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Mental Health, Self-Esteem, Time Structure, and Social Support among Unemployed in Hong Kong

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Abstract

**Objectives.** This study examined the mental health and self-esteem of unemployed Hong Kong Chinese in comparison with their employed counterparts. In addition, time structure and perceived social support of the unemployed were studied.

**Methods.** A total of 115 participants of different age groups, including 52 unemployed and 63 employed, completed a questionnaire that measures their mental health, self-esteem, time structure, and perceived social support.

**Results.** As predicted, the unemployed participants had poorer mental health but not significantly lower self-esteem than their employed counterparts. Results also indicated that among the unemployed, those with better time structure and more perceived social support enjoyed better mental health and higher level of self-esteem.

**Discussion.** The role of better time structure and social support may be incorporated in intervention programs as useful coping resources for the unemployed individuals.
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Mental Health, Self-Esteem, Time Structure, and Social Support
among Unemployed in Hong Kong

The problem of unemployment is no doubt a significant issue in recent years for both the HKSAR Government and the people of Hong Kong. Economic restructuring, globalization, capital relocation, the Asian financial crisis in 1998, as well as the outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in 2003 have brought the unemployment rate of Hong Kong to the highest reading of 8.7% in May to July period of 2003 (http://asia.news.yahoo.com/040216/ap/d870kue00.html). Currently, with continuous improvement in the local economy, the unemployment rate has been gradually eased to 5.9% in February to April 2005—the lowest level recorded since September to November 2001 (Census and Statistics Department, 2005), with approximately 205,000 being jobless. However, owing to a rapid transformation of the economy into knowledge-based economy and ageing of workforce, it is expected that the unemployment rate for Hong Kong as a whole would remain somewhat high over the medium term (http://www.news.gov.hk/en/category/atschool/050302/print/050302enO2003.htm). Unemployment, however, does not merely represent a statistical figure and imply "a considerable economic, social and individual waste" (Alexander, 1996, as cited in de Goede, de Klaver, van Ophem, Verhaar, & de Vries, 1996, p. 5), it is indeed a stressful life-event for most individuals (Wanberg & Griffiths, 1997), both economically and psychologically. It is one of the top 10 traumatic life
experiences and ranks in the upper quartile of the degree of stress it produces relative to other life changes (Holmes & Rahe, 1967, as cited in Wanberg & Griffiths, 1977).

Yet, in Hong Kong, the psychological impacts of unemployment on individuals are often being neglected, although they have been widely documented and researched in the West. Rather, unemployment issue in Hong Kong is often being focused on the broader economic, social, political, and policy aspects. Thus, this paper aimed to study the psychological aspects of unemployment at the individual level, particularly on people's mental health and self-esteem, and the role of social support and better use of time/ time structure as useful coping resources for the unemployed of different age groups in the context of Hong Kong.

*Psychological Effects of Unemployment*

Unemployment literature in general supports the idea that "job loss is a negative event, although the effects are not universal across and possibly within people" (Hanisch, 1999, p. 195). Over the past two decades, a number of studies in the West has shown that unemployment is associated with many negative physical and psychological consequences at the level of individual, not to mention other social and family impacts like crime and family conflicts (Price, 1992). For instance, unemployed often report greater physical illness and health complaints (Turner, 1995), higher level of psychological distress, lower morale, higher levels of depressive affect and anxiety (Shamir, 1986; Kessler, Turner, & House, 1987),
higher levels of apathy, lower self-esteem (Feather & Bond, 1983; Muller, Hicks, & Winocur, 1993), lower life satisfaction, and poorer mental health (Hepworth, 1980; Stafford, Jackson, & Banks, 1980) than their employed counterparts. Some longitudinal studies have even demonstrated that these negative outcomes are largely the result of people being unemployed rather than the result of people with few personal skills and poorer mental health drifting into joblessness (Creed & Macintyre, 2001).

Mental health and self-esteem are two of the most commonly studied outcomes in unemployment literature. Although some researchers like Latack and Dozier (1986) have suggested that unemployment can be positive, for example, it provides an opportunity for people to develop new competencies and to change their careers and life directions.

However, the psychological health of the unemployed is mostly negative, showing that the unemployed people are generally worse off than the employed people. To name a few, in the study carried out by Branimir, Maslic, and Mirta (2004), the unemployed samples in Croatia exhibited more impaired psychological health at all age levels as compared with the general population sample, with middle-age range showing the greatest differences in psychological health between the two samples. Whereas, in a local research by Lai, Chan, and Luk (1997), similar results were found in that the unemployed Chinese women were more psychologically disturbed than their steadily employed peers. Study of Stafford et al. (1980) also found that unemployed young people, especially those who were highly
motivated to work, experienced poorer mental health than those who had employment.

Kessler et al. (1987)'s study even found that their unemployed samples were three times more likely than steadily employed persons to show extreme scores on mental health symptoms.

Furthermore, meta-analysis of longitudinal studies by Murphy and Athanasou (1999) provided evidence that change of one's employment status would affect his/her mental health in that unemployed persons moving to reemployment generally experienced an improvement in mental health, while employed people who became unemployed would show a decrement in mental health (also see review by McKee-Ryan et al., 2005). All these proved that employment status is vital for one's mental health status.

Self-esteem refers to "the evaluation which the individual makes and customarily maintains with regard to himself or herself: it expresses an attitude of approval or disapproval towards oneself" (Rosenberg, 1965, p. 5). Several research have demonstrated that unemployed people display lower levels of self-esteem than do employed people. For example, research by Feather (1982) found that apart from suffering more depressive symptoms and higher levels of apathy, the young unemployed suffered diminished self-esteem when compared with the employed people. Besides, his research with Bond in 1983 found that the unemployed university graduates had significantly lower self-esteem scores on the negative items of the self-esteem scale when compared with that of the employed
graduates, though no significant differences were found for their total self-esteem scores (Feather & Bond, 1983). Moreover, there have been descriptive reports of loss of self-esteem, or damaged ego, loss of self-worth, loss of self-respect, loss of self-confidence, or feeling inferior, etc. amongst the unemployed by various authors too (Hartley, 1980).

Possible Explanations

Jahoda (1981) and Warr (1987) provided theoretical explanations for why employment is so important and that job loss is harmful and health-damaging. Both of them attributed the deleterious consequences of unemployment to the removal of several positive functions of employment. According to Warr's vitamin model, he suggested that unemployment leads to adverse physical and psychological outcomes because unemployed individuals fail to experience several positive benefits derived from the environment of employment such as the opportunity for control, opportunity for skill use, availability of money, physical security, opportunity for interpersonal contact, and valued social position.

Similarly, Jahoda's deprivation theory proposed that the ill-effects of job loss are due to the deprivation of the manifest and latent consequences of employment. She suggested that apart from earning a living (the manifest consequence of employment), employment serves five important positive psychological latent functions: (1) imposing a time structure on the waking day, (2) allowing individuals to regularly share experiences and contact with people outside the nuclear family, (3) providing people with a sense of purpose, (4) defining aspects
of personal status and identity, and (5) enforcing activity (Jahoda, 1981). Although she acknowledges that there may be other latent-by-products of employment which may be negative, it is these positive latent consequences of employment which explain why employment is psychologically supportive even when conditions are bad and why unemployment is psychologically destructive (Jahoda, 1981). She argued that individuals "have deep seated needs for structuring their time use and perspective, for enlarging their social horizon, for participating in collective enterprises where they can feel useful, for knowing they have a recognized place in society, and for being active" (Jahoda, 1984, p. 298).

That is why she said that "even with redundancy payments or adequate unemployment allowances-where they exist-the unemployed do not enjoy their "leisure", they become disheartened, lose their self-respect and their sense of time, and feel on the scrap heap" (Jahoda, 1981, p.189). On the other hand, other researchers like Fryer stressed the importance of financial deprivation/ hardship in explaining for the adverse consequences of unemployment (Creed & Macintyre, 2001). In the study of Creed and Macintyre (2001), it showed that both the manifest and latent benefits (particularly status, time structure, and collective purpose) proposed by Jahoda are associated with the well-being of the unemployed people.

It is undoubtedly that paid work means more than money to people. Indeed, money earned from work is often a symbol of how a man is valued by the society (Marsden & Duff,
and that occupation and identity are often being linked together (Kumar, 1979, as cited in Harris et al., 1986). To most working adults, the question of "Who am I" is often answered by "What do I do?" (Harris, Merrett, & Radford, 1986). Paid work helps to form and preserve internal identity and self-worth of a person (Kates, Greiff, & Hagen, 1993). Hence, being unemployed may be seen as a sign of personal inadequacy and therefore undermine the self-worth and self-esteem of a person.

The social comparison theory can also be used to account for the adverse mental health and esteem-related consequences of unemployment. Recent research done by Sheeran, Abrams, and Orbell (1995) investigating the relationship among unemployment, self-esteem, and depression has concluded that "the deleterious psychological consequences of unemployment may arise from the intrapersonal, interpersonal, intragroup, and intergroup comparisons of the unemployed person" (p. 79). This can actually be reflected from a comment made by a 37-year-old unemployed man in the study of Waters and Moore (2002): "My mates are all at work during the day and then busy with their "lives" on the weekends. I feel like a loser when I am with them and I don't see anyone much these days" (p. 183).

On top of these, those who become unemployed face a lot of changes, including changes in their social roles as self-sufficient providers for themselves and their families (Mallinckrodt & Fretz, 1988) and changes in their social position. In addition, uncertainty about the future and experiences of rejection and failure involved during job search also
increase the psychological burden of the unemployed. All these explain why unemployment experience is often hard for most individuals and may lead to a reduction in their mental health and self-esteem.

*Time Structure and Unemployment*

As mentioned previously, one of the latent benefits of employment proposed by Jahoda (1981) is that it imposes a time structure-"the degree to which individuals perceive their use of time to be structured and purposive" (Bond & Feather, 1988, p. 321) for a person. Like many of us, most working people are used to fill and structure their time through work and they have been "adapted to a routine of going to work, eating meals, exercising, taking leisure time, visiting with friends and family, and sleeping. Job loss dramatically disrupts this temporal pattern" (Fryer & McKenna, 1987, as cited in Wanberg & Griffiths, 1997, p. 75). Although some unemployed people may view it as a positive leisure opportunity and adjust well to a new living pattern, most unemployed individuals do find it difficult in organizing and structuring their time. They spend long periods of time without purposeful activities, feeling aimless and boring. In spite of plenty of free time, they become less efficient to make use of their time-the so-called "irony of having free time yet doing less" (Hutchens, 1994, p. 58). They may delay completion of tasks as they think they will have a lot of time to finish it.

Also, they may lose the incentives to begin projects (such as taking a course) which
help to keep them busy as they are uncertain about how long the unemployment will last and whether they will have enough money to do so in the long run (Wanberg & Griffiths, 1997).

Indeed, both qualitative and quantitative research have demonstrated that individuals tend to have time structure problems during unemployment. For instance, Feather and Bond (1983), using their use of time scale, found that the unemployed university graduates perceived their use of time to be less organized and purposeful than those with jobs. Interviews by Hutchens (1994) with the young unemployed also found that over 60% of the interviewees reported having significant problems with time. Likewise, a local survey reported that nearly 70% of the unemployed participants in Hong Kong perceived themselves as having difficulties in filling or structuring their time frequently or sometimes (香港天主教勞工事務委員會, 1996).

While the unemployed individuals are likely to have time structure problems, there has been evidence to show that time structure is associated with psychological well-being and mental health actually (Creed & Macintyre, 2001). Hepworth (1980) found that "the best single predictor of mental health during unemployment was whether or not a man felt his time was occupied" (p. 139). Other researchers also found that more structure and purpose in the use of time (for both employed and unemployed individuals) is associated with higher self-esteem, lower depression, lower psychological distress, and better mental health, etc. (Feather & Bond, 1983; Rowley & Feather, 1987; Bond & Feather, 1988; Wanberg &
Griffiths, 1997). These findings suggested that a better use of time / time structure may help the unemployed individuals buffer from the negative effects of unemployment. Therefore, it was predicted in this study that those unemployed individuals with better time structure would have better mental health and higher self-esteem than those without.

**Social Support and Unemployment**

Social support is defined as "an exchange of resources between at least two individuals perceived by the provider or the recipient to be intended to enhance the well-being of the recipient" (Shumaker & Brownell, 1984, p. 13). It is a kind of perceived or actual instrumental or expressive provisions given by the community, social networks, and confiding partners to an individual (Lin, 1986, as cited in Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet, & Farley, 1988).

Research has found that social support can contribute to stress reduction and act as a buffer between stressful life events and symptoms (see Zimet et al., 1988). In the context of unemployment, empirical studies also found that social support helps to ameliorate the negative effects of unemployment on mental health and self-esteem. For instance, Hammer (1993) found that social support from a close social network of family and friends moderated some of the adverse impacts of unemployment on well-being. Whereas, Shams (1993) and Halford et al. (1984) found that better mental health and adjustment to unemployment occurred with higher levels of social support. In the study of Mallinckrodt and Fretx (1988),
perceived availability of social support was found to be significantly correlated with positive self-esteem and lower levels of psychological symptoms in a sample of older unemployed professionals. Waters and Moore (2002) further demonstrated the positive main effect of social support on self-esteem for the unemployed and found that this effect was stronger for women than in men. On the other hand, those unemployed who lack perceived social support or a strong supportive social networks are found to be particularly at risk for psychological problems (House, Williams, & Kessler, 1986, as cited in Price, 1992).

Current Study

Although substantial research on the psychological outcomes of unemployment has been extensively conducted in the West, there is a lack of research on this area in Hong Kong. Given a low level of unemployment benefits and lack of unemployment insurance system in Hong Kong, the psychological health of the unemployed in Hong Kong is particularly worrisome. In fact, in a recent study with Hong Kong Chinese women, it was found that the unemployed participants exhibited higher psychological morbidity than their counterparts in other developed Western countries (Lai, Chan, & Luk, 1997).

In view of this, the present study was designed to examine the mental health and self-esteem of the unemployed Hong Kong Chinese and see whether they are significantly different from those who have employment, which refers to a situation when the individual receives economic reward for his/her labors which have a market value and there also
involves a relationship between the employee and employer based on exchange (Hartley, 1980). (Of course, the employee and employer can be the same person in case of self-employment.) In addition, since no systematic research has been carried out with regard to time structure and social support during unemployment in Hong Kong, this study also aimed to examine their role in ameliorating the negative effects of unemployment.

As such, based on the literature reviewed in previous parts, the following hypotheses were proposed:

Hypothesis 1: the unemployed would have poorer mental health than the employed.

Hypothesis 2: the unemployed would have lower self-esteem than the employed.

Hypothesis 3: among the unemployed, those with better time structure would have better mental health and higher self-esteem.

Hypothesis 4: among the unemployed, those with higher levels of perceived social support would have better mental health and higher self-esteem.

Method

Research Design

In this study, a cross-sectional survey design was used in which the currently unemployed subjects and their employed subjects were both required to complete a questionnaire anonymously.
Participants

Participants were 115 Hong Kong Chinese (60 males and 55 females) aged 15 or above, of which 52 were currently unemployed and 63 were employed at the time of data collection. To be classified as currently unemployed in the present study, participant has to meet the following criteria: Must be age 15 or above; has no full-time or part-time formal job attachment for pay or profit; is available for work; and is seeking work during the reference week (this definition is slightly different from the one employed by the Census and Statistics Department of Hong Kong which requires the person to be seeking work during the 30 days before enumeration). The unemployed participants might either be unemployed voluntarily or involuntarily. For the employed samples, only full-time employees were included so that those who are underemployed would not be counted. Besides, as fresh graduates of Form 5 or Form 7 students might not be so certain of whether they would enter the labor market or continue to further study, they were not included as samples in this study so as to avoid selection bias.

Procedure

Two ways were used for recruiting the unemployed samples: targeting the unemployed individuals outside the job centers of Labor Department and during the job fairs organized by the Department.
More than half of the unemployed samples were recruited outside the entrance of Shatin Job Center and Kowloon West Job Center. Only those job-seekers who were going out from the centers would be approached by the researcher personally and invited to participate in the study. Since some items of the questionnaire may be quite sensitive for the participants (say, "I certainly feel useless at times") and that their literacy level might vary, those agreed to participate were asked if they would like to fill in the questionnaire themselves or interviewed by the researcher with the questionnaire.\(^1\)

The rest of the unemployed samples were recruited at two medium-scale job fairs organized by the Labor Department for adults. Again, the researcher approached those unemployed job-seekers who are waiting for their job interviews or leaving. Subject to their will, the respondents either filled in the questionnaire themselves or interviewed by the researcher with the questionnaire. Most of the unemployed samples who were relatively younger around the age of 20 to 30 were recruited during such occasions, whereas those recruited outside the job centers mentioned above were relatively older.

As for the employed samples, convenient sampling method was used to recruit participants. Questionnaires were sent to the targeted people-full-time employees either by email or by hand with their consent. All of the employed samples completed the questionnaire by themselves and the questionnaires were collected either personally or via

\(^{1}\) It was observed that those with lower education level (mainly middle-aged or above) would prefer being interviewed by the researcher with the questionnaire, while those with relatively higher education level (mainly young adults) would prefer to fill in the questionnaire themselves.
email. It should be noted that while they were currently employed, some of them might be seeking job too due to whatever reasons.

Materials

Questionnaire

Apart from some demographic information like sex, education level, length of unemployment, perceived physical health, and frequency of financial worries; the questionnaire included 4 scales to measure the mental health, self-esteem, time structure, and perceived social support of the respondents respectively.

Measures

Mental Health

The General Health Questionnaire (GHQ) is a self-administered screening test designed for detecting people with a diagnosis of psychiatric disorder (Goldberg, 1972, as cited in Stafford et al., 1980). In the present study, the 12-item Chinese version of the General Health Questionnaire was used to assess the mental health of the participants. This concise version (GHQ-12) has been recommended for use as an indicator of mental health in occupational research (Banks, Clegg, Jackson, Kemp, Stafford, & Wall, 1980) and translated into Chinese by Shek (1987). Respondents were required to indicate on a 4-point scale ranging from 0 to 3 (0 = less so than usual, 1 = same as usual, 2 = a bit more than usual, 3 = much more than usual for negatively phrased items; scores were reversed for positively phrased items)
whether they had experienced each of the twelve items of symptom or behavior in the last month (e.g. "Lost sleep over worry?" and "Able to concentrate?"). Higher scores indicated poorer mental health, and vice versa. An average score of the twelve items was obtained as a mental health rating for each participant. The internal consistency of the scale (coefficient alpha) in this study was 0.92.

**Self-Esteem**

Self-esteem of the participants was measured by using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965). This scale has been widely used and has respectable evidence of validity and reliability (Shamir, 1986). It consists of 10 statements, including both positively phrased and negatively phrased items (e.g. "I certainly feel useless at times"; and "I feel that I have a number of good qualities") and was translated into Chinese. Respondents were asked to rate their level of agreement on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree on each item. Relevant items were recoded so that higher scores indicated higher level of self-esteem. Responses to the 10 items were averaged for each participant. Internal consistency of the scale (coefficient alpha) in this study was 0.88.

**Time Structure / Use of time**

The time structure or use of time of respondents was measured by the Use of Time Scale developed by Feather and Bond (1983). Such scale was developed based on their analysis of the negative effects of unemployment on time structure suggested by Jahoda.
(Bond & Feather, 1988) and consisted of 17 items. However, in the present study, only 12 items under the four factors (such as engagement, direction, structure, and routine) grouped by Feather and Bond (1983) were chosen and translated into Chinese. Respondents were asked to rate on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = "Yes, always" to 7 = "No, never" on each item (e.g. "Do you ever have trouble organizing the things you have to do?" and "Do you often feel that your life is aimless, with no definite purpose?") to measure whether they have a structured and purposeful use of time. Relevant items were recoded so that higher scores would denote more structure and purpose in the use of time. Responses to the 10 items were averaged for each participant. The internal consistency of the scale (coefficient alpha) in this study was 0.79, which was quite similar to the value reported by Feather and Bond (1983).

**Perceived Social Support**

Perceived social support of participants was measured by using the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) adopted and validated by Zimet et al. (1988). This scale comprised 12 items measuring social support received from three sources: family, friends, and significant others (Zimet et al., 1988) and was translated into Chinese for this study. Participants were asked to rate their level of agreement on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = very strongly disagree to 7 = very strongly agree on each item (e.g. "I get the emotional help and support I need from my family" and "I have friends with whom I can..."
share my joys and sorrows") to measure social support. Higher scores indicated higher level of Responses of the 12 items were averaged to obtain a mean Internal consistency of the scale (coefficient alpha) in this social support of participants was measured by using the their level of perceived social support. score for the participants. study was found to be 0.93.

Results

Table 1 Demographic Characteristics of the Employed (n = 63) and Unemployed (n = 52)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic Characteristics</th>
<th>Overall (N=115)</th>
<th>Employed (n = 63)</th>
<th>Unemployed (n = 52)</th>
<th>( \chi^2 )</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Age 15-19</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-29</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>52.2</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>58.7</td>
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<td>30-39</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>24.3</td>
<td>16</td>
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<td>40-49</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>50 or above</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender Male</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>52.2</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>47.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>47.8</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>52.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Education Primary or below</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
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<td>F. 1 - F. 3</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>F. 4 - F. 5 Matriculation or Diploma</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>31.3</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>30.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Degree or above</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>28.7</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>34.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital Status Single</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>71.3</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>73</td>
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<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>25.2</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>25.4</td>
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<td>Divorced or Widowed</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.6</td>
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Demographic Data
Demographic information on age distribution, sex, education level, and marital status of the respondents was presented in Table 1 above. Of the total 115 respondents, 63 of them were employed and 52 of them were unemployed, 60 were males and 55 were females. Most of them (52.2%) belonged to the age group of 20-29, followed by the age group of 30-39 (28%), while each of the age groups of 40-49 and 50 or above had 11.3% of respondents. As for their education level, most of them achieved Form 4 or above, with 31.3%, 28.7%, and 25.2% achieved F. 4 to F. 5, a degree or above, and matriculation or Diploma respectively. Majority (71.3%) of the participants was single.

As shown in Table 1, the demographic background including age distribution, gender, education level, and marital status of both the employed and unemployed groups were similar. Results of Chi-squares also found that there were no significant differences between the two groups over these demographic variables.

The duration of unemployment of the unemployed samples ranged from less than 1 month to 55 months, with an average duration of about 6 months ($M = 6.62$, $SD = 10.73$). The mode of their length of unemployment was 1 month (or less than 1 month). Of the 52 unemployed samples, 24 of them were unemployed for less than 2 months, whereas 20 and 8 of them were unemployed for 3-9 months and 10 months or above respectively.

Only 3.5% of all the participants perceived their physical health as "poor" or "very poor", whereas most of them (39.1%) perceived their physical health as "good", followed by
"average" (31.3%) and "very good" (26.1%). Besides, most of them (35.7%) reported to have financial worries over the past month "sometimes", followed by "rarely" (30.4%), "always" (24.3%), and "never" (9.6%).

Most of the unemployed respondents (59.7%) reported to have confidence or great confidence in being reemployed, while 40.3% of them were not confident in reemployment.

Moreover, nearly 70% of them thought that improvement of the economy would strengthen their confidence in getting a job. The major form of activity of the respondents during unemployment was job searching, followed by relaxing at home, doing sports and having leisure activities outside home, studying, and doing housework, etc.

**T-tests**

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<th>Mean Scores and Standard Deviation of GHQ of Respondents</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean Score of GHQ</td>
<td>Standard Deviation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Employed (n = 63)</td>
<td>0.876</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unemployed (n = 52)</td>
<td>1.240</td>
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<td>Employed and Unemployed (N =115)</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3</th>
<th>Mean Scores and Standard Deviation of Self-Esteem of Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean Score of Self-Esteem</td>
<td>Standard Deviation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed (n = 63)</td>
<td>2.856</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed (n = 52)</td>
<td>2.812</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed and Unemployed (N =115)</td>
<td>2.836</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It was hypothesized that the mental health of the unemployed would be poorer than that of the employed (Hypothesis 1). Results of independent t-tests supported this
hypothesis. As shown in Table 2 above, the mean score of GHQ of the unemployed (1.24) was significantly higher than that of the employed (0.876), \( t(94.738) = -3.301, p<.01, \) indicating poorer mental health of the unemployed. However, the hypothesis that the unemployed would have lower level of self-esteem than that of the employed (Hypothesis 2) could not be confirmed, as the mean score of self-esteem of the unemployed (2.812) was not significantly lower than that of the employed (2.856), \( t(113) = 0.587, p>.05. \) (Table 3).

Independent t-tests were also performed to see if the perceived social support and time structure of the employed and unemployed groups are significantly different. Results showed that the employed samples had significantly higher level of perceived social support \((M = 5.208 \text{ vs. } M = 4.4, t(113) = 3.673, p<.01)\) and time structure \((M = 4.631 \text{ vs. } M = 4.178, t(113) = 2.667, p<.01)\) than that of the unemployed as well, apart from having better mental health. In addition, the employed and unemployed samples showed significant differences on their frequency of financial worries, \( t(113) = -3.144, p<.01. \) However, their perceived physical health showed no significant differences.

In testing Hypothesis 3 (among the unemployed, those with better time structure would have better mental health and higher self-esteem), the unemployed samples were divided into two groups according to their scores on time structure. The upper 40% of the unemployed samples (with time structure scores above 4.317) belonged to the high time structure group, whereas the lower 40% of the unemployed respondents (with scores below 3.933) belonged
to the low time structure group. Independent Mest results in Table 4 below supported this hypothesis in that the high time structure group had significantly higher self-esteem score \((M = 3.071\text{ vs. } M = 2.571, t(40) = -4.838, p < .01)\) and lower GHQ score (which indicates better mental health) \((M = 0.802\text{ vs. } M = 1.635, t(40) = 4.812, p < .01)\) than that of the low time structure group.

Table 4 Mean Scores of GHQ and Self-Esteem of Different Time Structure Groups Among the Unemployed Respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>High Time Structure Group (n = 21)</th>
<th>Low Time Structure Group (n = 21)</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>Sig. (2-tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GHQ</td>
<td>Mean 0.802 S.D. 0.523</td>
<td>Mean 1.635 S.D. 0.597</td>
<td>4.812</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Esteem</td>
<td>Mean 3.071 S.D. 0.377</td>
<td>Mean 2.571 S.D. 0.287</td>
<td>-4.838</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Likewise, in testing Hypothesis 4 (among the unemployed, those with higher levels of perceived social support would have better mental health and higher self-esteem), the unemployed samples were divided into two groups according to their scores on social support. The upper 40% of the unemployed samples (with social support scores above 4.95) belonged to the high social support group, whereas the lower 40% of the unemployed respondents (with scores below 4.167) belonged to the low social support group. Again, independent West results presented in Table 5 below supported this hypothesis in that the high social support group had significantly higher self-esteem score \((M = 2.957\text{ vs. } M = 2.641, t(41) = -2.769, p < .01)\) and lower GHQ score \((M = 1.016\text{ vs. } M = 1.519, t(41) = 2.516, p < .05)\) than that of the low social support group.
Table 5 Mean Scores of GHQ and Self-Esteem of Different Social Support Groups Among the Unemployed Respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>High Social Support Group (n = 21)</th>
<th>Low Social Support Group (n = 22)</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>Sig (2-tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>S. D.</td>
<td>S. D.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GHQ</td>
<td>1.016</td>
<td>0.647</td>
<td>1.519</td>
<td>0.663</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Esteem</td>
<td>2.957</td>
<td>0.389</td>
<td>2.641</td>
<td>0.359</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

No gender differences on self-esteem and mental health were found when both the employed and unemployed groups were analyzed together. However, gender differences were found when only the unemployed group was being analyzed in that unemployed females exhibited higher level of self-esteem ($M = 2.941$ vs. $M = 2.717$, $t (50) = -2.115$, $p<.05$) and better mental health ($M = 0.981$ vs. $M = 1.431$, $t (50) = 2.589$, $p<.05$) than the unemployed males. Apart from that, unemployed females had better time structure than their unemployed male counterparts ($M = 4.625$ vs. $M = 3.85$, $t (50) = -2.95$, $p<.01$).

**Intercorrelations of variables**

It was found that self-esteem, mental health (GHQ, perceived social support, and time structure of the participants were all correlated in that correlation between mental health and time structure was the strongest ($r = -.706$, $p<.01$). This suggested that those who had more structured and purposeful use of time, regardless of their employment status, were likely to have better mental health.

Furthermore, respondents' perceived physical health and frequency of financial worries were both correlated with mental health, self-esteem, social support, and time structure.

Besides, perceived social support was negatively correlated with age ($r = -.216$, $p<.05$).
and self-esteem was positively correlated with education level \( (r = .335, p < .01) \). As for the unemployed samples, their confidence in being reemployed was correlated with their mental health \( (r = -.601, p < .01) \), self-esteem \( (r = .537, p < .01) \), time structure \( (r = .579, p < .01) \), and education level \( (r = .324, p < .05) \). However, contrary to Hepworth's (1980) findings that duration of unemployment was inversely correlated with mental health, duration of unemployment of the present samples was not associated with their mental health, nor with their self-esteem, perceived social support, and time structure. The age of the unemployed respondents also showed no association with these variables.

Discussion

The above findings supported the hypothesis that mental health of the unemployed would be poorer than that of the employed. This result is actually consistent with many prior studies such as Hepworth (1980), Stafford et al. (1980), and Lai et al. (1997). However, contrary to expectation, the self-esteem of the unemployed was not significantly lower than that of the employed. This contradicts the findings of Feather (1982) and many other descriptive studies on unemployment depicting the loss of self-esteem among the unemployed. Yet, this result is not too surprising, as Shamir (1986) also found that self-esteem of highly educated Israeli adult samples was not sensitive to employment status or to changes in employment status. The current lack of difference in self-esteem between the employed and unemployed individuals may imply that adult self-esteem is a rather stable
personality variable which may not be altered easily by life events such as unemployment, although these events may be stressful and affect their psychological health. Indeed, it is likely that most people establish their self-esteem from different aspects well before adulthood. Thus, unemployment, either short-term or long-term, may have no significant impact on their global self-esteem. Besides, it is also possible that some unemployed participants might put on a "brave face" and pretended to have a high self-esteem defensively (Hartley, 1980) due to social desirability, leading to comparable self-esteem level with their employed counterparts.

In line with other studies (McKee-Ryan et al., 2005; Feather & Bond, 1983; Shams, 1993), the present findings demonstrated that better use of time and social support are two important coping resources for the unemployed individuals. As predicted, among the unemployed, those who were more organized and purposeful in their use of time and those who perceived more social support from family, friends, and significant others enjoyed better mental health and higher level of self-esteem. This showed that a better use of time involving more purposeful activities and more social support received from informal networks would act as an effective buffer against the possible negative effects of unemployment on mental health and self-esteem. In other words, unemployed individuals are not homogenous in reacting to the effects of unemployment. The extent of the impact of unemployment varies
depending on individuals' access to such coping resources as better use of time and social support.

These findings also suggested that for safeguarding the psychological well-being, social-functioning, and self-esteem of the unemployed, people should try to occupy their time with meaningful activities (for example, doing voluntary services, reading, doing chores and sports) and reorganize their lives into a routine structure so that they can feel productive and have a sense of accomplishment. That is why the interviewee of Hutchens (1994) advised other unemployed individuals to "Keep yourself occupied! Keep your brain occupied! Cos if you don't you've had it (depression)! If you have other things to do and talk about other than just being unemployed then you're alright. If you have a hobby, make it more than a hobby." (p. 59). Hence, future intervention programs for the unemployed in Hong Kong may consider providing time management courses or guidance for helping the unemployed increase their resourcefulness by initiating and engaging in meaningful activities, and to encourage them to set goals and organize their time and activities effectively. Intervention programs may also consider organizing meaningful activities for the unemployed, such as voluntary services, so as to increase the self-worth and sense of accomplishment of the jobless individuals.

Besides, since perceived social support was found to be important for the unemployed in buffering against the negative impacts of unemployment, it is suggested that the family, friends, and/ or significant others of the unemployed should try to show their support to them.
Although their support may only be emotional instead of practical financial support and may be simply giving advice, they serve as valuable coping resources for people during unemployment. This also led to the implications that future intervention programs may involve setting up of peer support groups for the unemployed individuals, especially for those who lack support from informal social networks—family, friends, and significant others.

In this study, significant gender differences were also found among the unemployed in that unemployed females had higher level of self-esteem, better mental health as well as higher level of time structure. This is in line with the findings of a local study by Lai et al. (2002) in which unemployed men were found to be more psychologically disturbed by unemployment than women but contradict with the findings from recent studies of the West which showed that unemployed women were as distressed as men (Ensminger & Celentano, 1990) or more vulnerable (Muller et al., 1993). Such a difference between the findings of local studies and studies of the West may be due to their different cultures. In many Chinese societies, there is still a traditional belief that men should be the breadwinner of a family and it is a shame for a man to be unemployed and live on government’s financial assistance. Future research may investigate the influence of culture or work ethics of different countries on psychological aspects of unemployed individuals among different gender.

Nevertheless, this research did suffer from several limitations. First of all, except for those younger unemployed who were identified mainly during the job fairs, the response rate
of the older unemployed approached outside the entrance of the job centers was quite low, especially for middle-aged women. Besides, it was possible that those who were low in self-esteem and severely depressed might not be willing to take part in the study, just like one unemployed middle-aged man who refused to participate told me that he really had “no mood” to participate owing to his unemployment and that he really felt he was “useless” after glancing at the item “I certainly feel useless at times” which measures self-esteem of the questionnaire.

Secondly, the sample size (with only 52 unemployed samples and 63 employed samples) was quite small, though the range of their age and duration of unemployment was large. This might be the reason why age and duration of unemployment of the unemployed participants showed no significant relationship with their mental health and self-esteem. Future research should either increase the sample size to increase representativeness of the samples, or confound the samples into single age group and minimize the variety of their duration of unemployment.

Thirdly, owing to the shortage of time, convenient sampling instead of random sampling method was adopted in recruiting the employed samples. This might pose problems in generalizing the findings to the general population. In addition, as there was no seat outside the entrance of the job centers, the employed participants there needed to stand while completing the questionnaire themselves or being interviewed by the researcher with the
questionnaire for several minutes. This might influence the accuracy of their answers as some might try to rush to fill in the questionnaire as fast as possible due to fatigue or other reasons.

Furthermore, as the General Health Questionnaire measures mental health of the participants in the last month, it was possible that those long-term unemployed individuals who had been suffering from poor mental health for a long period might choose the answer “same as usual” which had low scoring and indicated relatively good mental health when answering the questions on whether they experienced certain symptoms or behaviors in the last month. This might also contribute in explaining why longer duration of unemployment was not associated with poorer mental health among the unemployed respondents in this study, apart from the reason of a small sample size.

Most importantly, this research was cross-sectional. Therefore, any observed relationships are only correlational and we could not conclude that the poor mental health of the unemployed individuals was caused by their unemployment. As mentioned by Price (1992), “the rival hypothesis, that persons with mental health problems are more likely than others to lose their jobs, is difficult to rule out unless representative samples of both employed and unemployed persons can be followed over time” (p. 9). Likewise, although the present study found that more structured and purposeful use of time was strongly correlated with people’s mental health, it is hard to determine the direction of the causal link between them. It is plausible that individuals who have problems in filling and structuring their time
during unemployment may feel non-productive, resulting in psychological distress and poorer mental health. Yet, it is also plausible that poor mental health of the jobless individuals may reduce their incentives to pursue meaningful activities, leading to problems in time structure. Whereas, other researcher suggested that the relationship between time structure and mental health is reciprocal in nature (Brenner & Bartell, 1983). To further examine the causality among these variables, more local longitudinal research should be carried out.
References


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