatric disorder [Goldberg, 1972; 1978]. It is concerned with two major features, the ability to carry out one's normal healthy functions, and the appearance of new reactions of a distressing nature. The twelve item version of the GHQ was used in this study and the results refer to the GHQ binary scoring method with a four point response scale as (0, 0, 1, 1). The cutting score for discriminating between stressed and unstressed types was set at 2 which is appropriate for the GHQ-12. The scale on the Work Involvement Questionnaire involves six items. There is a seven-point agree-disagree response dimension and the scale score is the sum of the item scores. The Attitude Towards Unemployment questionnaire was constructed as follows: 150 statements made by managers about unemployment were sorted into seven areas: loss of purpose; stigma; depression/loss of faith; social participation; supportiveness; activity and general feelings about unemployment [Swinburne, 1981]. Items were scored from 1 to 5 respectively, ranging from "strongly agree" to "disagree strongly". Scoring was reversed on the positive statements. Twenty three questionnaires were administered, all of which were usable representing a response rate of over 90 per cent.

Results

The managers were divided into two groups according to their scores on the GHQ-12. Those scoring less than two were classed as unstressed while those scoring two or greater were classed as stressed. The mean for the sample as a whole was 4.7 (s.d. = 4.13). This dichotomy was used as the starting point for our investigations. Two methods were used in assessing group differences:

(a) t-tests or cross tabulation (as appropriate) of single variables.
(b) a discriminant analysis of three variables, between the two groups.

Each approach has particular merits and weaknesses, and they should be seen as complementary in the information they provide. Discriminant analysis is the more powerful technique in that it is possible to analyse more than one variable concurrently.

Appraisal of the Research Propositions

Hypothesis 1; The stressed managers will be more work involved than the unstressed managers. The differences between the groups in terms of work involvement is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: *Group Differences on Work Involvement Score*

	Group 1 Unstressed	Group 2 Stressed	t	p
	Mean S.D.	Mean S.D.		
Work Involvement	34.89 4.96	37.43 7.17	−1.0	0.16
	n = 9	n = 14		

In order to establish that the difference between the groups is statistically significant, a "one tailed t-test" was performed on the data of Table 2 . This shows that the difference hypothesised between the two groups was not statistically significant. Three possible explanations spring to mind. Firstly, the homogeneity of the group may be too great due to the self selected nature of the sample. The total group mean on this variable was 36.4 (s.d. = 6.39) thus implying a highly work involved sample with very slight variation. Slater (1975) asserts that managers are better at rationalisation than other occupational groups, so perhaps it is incongruent for unemployed managers to consider themselves as anything but highly work involved. Alternatively, the data may be a true reflection of the respondents preferences. Secondly, experimental error may have crept into the data. The respondents, having been assured that all information obtained by the researcher was confidential, may nonetheless have felt it their "duty" to be work involved, fearing possible identification. An objective of the CDP is to place the managers in jobs — not to be work involved can then be seen as contra-normative behaviour, unlikely to engender the respect of the organisers operating the job placement scheme. Thirdly, and perhaps most damaging, the scale used may not discriminate between those managers who are work involved and those who are not. This possibility was considered early on in the research and a central life interests scale [Dubin, 1956] was administered concurrently with the questionnaire. A three-fold description operates, within this measurement instrument. Individuals are classed into job oriented, non-job oriented and flexible-focus categories. It was interesting to find that over 50 per cent of the sample would accordingly be classed as uninterpretable. Perhaps this says something either of the complexity of the process involved or of the nature of Irish managers!

Hypothesis 2: The stressed managers will have a more negative attitude towards unemployment than the unstressed managers.

The difference in terms of attitude towards unemployment between the two groups is shown in Table 2.

Table 2: *Group Differences in Attitude Towards Unemployment*

	Group 1 Unstressed		Group 2 Stressed		t	p
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.		
Attitude towards	90.89	24.71	80.57	14.06	1.14	0.14
unemployment	n = 9		n = 14			

We discover, as predicted, that the unstressed group has a more positive attitude towards unemployment (represented by a higher score on the attitude scale) than the stressed group of managers. In order to establish whether the difference between the groups is statistically significant, a one tailed t-test was performed on the data of Table 3, which indicates, however, that there is no difference between the two groups. It is interesting to note that the group as a whole seemed to have a positive attitude towards unemployment as registered by the group mean score at 84.6 (s.d. = 19.0) on this variable. This concurs with the findings of several researchers that there are frequently very positive reactions to the experience of redundancy and unemployment. This raises the question as to what kinds of people respond in this proactive fashion. A useful research project would be the development of a personality typology to aid our understanding of people's reactions to changing circumstances.

Discriminant Analysis: Variables entered in the Discriminant function were age, length of unemployment and number of dependent children. The classification used was the dichotomy of stressed and unstressed managers. Table 3 shows some of the more important findings of the analysis.

Table 3: *Variables Entered in Discriminant Analysis*

Variables	Wilks Lambda	P	Standardised Disc.Fn.Coeff.
Age	0.81	0.04	1.04
Number of dependent children	0.75	0.06	−0.61
Length unemployed	F ratio too low		
Canonical Correlation for Function = 0.49			

Ignoring the sign, we can see from the standardised discriminant function co-efficients that the variable "age" is almost 1.5 times more important than the variable "Number of dependent children" in terms of its respective contribution to the discriminating power of the function. The minus sign for the latter coefficient suggests that it makes a negative contribution to the discriminating power of the function. Length of unemployment was not entered into the discriminant analysis because the F-ratio entry criterion was insufficeint for this variable. Thus, of the three variables entered in the analysis only age contributed significantly to the

function. The discriminant function itself is reasonably accurate in describing the two groups (Wilks Lambda = 0.75, p = 0.06) and the canonical correlation of 0.5 is acceptable. Thus the discriminant function seems to be a reasonable mathematical description of the differences between the two groups. The known cases were re-classified to determine the extent to which the discriminant function is able to classify or predict. The prediction results are provided in Table 4. 74 per cent of known cases were correctly classified, correct prediction being highest, for group 2. The results indicate that there are some significant differences between the two groups.

Table 4: *Prediction Results of the Discriminant Analysis (Variables = Age, Number of Children)*

Actual Group	Predicted Group	
(n of cases)	Group 1	Group 2
Group 1 — No stress (9)	55.6%	44.4%
Group 2 — Stress (14)	14.3%	85.7%

The technique is strongly provocative for the development of new research in the area. A first task might be to test the discriminating power of certain personality variables as predictors of stress group membership. Catell's (1970) 16 Personality Factor Test would be a suitable instrument to use in conjunction with the General Health Questionnaire. This area is one meriting investigation as the researcher feels that personality variables other than that of attitude may affect the individuals experience of unemployment.

Conclusion

The development of predictive models of stress and stress resulting from unemployment is in its infancy and provides adequate scope for further longitudinally based investigation. Multivariate techniques may be used to select a set of variables which accurately predict an individuals response to stress. The exciting feature of this, however, is that one may then return to simple univariate analysis to isolate the precise effects of each variable. Such research, if successful, would provide fresh impetus to the development of counselling provisions for unemployed individuals. Let us finish our discussion therefore with a plea for more research in the direction outlined above.

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