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Long-Term Unemployed People in the 21st Century: An Old Problem amid a New Conjuncture

Unemployment is an integral part of the capitalist economy. High rates of unemployment can be considered a positive phenomenon on the labour market, breeding respect for work and stronger motives for better work performance as related to the risk of losing one's job. However, long-term unemployment (i.e. lasting longer than one year) is a negative phenomenon. It bears a range of harmful consequences, including the consolidation of joblessness, often leading to its chronic quality. While the supply of jobs may reduce the unemployment rate, it does not solve the problem of long-term unemployment, and this is particularly dangerous for those who experience it. In the post-industrial era, long-term unemployment is a has various facets and characteristics. As such, it calls for varied interventions for people at risk of and affected by it.

Keywords: work, long-term unemployment, capitalist economy, career counselling, individualism, aspirations of the long-term unemployed

Introduction

Unemployment is an inherent element of the capitalist economy. Even in (relatively rare) situations in which there is an excess of labour supply over labour demand, there is a discrepancy between job vacancies and their use on the labour market. Depending on the scale of this phenomenon, such situations may disrupt the operation and the economic outcomes of the workplaces, with the workforce potential being squandered. To be unemployed for a long time is a distinctive and usually difficult experience for an individual to experience unemployment for a long time. Such people may need others' help to subjectively realise their life and work biographies. For long-term unemployed people to successfully move out of their long-term unemployment, a holistic approach must be implemented in which individuals' respective contexts and situations must be taken into account. It is not enough to focus on work alone. Nonetheless, interventions launched by employment

services focus on providing unemployed people with work-related resources, unfortunately without considering their subjective and non-work circumstances.

This paper seeks to portray the specificity of long-term unemployed people today, as their situation is an unresolved—and perhaps never fully resolvable—problem. According to the available forecasts, long-term unemployment in Europe will remain considerable, affecting approximately 1.8 million people in the near future (Liwacz, n.d., p. 2). At the moment, the sphere of employment is undergoing staggering changes, which are mainly caused by technical and technological advancement, demographic factors, previously unforeseen consequences of the coronavirus pandemic and the war in Ukraine. These changes are significant to the long-term unemployed and to people at risk of unemployment. Except for demographic factors, all other factor that affect the labour market and people's lives are unpredictable. Besides, these factors influence individual biographies in various ways and with a different intensity, often generating entirely unforeseeable effects. Individuals' work and position on the occupational path have been at the centre of attention of vocational guidance services for a long time. Initially, this was associated with attempts to use prospective employees' potentials optimally in work settings (primarily in industrial production). People's personal circumstances were only taken into account in the context of their usefulness and application in professional work. Today, vocational guidance services are based on the humanistic paradigm, and they put prioritise individuals' subjectivities over their instrumental use on the labour market. Thereby emphasis is put on the importance of a given person and enabling them to participate in one of the most significant developmental tasks of adulthood in a dignified and productive manner. As a result, vocational guidance services are becoming more and more focused on career guidance and biographical counselling (Bańka, 2007). A well-realised life and work biography provide the best opportunities for professional activity, not only for an individual, but also for the entire economy and the particular company that employs such person (Piorunek, 2004, p. 229). Therefore, while to help long-term unemployed people effectively, one needs to have a good grasp of the complexity of the contemporary labour market, one must above all take into account the individual circumstances and personal resources of a given individual.

The primary purpose of this paper is to portray the complex contemporary conditions that determine the situation of long-term unemployed people. My examination of the numerous attempts to solve this problem suggests that the right solution involves a personalist approach, which addresses an unemployed person's individual occupational and non-occupational circumstances, while at the same time recognising their personal situation. This approach should be implemented in line with an individual project developed on this basis.

Consequences of Long-Term Unemployment Today

Unemployed people commonly declare willingness to work. The complexity of the social consequences of unemployment was first comprehensively shown in an interwar study (1930) carried out by Marie Jahoda and her team in an Austrian town called Marienthal (Jahoda, Lazarsfeld, & Zeisel, 2007). The study showed that job loss resulted in a significant decrease in people's social and cultural activity, weakened the social bonds within the town's community and caused long-term unemployed people to be disengaged from social issues, even those directly concerning them. The longer unemployment persisted, the more the problems of social inactivity accumulated. Though generalisations based on the Marienthal research results are debatable, the study was certainly spot-on regarding the correlation of prolonged unemployment and a reduction in social activity combined with the increased passivity of the town's residents. Similar mechanisms were observed in the US during the Great Depression of the interwar period. Poland also went through such experiences in the first stage of transition to the market economy (Bańka 1995; Rychard & Federowicz, 1993).

Certain consequences of long-term unemployment are not as surprising today as they were in the mid-1920s. As the current unemployment rate in Poland is low, it is not shocking and people have become accustomed to it. Prior to the coronavirus pandemic, the employee market prevailed in Poland, and the rate of unemployment stood at 5.2% (as compared to 6.7% in 2017), according to the data of Statistics Poland. Under such conditions, people who wanted to work had every opportunity to find a job; despite that, structural unemployment still exists and jobs are unevenly distributed, two issues that must not be underestimated. Multiple instruments have been developed in order to reduce the risk of unemployment and to protect the unemployed. This has certainly helped curb the scale of unemployment. Nevertheless, only modest effects can be seen in interventions against long-term unemployment, which bears dangerous ramifications and is a major economic and social problem (Podwysocka, 2016, p. 194).

The experience of prolonged unemployment causes changes in people's behaviour, self-esteem and aspirations, which also affects employers' assessment of their work competencies. Sometimes, the unemployed implement their individual strategies of resourcefulness, which tend to be limited to solving subsistence problems, sometimes without resorting to typical employment. Crucially, complex consequences are experienced by all those who do not work, regardless of whether they have lost their job or whether they have never had one in their biographies (Antosz, 2016, p. 329; Banaszekiewicz & Komorowska, 2012, p. 135).

Job loss is characterised by distinctive phases, from shock, which is people's first response to being made redundant, through optimism and hopes for new opportunities, followed by depression and pessimism, which arise in prolonged unemployment. Over time, people adapt to their situation as jobless and come to terms with

it (Giddens, 2006, p. 785). People who have not worked yet usually start their 'work biographies' with a carefree attitude and optimism; they tend not to have aspirations and plans for their lives.

Even though the unemployment rate in Poland is low today (5.4% as of the end of December 2021, according to the data of Statistics Poland), job loss is a traumatic experience for most people and causes severe stress. Its main microeconomic effect involves a deterioration of the economic situation of unemployed people and their families, which is mainly reflected in a more or less radical lowering of their prior standard of living (Kwiatkowski, 2006, pp. 82–9). A prolonged reduction or the complete loss of income necessitates changes in housekeeping, which often also entails drastic limitations in meeting families' basic needs (Chudzicka-Czupała, 2004, p. 89). The substitute forms of solving or postponing financial problems applied by households help unemployed people and their loved ones overcome subsistence challenges on an ad hoc basis. This, however, tends to produce negative consequences, as the unemployed people fail to grasp their actual financial situation accurately and, as a result, to take actions that could reduce the problems at hand. Therefore, they are not determined enough in their job-seeking, sometimes even refusing to implement measures to change their current situation, which they assess as 'not tragic, after all.' Ironically, such attitudes and situations may be the fallout from a range of social programmes, because in many cases they reinforce people's economic inactivity instead of fostering pro-active involvement in the world of work.

Furthermore, prolonged unemployment usually reduces people's self-esteem. This is the most serious and common response to job loss or inability to obtain a job. The longer people remain unemployed and the more failures they suffer, the more their self-esteem decreases, triggering the loss of self-belief and the questioning of their capabilities. Reduced self-esteem also contributes to passivity in job seeking and to withdrawal from and avoidance of tasks, because people come to feel that positive results are unattainable to them. This problem particularly affects people who had jobs but lost them. A sizeable group of such people belong to the 50-and-older category. As work was a salient value for them, not only in the material sphere, having lost their jobs, they are critical of themselves and their social position. Although they are eager to return to work, a range of external circumstances (such as employers' frequent reluctance to take on people from this age group, the lack of adequate vacancies, and the technical and technological changes on the labour market) aggravate their lack of belief in success, thus thwarting their job-seeking efforts.

Besides, unemployment is associated with an array of adverse emotional states, such as dissatisfaction, sadness and depression. Of course, in the direct aftermath of losing their jobs, people may exhibit an optimistic attitude, yet it tends to be replaced by anxiety and nervousness over time. These are exacerbated by psychological tensions one experiences as a result of prolonged unacceptance of one's situation.

A decrease in cognitive activity is associated with individuals' general passivity. It turns out that people's social and intellectual activity shrinks along with the lack of work activity; concomitantly, curiosity about the world, which is a vital trait, decreases as well. This results from the fact that people's entire attention is focused on the matters of subsistence.

Additionally detrimental psychological consequences stem from the passivity of people who do not need to organise their days or discipline themselves. Work activity imposes a certain rhythm of life and makes people take care of themselves, including their health, fitness and way of life. With their jobs gone, nothing seems necessary anymore to people. Unemployed people must determine and arrange their activities on their own, excepting perhaps visits at the employment office, which are often snubbed. Many other pursuits in which people were involved simultaneously with work or study, are postponed. Having too much leisure breeds lazy habits and disrespect for time. As a result, unemployed people feel exempt from the pressure of time and consequently do not plan or monitor their activities, which makes them use time less effectively. Their performance of even simple tasks is inefficient and chaotic. All this combines to spawn reluctance to undertake any actions or efforts, which in turn prompts resistance to or refusal of external offers concerning re-engagement with work. People develop and consolidate attitudes of detachment, distancing and self-marginalisation, which become difficult to overcome.

Unemployed people's negative self-assessment and low self-esteem contribute to a curtailment of their social relations. Older people in particular feel ashamed of and embarrassed by the situation they experience, tend to fear being pitied by others and sometimes even envy those who are successful. A decrease in social activity is also associated with the economic difficulties of unemployed people and their families. The need to economise forces unemployed people to reduce their spendings, which involves purchasing clothes less frequently and paying less attention to appearance. This enhances the social isolation of the unemployed because, as a result of such constraints, their personal contacts are usually limited to people who are in a similar situation. In such a group, an atmosphere of commitment is rare, as is willingness to increase job-seeking aspirations and determination.

In addition to being damaging to unemployed people's personal characteristics, unemployment also generates multiple negative consequences to their work-related resources. The longer a person is out of work, the more their occupational usefulness and chances of finding a job decrease. The work-related resources that become depleted as unemployment persists include, for example, occupational competencies, work experience, validity (renewal) of qualifications, occupational stability, proficiency in job performance, teamwork, cooperation, responsibility, self-control, decision-making courage, occupational resourcefulness and innovation. The rapidity of changes in the world of work accelerates the lessening of unemployed people's prior resources and triggers a 'spiral of decline' (Europejska Fundacja, 1992, p. 16), which denotes a series of mutually stimulating and intensifying negative events

and states that make it difficult for an unemployed person to move out of unemployment. The downward spiral notion was proposed at the end of the last century to capture the numerous consequences of unemployment that accumulate and cause a progressing deterioration of the unemployed person's situation and their displacement to the margins of social life. Today, these consequences still persist, but their intensity has changed. Low income is not as impactful as it used to be, because social benefits and support from multiple helping organisations considerably reduce the threat to the existence of people who are out of work. Such help is extended not only to the unemployed but also to some underpaid employees, especially that jobs involve multiple duties and systematic involvement in a range of work-related activities which not always translate into a substantial improvement of people's financial situation. In 2001, 14 million employees in the European Union suffered from in-work poverty as a result of low remuneration (Damon, 2012, p. 114). Such developments do not encourage people to be pro-active job-seekers, because under Rhine capitalism, which prevails in Europe and is characterised by strong social support, the economic (social) factor is not a powerful incentive to take up employment (Albert, 1995, p. 116).

The other effects of decline, which include the severance of contact with colleagues and social isolation, have a weaker impact as well, because the once dominant face-to-face relations are more and more often replaced by communication social media and instant messengers. During the almost two-year-long pandemic, this tendency was only intensified and consolidated. The electronic media have also effectively replaced the traditional informal communication via peer contact, which often helped disseminate information about vacancies. In addition, the employment services that provided vocational guidance during the pandemic limited their activities to the essential electronically mediated contacts media. Such interventions were merely symbolic or purely formal.

Consequently, entering into an existential downward spiral as a result of unemployment has ceased to be a major and common threat. At the end of the 2010s, unemployed people no longer dread it, because the typical problems associated with unemployment do not put jobless people's personal and family lives in jeopardy, which was the case in the earlier phases of capitalism.

Nevertheless, being unemployed still triggers a range of feelings, including sadness, dissatisfaction, rebellion, social injustice and marginalisation. These feelings may encourage unemployed people to seek a job actively, and they may be conducive to re-engagement in work. However, these feelings tend to atrophy (fade away) over time. Although social atrophy does not completely preclude pro-active job-seeking, it significantly limits its chances and hinders its process. Thus, it is vital to try and prevent the emergence long-term unemployment, particularly in excess of 24 months of joblessness. Difficulties in re-engagement with the world of work immeasurably increased beyond this timeframe (Kabaj, 2004, p. 171).

In some situations, unemployment is caused by unemployed people's personal decisions and results from their preferences. This is usually a random occurrence, but it may also be associated with the implementation of a certain model of biography one has adopted. If this is the case, the unemployed person will shun employment and shield themselves against all incentives in this scope.

Making people who have been unemployed for a long time re-engage in work is very complex and requires a lot of effort, because it involves solving a broad spectrum of problems. As long-term unemployed people are unique individuals and the complexities of their respective situations vary widely, it is difficult to establish any common patterns of their biographies. In reality, every such person is different, so trying to identify any typical situations or suggesting any typical adequate measures would be ill-advised and could lead to harmful solutions. To provide effective support, one must attend to every person individually and recognise their characteristics and dispositions, as well as the contexts formative of their situation.

Long-Term Unemployed People at the Onset of the 2020s

Unemployment is characterised by various forms and leads to different consequences. Joblessness is regarded as long-term unemployment when a person has been out of work for longer than one year. Expressed in absolute numbers, long-term unemployed people account for 40–60% of the total unemployed population. This makes for a big group in need of help. In May 2022, 7,068 long-term unemployed people were registered in the Lubuskie Province. According to the data of the Provincial Labour Office in Zielona Góra (WUP, 2022), they constituted 45.7% of all the unemployed registered by the employment services in the area.

Long-term unemployed people do not form a homogeneous group: they are female and male, members of various age groups, people with different levels of education, urban and rural dwellers, as well as people with various disabilities and able-bodied individuals. While these personal and demographic features used to differentiate long-term unemployed people in the past, now they are primarily used to characterise them as a group that need intervention and support. Both young people and people aged 50 and older make up significant proportions of this group. It has been found that the chances of finding a job decrease with age (Kirenko & Duda, 2018, p. 221). The current data indicate that young people (many of whom have no prior work experience) and people over 50 years of age are most susceptible to being jobless for longer than one year. Age is associated with work experience. Research has shown that [p]eople who have been unemployed for longer than one year are different from people who are “temporarily” unemployed. Firstly, their unemployed status becomes, so to speak, “professionalised,” meaning that unemployment increasingly turning into a way of life. Secondly, occupational re-engagement of the long-term unemployed is much difficult than of the short-term unemployed’

(Kabaj & Koptas, 1995, p. 23). A person who is out of touch with paid work for a period exceeding one year suffers such a decline of their occupational skills that they are unlikely to ever regain full ability to work. Unfortunately, the longer one is unemployed, the greater risk one faces that the situation will continue, sometimes even for years, causing various personal and social problems. Regardless of individuals' personal traits, their occupational competencies and motivation to work weaken as unemployment continues, and they succumb to ever-intensifying negative factors with their objective and subjective impact. Most support programmes for the unemployed and most instruments against long-term unemployment are designed for people once had one or another job. In their case, the goal is to restore their work activity via various training courses, intervention jobs, public jobs and creation of new jobs (Szyłko-Skoczny, 2007, p. 230). Labour-market programmes are primarily focused on equipping the unemployed with occupational competencies, but they do not address their personal issues and issues unrelated to employment or work. Meanwhile, these issues are the main factors that perpetuate long-term unemployment.

Helping the unemployed acquire occupational competencies is especially important in the case of young people, in particular those who have not worked yet. These individuals have no work experience, and this aspect must be taken into account when designing support for them. They usually declare their readiness to take up employment, but in reality they believe that this is beyond their capabilities and, therefore, they rule out employment. Furthermore, they have no aspirations in this scope, even though their situation is not comfortable to them, and they would gladly change it. Nevertheless, having no knowledge or previous experience of work and entertaining simplified ideas about employment, they are convinced that employment is not for them, that they cannot handle it, and that they are unfit for it. Additionally, they often have no good models to follow in their family environments, so they just copy occupational passivity. As a result, they doom themselves to occupational marginalisation, without ever experiencing any work. They linger in dissatisfaction and unwanted (albeit actually desired) passivity. This brings to main the lack of aspirations for leisure time as described by Iwanicka and Karwańska (1997, p. 248). In both cases, the lack of aspirations is associated with the lack of belief in one's own capabilities and with the lack of good role models in the family and peer settings. Such young people tend to reproduce work disengagement and fall back on material support from their parents and welfare services. The lack of aspirations leads to passivity in many spheres of life, not only those directly associated with work.

The issue of young people without work experience on the labour market is even more complex, because employers are not interested in taking them on. This results from employers' belief that employing young people is risky—more risky than employing people who have already worked. Given that work experience promotes successful job-seeking, it is important to take up employment immediately

after the completion of education. This is linked to school-based educational-and-guidance interventions as the first round of actions that help reduce long-term unemployment. Demanded for many years, vocational guidance has been made part of general school education, but it is regrettably as a rule limited to the provision of careers information to student groups by teachers, who are not trained as career counsellors. Such interventions cannot possibly be effective, and they neither forestall nor solve the problem of young people's long-term unemployment. Such work should be preventive and protect young people against falling into the trap of occupational marginalisation. To be effective, it needs to be based on individual diagnosis and guide students throughout their education in ways suited to their respective initial and subsequent situations.

The youngest working-age generations are referred to today as the millennial generation and generation Z. Work is not ranked particularly high in their hierarchy of values, which was and still is different for the older generations. Young people are increasingly focused on themselves, while their pursuits, including work pursuits, are largely dependent on their expectations. Paid work is primarily significant to them as a method for implementing their own life plans, and they mainly perform pro-tem tasks, without committing to the prospective ones (Maciołek, 2019, p. 33). As a result of various circumstances and conditions, young people who remain unemployed for a longer time rather quickly 'enter the role' of an unemployed person and identify with it, which makes this state more familiar to them and seemingly safer than taking up employment. This risk is especially pronounced in case of people who have never worked before. Young long-term unemployed people make up 22% of the NEET generation. They are in particular need of complex support, because they are likely to become permanently unemployed, as a result of numerous risk factors (Krause et al., 2019, pp. 89–90).

People older than 50 years of age are the other age group at risk of long-term unemployment. People in this age group account for the largest proportion of the long-term unemployed population. About half of this group exhibit pro-work commitment in being active job-seekers eager to take up employment, and as a rule they eventually succeed. However, the rest of the group do not intend to work, and they want to reach the age of retirement as unemployed people, so they limit their activity to meeting the criteria for the long-term unemployed status. When people aged 50 and older register at labour offices, they remain in the registers for a very long time. In 2018, the average unemployment period in this age group was 16 months (Klementowska & Flaszynska, 2018, p. 68). Admittedly, older employees are less likely to become unemployed, but if they find themselves unemployed, they are at risk of remaining so for a long time.

Long-term unemployment calls for active counteraction from unemployed people, society and the state. For many years, long-term unemployment has primarily been experienced by older people, young people, women, residents of rural areas and small towns, people with low education levels and people with non-market

occupations (Antosz, 2016, p. 329). The risk of long-term unemployment increases for individuals who belong to several of these groups. In such situations, vocational guidance, career counselling or general life counselling must enable these people to overcome their complex problems and habits.

Today, the risk of exclusion from the labour market is most often associated with younger or older age and with the lack of or negative prior work experiences, in particular. The other characteristics are of secondary significance in this respect.

The experience of failure is very often 'assigned' to unemployed people. The loss of job and the lack of it as such are signs of failure. Unsuccessful job-seeking is another difficult experience. This is aggravated by the lack of successes in personal life, which often plagues unemployed people. Failure may inspire a significant effort, but more often than not a series of failures discourages people from further attempts and makes them doubt in their strengths and capabilities. People then strive to maintain their *status quo*, even if it is not their desired state.

Conclusion

Everybody has their own uniqueness in the real world, which determines their place and situation in life. This holds for long-term unemployed people as well. Therefore, even though they all experience the same problem, they do not form a uniform group. Consequently, every case requires individual interventions implemented according to a competently developed plan that accommodates a given person's characteristics, dispositions and experience, along with a range of circumstances resulting from their prior course of life. Only such a comprehensive approach, which is not limited to work- and employment-related problems, may offer effective support, promoting long-term unemployed people's social involvement and re-engagement with the labour market. The long-term unemployed tend to give up their vocational aspirations and adopt the posture of a person unconcerned with employment. Unfortunately, they do not regard 'life outside of work' as an extensive area of varied activity, but as one very circumscribed and reduced to necessary pursuits aimed at ensuring their livelihood. Therefore, taking up employment is perceived as an unpleasant necessity or even as a 'necessary evil'.

The youngest long-term unemployed people are increasingly distancing themselves from the labour market and from job-based work. They do not consider work an autotelic value. They can live without it, even if they have never experienced it. Their needs are usually reduced to the very basics, just like their activity, which is limited to the use of electronic media, which fill their time. This way of life is perpetuated along with the increasing duration of unemployment. This is one significant reason why motivations regarding work activity should be fostered long before severe regression occurs. It is a dyad of school education and the labour market.

People aged 50 and older at least have some work experience, because they entered the period of work activity in the times of universal, mandatory employment. However, their experiences often do not promote active job-seeking. In this age group, unemployment is usually associated with a lower level of education and the increasingly common need to take care of grandchildren and older family members (Górna, 2016, p. 395). The lack of professional aspirations and the lack of motivation to work are common among long-term unemployed young people and older people. It takes arduous, long-term systemic interventions to foster pro-active work attitudes and behaviour in them, because many spheres of their lives need to be addressed.

Despite the widespread and entrenched belief that support for long-term unemployed people must be personalised (Kabaj & Koptas, 1995, pp. 103–4), individualised practices are still rarely used, and interventions are limited to the problems directly linked to employment. The programmes implemented in social assistance and social work are also compensatory rather than stimulating (Arendt et al., 2012; Skowrońska, 2014).

In guidance for long-term unemployed people, it is crucial that counsellors have extensive knowledge of individual unemployed people, their priorities, personal, family and social situations and their prior ways of life in their communities. The more comprehensively such information underpins the assessment, the more likely it is that the provided help will be effective. Given this, the preparatory process preceding help-provision to a long-term unemployed person should be long, because it must involve an insightful scrutiny of this person broadly contextualised situation.

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