

Contemporary picture of women's unemployment. Personality conditioning of unemployment and its consequences for psychic health

Agnieszka Wilczyńska-Kwiatek, Kamilla Bargiel-Matusiewicz

Summary

Aim. Unemployment is one of the most complex contemporary phenomena and it has not only economic but also social and psychological dimensions. Unemployment is connected with low self-esteem, depression, risk of suicide and alcohol-related diseases.

Women's unemployment has become a syndrome of our times. It turns out that gender is an important indicator in the way of coping both in work and unemployment situations.

Material and Methods. According to the assumed concept women have been questioned about their plans for the future and an anticipated way of their realization. The plans have been analysed as an expression of aspirations and motivations, by means of the specially prepared questionnaire.

Mind abilities have been measured by the non-verbal Riden's Intellect Potential Test.

The "Self" concept has been identified on the basis of the selected concepts:

Locus of Control; observational self-control; the need for social approval.

The research has been made in the group of 84 unemployed women. Its aim was to describe the persons' individual potential and comparing ways of coping in the situation of long lasting (over 12 months) unemployment.

Results. The results have shown that in each case the problem of individual experiencing of unemployment and coping with it, has remained in individual connection with a person's psychological properties. It turned out that the results of the surveyed women may be categorized: in the range of pragmatism, that were characterized by high results in case of women well functioning in social situations (so called pragmatic persons) and low results characteristic of principal persons (who use strict solutions). Other distinctions have also been made: between persons with internal Locus of Control and external Locus of Control, between more and less intelligent persons and between persons with a high need of social approval (deforming one's image) and with a low need of social approval (presenting one's real image).

Conclusion. The knowledge of individual predispositions may help to prevent severe psychic problems connected with unemployment. The questionnaires described in this article may be used as a method of early prevention. Because personality traits are rather stable, it is possible to predict on their basis the future functioning and mental health.

unemployment / social exclusion / self-esteem

Agnieszka Wilczyńska-Kwiatek¹, Kamilla Bargiel-Matusiewicz²:

¹Institute of Social and Environmental Psychology, University of Silesia, Poland, ²Faculty of Psychology, University of Warsaw, Poland; Correspondence address: Agnieszka Wilczyńska-Kwiatek, Institute of Social and Environmental Psychology, Department of Psychology and Pedagogics, University of Silesia, 53 Grażyńskiego Str., 40-086, Katowice, Poland; E-mail: awkwiatek@op.pl

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays unemployment is one of the most complex contemporary phenomena and it has economic and social dimensions as well.

The psychological characteristics of persons with social exclusion risk underlines the com-

mon and long lasting character of unemployment today. All national statistics show that among unemployed people, women, young people and long time workers of the restructured sectors are the prevailing groups.

At the moment, Poland has the highest unemployment rate among all the EU countries, i.e. 14.7%. In the last quarter of 2006, 13.8 million people were rated as "professionally passive", which means that they did not work or look for employment. In this group, women constitute 60.7%, i.e. 8.7 million people. In comparison, in 2005 the employment rate amounted to 19%; but substantial migration to the British Isles, estimated at 2 million people, has resulted in today's lower unemployment figures.

Women's unemployment has become a syndrome of our times, especially in the poorer regions with little supply of jobs (25 %). It turns out that gender is an important factor concerning work and unemployment.

Discussion of the literature

Stereotypes concerning social and professional roles impose attitudes upon posts and jobs for women and men. As a consequence of social pressure a woman cares about the home and children, whereas a man looks for a job [1, 2].

Being unemployed, a woman tries to provide her family with the available social funds and at the same time looks for such a job that will allow her to continue her home activities. Men often find jobs in seasonal works and use different forms of flexible employment. A woman – in trying to assure stability for her family becomes less professionally flexible. Women's time and spatial possibilities are also limited by self-esteem or stereotypes. Employers reluctantly hire women, when a man aspires to the same job.

The narrow field of the professional sphere results in women's worse psychic and social functioning, decrease in motivation and – in the course of being unemployed – decrease in self-esteem.

Macroeconomic changes in the labor market in the last years have made the structure of unemployment much worse now. Women's unemployment is now treated as long-lasting and possibly resulting in social exclusion. Development

strategies of particular regions assume a growth in support activities for women.

As statistics in Upper Silesia show, in the years 2003-2005, over 50% of the unemployed were out of work for more than 12 months, and almost 30% were looking for a job for over 2 years.

University education has also ceased to be a job guarantee – in the recent years the number of the highly qualified unemployed people has become four times higher than before. Research shows that 41% of those currently working, seriously fear that they might lose their jobs.

Women's long-lasting unemployment brings about a risk of devaluation of one's own intellectual and professional resources. Diplomas, abilities and acquired knowledge become devalued. Research shows that after a long time of being unemployed, the way of coping with the situation consist in dealing with unemployment rather than searching for a new job. It is a consequence of the weakening of the motivation system and of defence mechanisms which normally help individuals in dealing with refusals and failures [3, 4, 5].

In the last six years, women have been the first to be affected by long term unemployment. In spite of the relative equalizing of unemployment in both genders, as a consequence of the restructuring of hard industry, there is still a lower level of women employed.

It is connected both with women's lower mobility and the employers' unwillingness to hire women. Female unemployment is longer in time, and its level increases in comparison with the male unemployment. Women are perceived as less spatially mobile and reluctant to start a job connected with commuting, working overtime or not being stationary. There is still a gap between highly educated women's and men's remuneration. On the average, men earn 43% more than women and such statistics are similar in many EU countries. The most difficult situation is encountered by women bringing up children or being housewives with little work experience and also by women unemployed for a long time.

We can observe some principles of employing women within the labour and unemployment market; they appear in statistics and analyses of the labour market.

- a) in the country's population, women on the average constitute 54 % of all the unemployed (in the region of Upper Silesia – 56 %),

In this group we can observe the

- increase in the number of persons without work experience within the unemployed women group.
- increase in the number of highly educated women

- b) women's unemployment has increased sharply (by about 89 %) in relation to the year 1999,

In this group we can see the

- increase of the number of women aged between 24 and 44 within the unemployed group,

- c) stagnation and lengthening of women's unemployment (in the group of the unemployed for over 12 months, it is in the majority and 64 % of the women unemployed for a long time search for a job for about two years).

Women's situation in the current labour market is influenced by their family roles as well as by the stereotypes. So they are perceived as being unable to fulfil their professional roles. The increase in the number of unemployed women aged under 44 is a signal that it is more and more difficult to find a job in the women's reproductive life period. Similarly we may interpret the analyses of the labour market showing an increase in the unemployment level among persons without professional experience, as well as among the school and university graduates. Beginning a professional career is difficult for young people; especially without any professional experience, they have limited chances in finding a job. Women are additionally perceived as less stable in their position, giving up work due to motherhood, and more often taking leave. It is still more difficult for them to find a job after some stagnation period, after being isolated from professional practice and opportunities to acquire current knowledge. Self stereotypes in women's self-perception constitute an additional difficulty. Women playing active functions connected with motherhood and bringing up children have a feeling of limited spatial mobility and this fact limits their actual adaptation possi-

bilities. Mothers bringing up several children are convinced of their small chances for full participation in social and professional life. Women often withdraw from ambitious professional goals and are satisfied with poorly paid jobs, usually below their competence. At the time when a child attends nursery school, women look for support in social institutions, decrease their expectations and self-reliance and give up their aspirations [6, 7].

Women experience helplessness, low self-esteem, lack of belief in their own competences more often than men. Apart from these problems unemployment is connected also with the risk of suicide and alcohol-related diseases. So, it is important to detect who is more resistant to the situation of unemployment and who is more exposed to these problems [8, 9].

The transformation period has brought about a decrease in women's professional activity. Their current social and professional situation is defined as a bad one. It is a situation of danger and uncertainty, full of humiliation. Problems emerge in the attempts to find a job during recruitment and selection. Women experience more refusals to get a job and proposals of lower salaries, they face tasks and professional expectations more difficult than men do at the same posts.

The external barriers influence and create internal ones such as withdrawal from activity and avoiding the risk of failure. In the situation where there are so many obstacles to women's full participation in professional life, it is worth taking a look at the question of how an individual's own potential influences his or her way of coping with unemployment. Taking into account high statistics of unemployment we may assume that within the unemployment group there are also women with high intelligence, responsibility, equipped with such highly appreciated features as pragmatism or smartness. How do they function in the labour market? That question became the inspiration for this research [8, 10, 11].

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The following problem has been raised in the study: we enquired whether there is a connec-

tion between the selected women's psychological traits and their coping with long-lasting unemployment situation.

The selection of variables resulted from the functional view represented by many authors in the so called wide formulating of personality. The concept is based upon an assumption that a man is an active creature and his or her functioning is influenced by three types of factors:

- conditional variables – traits that are connected with motivation and plans for the future,
- instrumental variables – traits whose indicator is a maximum level of performing a given activity – knowledge, experience, intelligence, style of functioning,
- modification variables – they concern the "Self" notion – a system of self schemes, it is a cognitive generalization of self that directs a process of information of one's own, it is connected with a feeling of control over surroundings, conviction about one's role, a tendency to idealize one's image.

According to the assumed concept, women have been questioned about:

1. Plans for the future and an anticipated method of their realization. The plans have been analysed as an expression of aspirations and motivations, by means of a specially prepared questionnaire.
2. Mind abilities. They were measured by the non-verbal Rican's Intellect Potential Test, the scale of results 1-10 sten [12].
3. The "Self" concept" has been identified on the basis of the selected concepts:
 - a) Locus of Control. The concept of Locus of Control lets us explain and anticipate a person's behaviour in typical situations, in the situation of decision making, social activity and motivation, it allows us to differentiate between the persons with an internal and external Locus of Control. The Delta test has been used, with the result scale 1-14 raw points [13].
 - b) Observational self-control. The concept lets differentiate persons as those having a high observational self-control (the pragmatic type) and those with a low one (the principal type). The results indicate a bigger variability between situational behaviour of pragmatist and principalists. The re-

sult show the way of collecting and using information for one's own functioning. The Scale of Pragmatism by Snyder-Wojciszke has been used with the scale of results 1-29 raw points [14].

The need for social approval understood as a tendency to idealize one's image. In the research, the Scale of Lie has been used with the scale of results 1–10 raw points, that is placed in Delta test. The increased need of social approval is expressed by a high number of points in that scale and means a tendency for a distorted presentation of one's own self [13].

The research has been made in a group of 84 unemployed women. Its aim was to describe the persons' individual potential and compare ways of coping with the situation of long lasting (over 12 months) unemployment.

According to the assumed plan, personality constructs have been selected, defined as relatively stable, characteristic of a given individual, allowing for the assessment of his or her social functioning, in relation to others and an individual way of performing tasks. In analysing the research results, their constellation has been taken into account. The qualitative analysis has been made on the basis of the raw results and the sten value in the Rican's scale.

RESULTS

The results have shown that in each case, the problem of an individual experiencing unemployment and coping with it has remained in specific connection with a person's psychological properties. It turned out that the results of the surveyed women may be categorized: in the range of pragmatism, that was characterized by high results in the case of women well functioning in social situations (so called pragmatic persons) and low results characteristic of principal persons (who use strict solutions). Other distinctions have also been made: between persons with an internal Locus of Control (high responsibility) and an external Locus of Control (low responsibility), between more and less intelligent persons and between persons with a high need of social approval (deforming one's image) and with a low need of social approval (presenting one's real image).

Two extreme groups of persons have been distinguished, in which the constellations of the obtained results were comparable in the range of specific constructs.

In the first group, 34 persons obtained high results in the scale of pragmatism, average or high results in the scale of inner steering and intellectual potential and low results in the range of the need of social approval. It was a group of women characterized by flexible social functioning, large adaptation possibilities, responsibility and high intellectual potential.

In the second group, 38 persons obtained low results in the scale of pragmatism (high principality) and average or low results in the inner steering scale, average or low results in the test of intellectual potential and high or average results in the scale of social approval. The group consisted of persons realizing a so-called strict social program, characterized by strict social solutions, convinced of having little influence upon one's own life, with a high need of other's approval and low intellectual potential.

The results attained by the remaining twelve persons in the whole group have been variable and inconsistent, they have been subject to separate analyses. In this article the results attained by persons in the above mentioned so called extreme group were interpreted.

The results of the research made in the above groups have been compared in their range of constructs with plans for the future.

Analysis of the plans in groups:

1. First group. Women from the first group (n = 34) expressed deliberate plans for the future and ways of realizing them. The persons were characterized by similar results in the studied constructs, e.g. moderation and strong internal Locus of Control (3-8 points in the Delta scale) and high results in the observational control scale (15 to 22 points in the S-M Snyder – Wojciszke scale). As a result of the experienced unemployment situation the indicated states of sadness or depression. The subgroup attained lower results in the scale of social approval, indicating real presenting of oneself (1-5 points). The persons declared their willingness to start a job and undertook activities to find it. They expressed anxiety about

the current situation, they described the situation as to a certain extent dependant on them, they declared willingness to start temporary work, their plans included solutions within the range of really existing resources – applying for social subsidies, elastic employment, social or professional activity in different forms.

2. The second group. The women qualifying for this group (n = 38) were characterized by passive acceptance of reality, pessimism and treating unemployment as a lifestyle. The majority of persons in this group expected that "things will work out somehow". A significant subgroup (n = 28) blamed others for their current situation, the remaining persons blamed themselves (n = 10). Women in this group were to a large extent characterized by an external Locus of Control (the lowest result 7 points, the highest 14 points) and various results in the observational self-control scale, results in the Intellect Potential scale were moderate and moderately high (the lowest 5 sten, the highest 7 sten) – they rendered average and bigger than average intelligence. The plans presented by the women in that phase were "unlikely to be fulfilled" or presented as "still not thought about". Their preparation was being put off "for later – now little can be done anyway". Most of the results obtained in the social approval scale indicated idealization of self and high need of social approval (5-8 points).

The obtained results let us make conclusions about the possible influence of constellations of some personality constructs upon ways of coping in the unemployment situation. The perceived consistencies in results may indicate that there is a possibility to make prognosis of women's functioning in the long-lasting unemployment situation on the basis of the research made on particular constructs and its analysis made in context of other data.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of the research results of the women unemployed for a long time has shown a big variability of the potential of particular individuals and increased the authors' conviction

that preparing an efficient program for women should include complex responses to individual needs, precise diagnosis of professional predispositions, identification of development domains and personality constructs connected with an individual's plans for coping with the situation of being unemployed. The persons more flexible in social terms, with a high level of pragmatism, inner steering and with high intellectual potential (the first group described above) are a group of persons potentially interested in non-standard work, presenting plans and expressing willingness to start different forms of professional activity – so as to increase their chances to earn money, being active in life, develop one's abilities and use one's resources. The persons with lower pragmatism potential, locating responsibility outside constitute a more demanding group, they need additional support e.g. a vocational guide or a psychotherapist.

Due to the danger of social marginalization of persons who may be qualified to the group at highest risk the models of support are developed to promote pro-vocational and pro-social activities and attitudes, especially in environments with high levels of unemployment. The programs supporting these groups create a complex influence on both the project participant and local environment. The environmental support and self – support groups led by activity participants and animators are being built. The research results show that building a new kind of work ethic should include an element of person openness for changes on the labour market, reduce a fear of being judged, give a feeling of self-realization, without risk of stereotypic vision of self.

The knowledge of individual predispositions may help to prevent also more severe problems. As it was mentioned, the unemployment situation is connected with depression, risk of suicide and alcohol-related diseases. The questionnaires described in this article may be used as a method of early prevention. Because personality traits are rather stable, it is possible to predict on their basis the future functioning and mental health.

REFERENCES

1. Bandura A. Self-efficacy mechanism in human agency. *American Psychologist*, 1982; (37): 122–147.
2. Kelvin P, Jarrett JE. Unemployment. Its social psychological effects. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.
3. Wilczyńska-Kwiątek A. Psychologiczny portret własny w sytuacji utraty pracy. In: Bezrobocie jako wyzwanie. Badania i Aplikacje. Ed. Ratajczak Zofia, ed. Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2004.
4. Wilczyńska-Kwiątek A. Psychologiczny autoportret jednostki i przewidywanie własnych zachowań zaradczych w sytuacji braku pracy. In: Kryzysy, Kataklizmy, Katastrofy. Zjawiska współczesnej cywilizacji. Czasopismo Psychologiczne. Popiołek Katarzyna, ed. Poznań, 2004.
5. Warr P. Psychologiczne skutki długotrwałego bezrobocia. In: Człowiek w społecznej przestrzeni bezrobocia. Chirkowska-Smolak T, Chudzicka A. eds. Poznań: UAM; 2004. 137–145.
6. Bargiel-Matusiewicz K, Matusiewicz J, Wilczyńska-Kwiątek A. The influence of vocational guidance upon the unemployed persons self-esteem. *Eukrasia* 2004; 5: 73–77.
7. Titkow A. Szklany sufit. Bariery i ograniczenia karier kobiet. Warszawa: Instytut Spraw Publicznych, 2003.
8. Platt SD. Unemployment and suicidal behavior. A review of the literature. *Social Science and Medicine* 1984; (19): 93–115.
9. Blakely T, Collings S, Atkinson J. Unemployment and suicide, evidence for a casual association? *Journal of Epidemiology & Community Health* 2003; (57): 594–600.
10. Boni M, Żak-Rosiak E. Bezrobocie – co robić? Poradnik outplacementu. Suwałki: Fundacja Rozwoju Przedsiębiorczości, 2002.
11. Swinburne P. The psychological impact of unemployment on managers and professional staff. *Journal of Occupational Psychology* 1981; (54): 47–64.
12. Rican P. Test potencjału intelektu. Bratislavia: P.A.D.T, 1980.
13. Drwal R. Delta Questionnaire for measuring locus of control. *Polish Psychological Bulletin* 1980; (11): 269–282.
14. Wojciszke B. Skala Pragmatyzmu – treść i charakterystyka psychometryczna. *Przegląd Psychologiczny* 1984; (27): 725–743.