

TO WORK OR NOT TO WORK? AN ENQUIRY OF MEN EXPERIENCING UNEMPLOYMENT, PROMOTION, AND RETIREMENT

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The psychological reactions of 3 groups of men undergoing work-related transitions (unemployment, promotion, and retirement) were compared using content analysis of their responses to an open-ended question about their current experiences. Our propositions linking paid work with psychological well-being were supported by data from the promoted and unemployed groups. The retired group also gave support to these propositions, in accordance with the assumptions of society that they proved to be content to “relax and potter.” Qualitative analyses of the men’s responses, while showing cohort effects, also demonstrated that worth and work were strongly associated, and another important associate of worth was autonomy.

Keywords: work-related transitions, work experiences, unemployment, promotion, retirement, autonomy, men.

In our society, there is a general expectation that men will work. Work is seen as a source of financial gain and opportunities to associate with other people, which engender a feeling of self-respect as well as acting as a source of respect from others. Thus, in terms of Maslow, Frager, and Cox’s (1970) theory of motivation, work provides fulfillment of the need for esteem, leading to feelings of worth (i.e., psychological well-being). So much emphasis is placed on a man’s job as a means of classification, that “Who are you?” has been traditionally expressed as “What do you do?” A man’s occupational identity implies certain aspects of himself and sets up certain assumptions on which others base their interactions with him. Even

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when a man has retired, a frequent title used to identify him is that of his former occupation (e.g., "I am a retired builder").

Throughout their lives, men confront a series of occupational choices that begin in childhood, when an occupation is seen as an important attribute of the adult they wish to become. Later, men make tentative choices based on interest, then exploratory choices, and finally reality choices. A compromise is effected between self and reality somewhere on the development path. In today's dynamic society, few men can rigidly and accurately map out a career in advance; thus, the future holds many uncertainties. However, most men place importance on security, hope, and aspiration, particularly when their society has been in an economic recession. Most occupations are characterized by a series of relatively well-defined ranks or grade, and although progression is not guaranteed, a particular career prototype within an occupation is usually known, and can channel and guide aspirations. There is also a sequence of timing along the career path. At certain points in one's life span, society's assumptions are that certain events will occur. There is an agreed time to begin to work, a time to move along the career path, and a time to retire from work; specifically, it is customary for men to enter the work force after they have finished their schooling and to remain working until retirement or death.

Today, *unemployment* is rife and employment opportunities are restricted. Many men are denied the opportunity for financial gain, work associates, and respect as well as the security, hopes, and aspirations that are afforded by work. Because they are denied a sense of worth and, thus, of psychological well-being, in essence they lack meaning in what they are doing, which threatens their fundamental being. Associated psychological costs have already begun to be reported (Brenner, 1973; Viney, 1983).

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For men who have obtained employment and moved along the career path, promotions usually include the crossing of an organizational boundary. This can lead to changes in their behavior, and how they see themselves and are viewed by others. Whether or not these changes are advantageous depends on the individual and situation. *Promotions* typically involve restructuring and adaptation of security, needs, hopes, and aspirations. However, fulfillment of their occupational identity should be reflected in a greater sense of self-worth (Glaser, 1968; Hall, 1976).

Retirement marks the end of the career path. There are some similarities to unemployment, in the sense of a loss of work-related financial gain, work associates, and the hope and aspirations that work provides; however, retired men have had these experiences in the past. They may even have had an initial period of unemployment during the Depression, but from then on have worked, experienced promotions, completed their working years, and moved into the expected retirement period. However, the association of "work and worth" has been with them all their life;

hence, upon retiring, they must establish a new sense of meaning for their activities (Atchley, 1974; Carp, 1972; Crawford, 1972; Gubrium, 1976).

Unemployment, promotion, and retirement are three work-related aspects of men's lives that may be viewed as transitions or crises because they involve psychological restructuring and adaptation (Viney, 1976, 1980). If work is a measure of worth of self-esteem (Turtle, Cranfield, Halse-Rogers, Reuman, & Williams, 1978), then the psychological states of men involved in these different transitions should reflect this. We hypothesized that unemployed men would display the greatest psychological costs. According to Maslow et al. (1970), if the need for esteem is not able to be fulfilled, then anxiety, depression, anger, and helplessness result. Maslow et al. warned that prolonged unemployment may permanently damage the aspiration levels of needs, such that the person may continue to be satisfied only by getting sufficient food. Men receiving a promotion, however, have been given social recognition and the opportunity to demonstrate further their competence; thus, their need for esteem should be being fulfilled. They should express good feelings but also some uncertainty relating to their future career prospects. For men in retirement, we hypothesized that, having established their worth during their working years, the need of the retired for esteem has been satiated so they should be content to give up pressure, tension, and urgency for the need to relax and potter (Maslow et al., 1970). Thus, they should experience little uncertainty, anxiety, depression, anger, or helplessness, but much competence, sociability, and good feelings.

Method

Participants and Procedure

All participants came from the same provincial city in Australia. Those in the unemployed group ($n = 60$; age range = 17–57 years) volunteered when approached as they left the Commonwealth Employment Office. They had been unemployed for at least 6 months. Men in the promoted group ($n = 29$; age range = 24–48 years) were volunteers from the various organizations we approached and had been promoted within the last 2 years. Their promoted occupations ranged from chief accountant to mine deputy. These men were interviewed on the premises of the organization for which they worked. The retired men ($n = 40$; age range = 58–82 years) were also volunteers. Their interviews were conducted in their homes.

Measures

Participants' psychological reactions were assessed in an interview with by a female psychologist that included the open-ended question "Please tell me about your life now, the good and the bad." Their responses were,

with their permission, tape recorded and transcribed, claused, and coded according to the requirements of the content analysis scales employed in this inquiry. These content analysis scales have been effectively used in other studies of transitions (Viney, 1980; Viney & Bazeley, 1977). They provide reliable and valid quantitative assessment, while preserving much of the meaning of the qualitative aspects of the participants' responses (Viney, 1981, 1983; Viney & Westbrook, 1981).

Uncertainty. Uncertainty was measured by the Cognitive Anxiety Scale (Viney & Westbrook, 1976), which taps emotions experienced when people have difficulty in understanding what is happening to them. References that relate to new events (e.g., "I'm only new to this job"), comments about lack of meaning (e.g., "I don't really know how to solve the problem"), and descriptions of overwhelming experiences (e.g., "I'm not really used to being in charge of so many people") are all scored.

Anxiety. Anxiety was measured by the Total Anxiety Scale (Gottschalk, 1979; Gottschalk & Gleser, 1969; Gottschalk, Winget, & Gleser, 1969), which comprises six subscales representing anxiety from six different sources: threats to physical integrity, as in death (e.g., "If I snuff it, then my wife knows how to cope with things") and mutilation (e.g., "I was really cut up about that"); and threats to personal integrity or lack of worth, as in loneliness (e.g., "My girlfriend and I have just broken up"), guilt (e.g., "I should be out looking for a job"), shame (e.g., "I'm embarrassed to tell people I haven't got a job"), and vague worries (e.g., "I've had a fair amount of problems with the bureaucracy").

Depression. Depression was assessed by the Hostility In Scale, which focuses on self-critical responses (e.g., "Every day is just as rotten as the last"); the Hostility Out Scale, which measures directly expressed anger and is scored when angry comments are made about the world or others (e.g. "I was really angry because they didn't even bother to interview me"); and the Ambivalent Hostility Scale, which measures indirectly expressed anger and is scored for comments in which the anger has been disowned by the speaker and projected onto others, thus becoming self-directed (e.g., "People don't think you're really trying to get a job"). These three scales were developed by the same American team of researchers (Gottschalk, 1979; Gottschalk & Gleser, 1969; Gottschalk et al., 1969).

Competence. Competence was measured by the Origin Scale (Westbrook & Viney, 1980), regarding intention (e.g., "I mean to be at the top in another 5 years"), effort (e.g., "I work hard"), ability (e.g., "I feel rewarded when I do the job well"), and influence (e.g., "I now have many people reporting to me").

Helplessness. Helplessness was measured by the Pawn Scale (Westbrook & Viney, 1980), regarding lack of effort (e.g., "I just can't be

bothered trying to get a job”) and lack of influence (e.g., “Nobody is even willing to give me a go”).

Sociability. Sociability was assessed on the Sociality Scale (Viney & Westbrook, 1979), in relation to expressions of personal involvement in positive relationships. It contains four subscales: helping relationships (e.g., “He offered me more money”), intimate relationships (e.g., “My wife and I now have time to be together”), influencing relationships (e.g., “The deputy manager is more receptive to my ideas now”), and unspecified relationships (e.g., “We got together over a drink”).

Good feelings. Good feelings were measured by the Positive Affect Scale (Westbrook, 1976), which is scored in relation references to or implications of good feelings (e.g., “I’ve never been happier in my life”).

Results

The means and standard deviations of the content analysis scale and subscale scores are given in Table 1. Table 2 shows the results of the multivariate and univariate analyses of variance for the nine sets of scales and six anxiety subscales. For both sets, multivariate *F* was significant. For uncertainty, anxiety, directly expressed and indirectly expressed anger, helplessness, sociability, and good feelings the univariate *F* value attained a high level of significance, and for competence, *F* was significant at .02. Finally, the different sources of anxiety, those dealing with death, anxiety, guilt, shame, and vague worries showed significant differences.

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations of the Content Analysis Scale and Subscale Scores for Unemployed, Promoted, and Retired Men

Scales and subscales	Unemployed (N = 60)		Promoted (N = 29)		Retired (N = 40)	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
<i>Scales</i>						
Uncertainty	1.02	0.63	1.30	0.66	0.69	0.35
Anxiety	2.36	0.74	1.50	1.08	1.77	0.66
Depression	1.57	0.59	0.66	0.66	0.97	0.46
Direct anger	1.14	0.43	0.99	0.66	0.77	0.32
Indirect anger	0.84	0.43	0.50	0.33	0.50	0.31
Competence	1.23	0.32	1.48	0.53	1.45	0.34
Helplessness	1.62	0.39	1.42	0.71	1.13	0.42
Sociability	0.24	0.17	0.41	0.25	0.56	0.19
Good feelings	0.66	0.28	1.25	0.54	1.20	0.43
<i>Subscales</i>						
Death	0.38	0.12	0.35	0.14	0.49	0.33
Mutilation	0.47	0.29	0.38	0.22	0.54	0.42
Loneliness	1.17	0.61	0.90	0.73	1.07	0.63
Guilt	1.02	0.68	0.48	0.42	0.44	0.21
Shame	1.12	0.67	0.56	0.71	0.79	0.54
Vague worries	1.11	0.53	0.89	0.62	0.74	0.32

Table 2. Results of Multivariate and Univariate Analyses of the Content Analysis Scale and Subscale Scores for Unemployed, Promoted, and Retired Men

Source	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
<i>Content analysis scales</i>			
Multivariate analysis	18.16	18,246	.001
Univariate analyses			
Uncertainty	9.79	2,131	.001
Anxiety	13.71	2,131	.001
Depression	8.06	2,131	.001
Direct anger	29.06	2,131	.001
Indirect anger	15.48	2,131	.001
Competence	4.28	2,131	.020
Helplessness	12.56	2,131	.001
Sociability	33.06	2,131	.001
Good feelings	33.09	2,131	.001
<i>Content analysis subscales</i>			
Multivariate analysis	5.62	12,252	.001
Univariate analyses			
Death	4.53	2,131	.020
Mutilation	2.05	2,131	<i>ns</i>
Loneliness	1.76	2,131	<i>ns</i>
Guilt	19.04	2,131	.001
Shame	8.36	2,131	.001
Vague worries	6.90	2,131	.001

The results of a priori small-group comparisons of the unemployed with the retired, and the promoted with the retired groups supported our hypotheses. Unemployed men showed the greatest psychological costs, exhibiting high anxiety, depression, anger, and helplessness. Promoted men expressed competence, sociability, and good feelings but felt helpless and uncertain. Retired men, in contrast, retained their morale as measured by competence, sociability, and good feelings, with relatively little uncertainty about what was happening to them in this period of their lives, but showed significantly more concern about approaching death.

Comparisons of content analysis scale scores showed that unemployed men expressed the greatest anxiety, depression, helplessness, directly expressed anger, and indirectly expressed anger. Their inability to get a job left them feeling guilt, shame, and vague worry. Thus, the proposition that work is important for psychological well-being was supported. The promoted group demonstrated that this transition was related to feelings of being competent but the demands of a new job role gave rise to feelings of uncertainty, which seemed to be concerned with whether the man was as big as the job he had secured. The retired men had retained their morale. Work had been an important part of their lives but their retirement was seen—by them and other members of society—as a reward for having worked, so their feelings of self-worth equaled those of promoted men.

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The generalizability of the patterns of psychological reactions identified through quantitative analysis for the three groups of men must remain in some doubt until replication is attempted. These groups differed, not only in their experiencing of different work-related transitions, but in their chronological ages and the life span cohorts to which they belonged. First, age brings a variety of concomitant experiences. Elderly men, for example, typically deal with more physical illness than younger men; yet, if the pattern of the latter group's reactions is compared with that of the physically ill elderly (Westbrook & Viney, 1982), no similarity is found. This age-related experience, at least, seems not to have been influential. Second, members of the same cohort share many life experiences not shared by others. The older men in the group, for example, all experienced the Depression. What happened to them then could well have determined their current reactions, so that cohorts from other periods of history may show different patterns yet again. Therefore, to examine these possibilities and achieve our second aim of more intensive exploration of what the men had to tell us, we examined some qualitative data.

Unemployed men showed the cost of their jobless situation. They were lacking in self-respect, as can be seen from Michael G.'s description: "I sometimes start to wonder whether I'm of use to anybody at all."

Worthlessness was something Robert D. was dealing with: "Being unemployed, um, it makes you really numb in the head. You're not doing anything. You're not thinking very much all the time. Makes you lazy."

Feelings of inferiority were also commonly stated, as in this example from Peter P: "The worst thing about being unemployed is the stigma. You walk down the street in worn out clothes and people look down on you."

John P. had given up hope: "Being unemployed demoralizes you; the longer you're on the dole, you eventually totally give up looking for a job...what's the use?" Further, David W. expressed his feelings of lack of aspiration: "Sometimes you just get used to being unemployed and you don't even feel like going out and finding a job."

To be unemployed was to be deprived of meaning and direction, as observed by Paul S.: "Well, you sort of worry about yourself: what you're going to do during your life, what's going to happen to you?"

Lack of financial gain as well as the constraints this created was mentioned by all unemployed men we interviewed. Allan D. summed up his experiences: "Well, I've just found it bloody horrible. You've got nothing to do and you don't get enough money to do anything with."

After months of being denied the opportunity to work, our participants faced the possibility that they may never have the security, hope, independence, or self-worth associated with paid employment.

For the promoted group, the new job usually implied changes and positive feelings associated with the satisfaction of their need for esteem.

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Richard P. expressed it this way: "I'm very pleased with job change. It has meant a significant increase in status, in responsibility, and in economic gain." Michael C. also perceived his promotion as a valuable step: "From a career point of view, this promotion has been very good because my marketability has increased a lot. Wagewise, it's very good and opportunities to learn have been exceptional."

Changes in himself postpromotion were very clear to Jim W.: "There was a dramatic change in me when I went onto the staff, from the tools to the people...I think you realize what it's like on the other side of the fence...and I'm much more responsible."

Philip H. initially was unsure of his ability to cope with his new position:

At first, I had a few anxieties about whether or not to take the job, because, er, obviously it's fairly responsible sort of job and you've got extra strains from different areas on if you can successfully do the job without any major hassles.

The financial security offered by most of the promotions was an obvious benefit, as Doug D. said: "Now that I've got this promotion, I'm in a situation where I'm putting money aside for investments." Generally, promotion was viewed as a rewarding experience, and Charles G. put it this way: "When I was promoted, that was the fulfillment of my objectives." Most promotions were thought to be challenging, with added responsibility as well as financial gain. Promotions gave the men a feeling of worth, independence, usefulness, and confidence in the future.

The retired men had established their measure of worth through work over a long period, regardless of their specific role, and had come to terms with any career conflicts. An aspect of retirement that most of the men acknowledged was freedom from the constraints of a job and the necessity to earn a living. Mike S., who had worked in the steel mills all his life, said: "Of course, when you retire, you get a lump sum of superannuation and, ah, you feel more independent; you don't have to worry about a weekly wage." Hal S. enjoyed being his own man: "The good thing about retirement is that you do what you want to do, generally speaking."

However, not all of the retired men felt so financially secure. Al I. expressed his concerns about the cost of living:

Well, in many respects, I've had a very happy retirement, but I've found over the years that, er, the pension itself hasn't the value it had when I first retired. We are both thrifty people. We were brought up in hard conditions, and we've found living on the pension is very difficult.

Most men did, however, manage on their incomes, and were happy and fulfilled in their retirement. Mich R. stated: "I was looking forward to

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retirement and I've thoroughly enjoyed it. I've no regrets, don't miss my work, and I've time to do some of the things I've always wanted to do."

Retirement was, for these men, a positive period in their lives. They retained their sense of hope and aspiration for the future, based on the reality of their life in retirement. An official job was no longer a culturally necessary part of their identity, nor was it a source of meaning in their lives. For men like Tom R., they had enjoyed their working lives and now enjoyed their retirement:

Retirement was something I looked forward to because I think I had been a good worker all my life, I can go back to any job I've ever been in, but when I gave up work it was the best thing that ever happened. I can please myself in whatever I do and there's never a dull moment so I'm very fortunate.

Although both retired and unemployed men were not working, the effects were different because the two groups were in different life stages. Retired men were expecting not to work, while unemployed men were expecting to work. Robert V., an unemployed man, had incorporated this view of the importance of work into his view of life and expressed it thus: "The main thing really is just not being able to work, that's the worst thing...because we're really designed to work, you know, and when we don't work, everything's just not right, you know."

Although groups were denied the opportunity for work, the retired men were not expected by society to be employed, whereas the unemployed men were. Wally T., a retired man, summed up his attitude toward work:

I've always loved machinery. I always was fascinated by it and I've never regretted working with machines, and the last years of my work were...the same as the ones before, they were very pleasant. I enjoyed working very much, but at the same time I looked forward to retirement.

Promoted men also experienced the socially expected sequence of life events associated with work, Nicholas, who was in the bloom of his career, stated: "I've always enjoyed working. I don't think there's been a day in my life when I haven't gotten up and wanted to come to work."

All three men saw work as a very important part of their lives. Robert was being denied the opportunity to work and this had affected his perspective, even of other events, so that "everything" was not right. Nicholas obtained great pleasure from his work. Wally had enjoyed his job all his life, but saw retirement as positive both now and in the future.

Both the qualitative and quantitative data we obtained in this study provide support for our propositions relating paid work to psychological well-being. In these three work-related transition scenarios, sense of worth appears to be strongly related to work. Yet, the very rich can live a life of

so called idleness and still retain their sense of worth because they did not live in poverty and were able to do whatever they wished. Thus, being able to do what you want and having sufficient funds to accommodate this are associated. Perhaps, then, an important associate of worth is autonomy, which is very much related to the availability of money. All three groups of men referred to financial security or lack of it. The unemployed had no financial security, so they felt the benefits of financial security and the opportunity to do things they wanted to do. The retired, who were not necessarily rich but had reached a balance between reality and wants, so that they felt they had sufficient funds, also felt secure.

If the trend in Western societies is toward unemployment increasing, how can an alternative sense of worth be accessed? We did not attempt to answer this question; however, our qualitative data suggest that autonomy or independence is an important part of the feeling of worth and the fulfilment of the need for esteem, not only in the early years of a boy's development, but through a man's life span. Future research in which this is taken into account may provide some understanding of how a sense of worth may be made available to all, whether or not they do paid work.

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