Department of Sociology
Umeå University

UNEMPLOYMENT, EMPLOYMENT COMMITMENT AND WELL-BEING

The Psychosocial Meaning of (Un)employment among Women and Men

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ABSTRACT

The general aim of this thesis is to study the psychosocial meaning of (un)employment among women and men. This is mainly done by analysing employment commitment, or non-financial employment motivation, and mental well-being among a random sample of 3 500 Swedes that were interviewed at the beginning of 1996, when all were unemployed, and then again at the end of 1997, when the labour market situation varied. The results are presented in five separate articles and the main findings are as follows.

In general, the results from this study support the unemployment studies that have emphasised the importance of employment for the possibility to create and maintain a satisfactory life situation. This conclusion is based on the strong non-financial employment commitment among unemployed in general and on the fact that persons who find a paid job experience improved mental health more than continuously unemployed. The last result is valid even when controlling for the economic improvement that usually accompanies re-employment.

Even though employment in general seems to be important for unemployed, there is also some variation concerning the psychosocial value of paid work. Employment is more important for unemployed who have had a stimulating job and a weak engagement in non-employment activities, such as housework and spare time activities, than for those who have a more instrumental attitude to their former job and are engaged in meaningful activities outside of the labour market. Further, persons who manage to find stimulating employment have a stronger level of non-financial commitment and a better mental well-being relative to both individuals who acquired a job with mainly an economic value and the continuously unemployed.

However, when analysing how employment commitment and well-being are related to unemployment duration and the degree of unemployment concentration (when unemployment is concentrated to families or friendship networks), there are no substantial differences. When there are differences they point to a stronger psychosocial need for employment among long-term unemployed and unemployed who have a social network consisting of several other unemployed, indicating that these categories seem to be at least as anxious as others are to be engaged in employment. Even when analysing the relationship between gender and the psychosocial meaning of unemployment, it is the similarities rather than the differences between men and women that are most striking. Older women have a somewhat weaker non-financial employment motivation than men of the same ages have, but among the younger age categories the level of employment commitment is at least as high among women as it is among men.

In conclusion, the results speak against the notion that a weak motivation to be engaged in paid work is a main cause of unemployment in general and of long-term unemployment and unemployment concentration in particular. In light of this, the debate about how to solve the unemployment problem should be more focused on how to create more jobs for already motivated individuals instead of concentrating on the question of how to strengthen the incentives for employment.

Keywords: Unemployment, Employment, Psychosocial, Employment Commitment, Well-being, Women, Men, Family.

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In co-authored Article 5 both authors made equal contributions.

Preface

"Unemployment! What a boring dissertation subject". This was the comment from one of my friends when I told him about the subject that I would dedicate the next five years of my life to. The worst thing about my friend's comment was that I, at least in some sense, agreed with him. This conversation took place in the summer of 1994. To study unemployment was not precisely a dream that I had at this point in time. But today, almost five years later, I am glad that I decided to devote my time to study the meaning of unemployment. During these past few years I have discovered that research about unemployment also includes research about the meaning of employment. Further, individuals' labour market situation touches such areas as family life, gender relations, social life, well-being and so on, and therefore, studies of unemployment also includes studies of these areas. This means that research about the meaning of unemployment in some sense is the same as research about the meaning of life, which after all is the real reason why I decided to join the Long-term Unemployment Project and to become a PhD student at the department of Sociology in 1994.

During my work on the doctoral thesis I have received valuable support from colleagues, family members and friends. First of all I would like to thank my supervisor Rune Åberg for engaging me in the Long-term Unemployment Project in the first place and for giving me professional support all these years. I am also grateful for the fruitful collaboration that I have had with my other project colleagues, Mattias Strandh and Margareta Bolinder. Besides these, there are a number of present and former colleagues at the Department of Sociology that have contributed to this dissertation by creating a productive research environment, giving useful advice and being good friends. Special thanks to Stefan Svallfors, Björn Halleröd, Rickard Danell, Mikael Hjerm, Erik Bihagen, Sverker Björk and to Charlott Nyman, who also helped translate my Swenglish into English. A long list of other Swedish and international sociologists outside of the Department of Sociology in Umeå have also contributed to this doctoral thesis. Some of the most valuable views have come from Knut Halvorsen, who has acted as a commentator on my work on several occasions.

My dear family - Sara, Jens and Gunilla. Thank you Sara and Jens for accepting me as a new member of your family. You are, and will always be, a central part of my life. To Gunilla, my wife, lover and best friend, who has not been patient enough to read one single piece of work I have written: I could have written this dissertation without you, but I can not live without you. Sara, Jens and Gunilla – This one is for you!

There also exist people and places outside of my family and academia that mean a great deal to me. I would like to thank my parents Hilda and Ossian Nordenmark for always supporting me, in spite of the reality that I will probably never get a "real" job anymore. I would also like to thank my friends in Östersund who, now and then, have reminded me that the whole world does not revolve around my research and the Umeå University. "Viva the Republic of Jamtland".

As this dissertation will show, money is not everything, but it sure makes things a lot easier. This study was made possible by the economic support from The Swedish Council for Work Life Research (Ralf), The Expert Group for Evaluation Studies of Labour Market Policy (EFA) and The National Labour Market Board (AMS).

Umeå, March 27, 1999

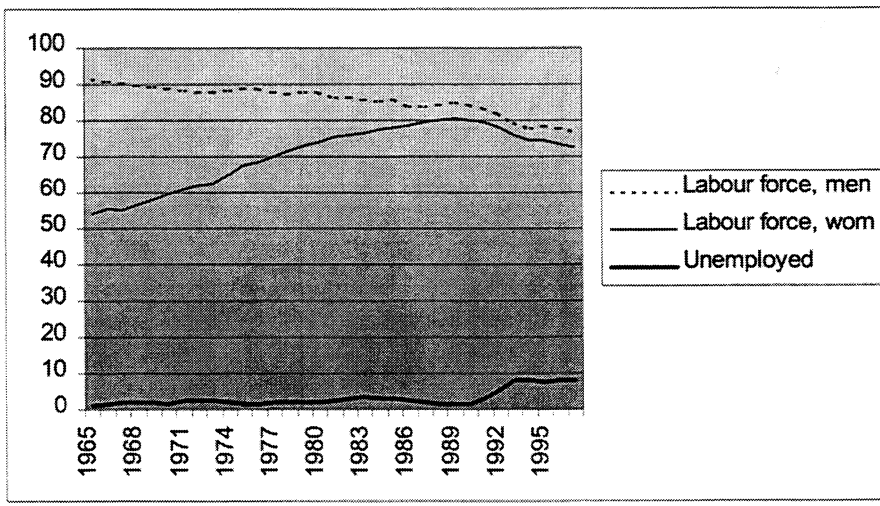
Mikael Nordenmark

Introduction

> Ett väl utfört arbete ger en inre tillfredsställelse och är den grund varpå samhället vilar.
>
> A well done job provides inner personal satisfaction and is the base on which society rests.
>
> [Karl-Bertil Jonsson Christmas Eve, Swedish Television, 24/12, aired every year].

Sweden is a country that, like the rest of the industrial world, to a large extent has organised society and individuals' everyday life around paid work. In the case of Sweden, this can be illustrated by the fact that most of the social insurance system is based on what the individual has achieved on the labour market. Further, the importance of employment is emphasised by the fact that the government gave a directive to the so-called "Employment Investigation" in 1975, in which it was stated that "employment satisfies the human needs of developing and enriching everyday life". This illustrates that paid work, in addition to making possible a high economic standard, is also supposed to generate a sense of community, meaningful activity and a social identity. The centrality of employment in today's society is also shown in politics and in the public debate on the problems of modern society. This is perhaps even more valid for Scandinavia, where the struggle for full employment has been given high priority. In comparison with other industrial countries, Sweden has invested a great deal of economic and personal resources in an active labour market policy aiming at maintaining as many persons as possible in the labour force.

Diagram 1. The percent of men and women in the labour force and the total percent openly unemployed of the labour force (15-64 years) between 1965-1997.



Source: OECD, 1997

This is at least one reason for the fact that Sweden's previous low unemployment rates from the 1950s until the 1990s is rather unique. As Diagram 1 shows, the unemployment rate has never exceeded 4 percent during the period before 1992. Furthermore, Sweden has had one of the highest employment rates among women in the western world since the 1970s. In the beginning of the 1990s, around 80 percent of women and 85 percent of men between 15 to 64 years old were in the Swedish labour force and only about two percent of the labour force were openly unemployed (OECD, 1997).

However, during the 1990s the labour market situation in Sweden went through a dramatic change. Between 1991 and 1993, the share of unemployed increased from 2,9 to 8,2 percent. This means that Sweden moved from being a country with one of the lowest unemployment rates in the industrialised world 1991 to being one with an unemployment rate near the OECD average for the years 1993 to 1997. Between these years, the unemployment level in Sweden was around 8 percent. If those in education and job-training programmes are included the unemployment figure increases to around 12 percent. However, in a European context, these unemployment levels are quite normal and near the OECD average during the 1990s (OECD, 1997). At the same time as the unemployment rate began to rise in 1991, the percentage of both women and men in the labour force begun to decrease to approximately 77 percent for men and 73 percent for women in 1997.

How has the dramatic increase of the unemployment rate in the 1990s in Sweden affected different categories of people? This has been studied in a report produced within the framework of the Long-term Unemployment Project (Åberg et al., 1997). The analyses in the report are based on the study of living conditions in Sweden, where 160 000 persons were interviewed about their actual labour market situation between 1975 and 1995. In general, these results show that all categories of people have been effected by the considerable increase in the unemployment rate in the last decade.

As the last two columns in Table 1 show, the unemployment rate among men rose above the unemployment level among women during the last recession. However, a closer look at the period between 1992 to 1995 indicates that women's relative unemployment risk decreased until 1993, but during the last two years of the analysis, this risk increased relative to men's (Nordenmark, 1997). This can be explained by the fact that the economic recession mainly affected the male dominated export industry and building sector first, and then hit the female dominated public sector. During the whole period, singles have had a considerably higher unemployment rate than cohabiting persons. The family category that has the highest share of unemployed between 1992 and 1995 is singles with children living at home, who are mainly women. During this period, the risk of being unemployed is about twice as high among singles with children than among cohabiting persons. Youths have suffered more from high unemployment rates than older generations. In spite of the fact that the unemployment rate among youths has increased considerably during the last recession, the relative unemployment risk for youths has decreased. This is an effect of the fact that even older age categories, that usually have low unemployment rates, are affected by unemployment during economic recessions (Åberg et al., 1997).

Table 1. The unemployment rate for different categories of people in the labour force in varying economic situations 1975-1995 (16-65 years)

	1975-1980 *Business boom*	*1981-1985* *Business recession*	*1986-1991* *Business boom*	*1992-1995* *Business recession*
Total unemployment rate	3,0	4,8	3,7	11,2
Sex				
Men	2,4	4,3	3,3	11,6
Women	3,7	5,4	4,1	10,9
Family situation				
Single	5,6	7,6	6,6	16,8
Single, children	5,2	6,7	5,4	17,9
Cohabiting	2,6	4,4	2,8	8,7
Cohabiting, children	2,2	3,2	2,3	8,9
Age				
-25	7,5	10,4	8,7	22,9
26-35	3,0	4,8	4,0	13,5
36-45	1,7	2,9	2,3	9,1
46-55	1,3	2,5	1,7	6,4
56-	2,2	4,4	2,3	7,2
Education				
Comprehensive school	3,3	5,2	3,9	10,3
Upper secondary school 2 years	3,2	6,0	4,2	13,9
Upper secondary school 3 years	2,7	3,6	3,5	13,8
University -2 years	2,8	3,9	3,6	8,2
University 2 years-	1,5	1,6	1,9	6,1
Citizenship				
Non-Swedish	5,1	8,5	9,0	22,1
Swedish	2,9	4,6	3,4	10,7
Region				
North Sweden, rural area	5,4	8,4	5,6	13,6
North Sweden, moderately pop.	3,0	5,4	3,9	11,6
South/middle Sweden	3,0	5,5	3,5	12,3
Gothenburg, Malmö	2,9	4,4	4,0	11,7
Stockholm	2,4	2,4	2,7	8,7

Source: Åberg et al., 1997

Further, poorly educated persons have a higher unemployment rate than the highly educated. However, the education category that has suffered most as a result of the business recession the last years is those with upper secondary school. The risk of becoming unemployed is even higher for this category than it is for the category of persons with only comprehensive school during the period 1992 to 1995. Non-Swedish citizens have higher unemployment rates than Swedish citizens, but the relative risk of becoming unemployed for non-Swedish citizens decreases between the business boom during the late 1980s and the present business recession (Åberg et al., 1997). Finally, the results indicate that rural areas have higher unemployment levels than densely populated areas, but even in this case the results from the Åberg et al. study indicate that the relative risk for persons living in rural areas has decreased during the

period between 1992 and 1995. This is a result of the unemployment rates in big towns having increased more than the unemployment level in rural areas during the last economic recession.

In conclusion, in spite of the fact that there is strong confidence in the high individual and societal values of employment and regardless of the main political goal to combat unemployment, Sweden has suffered from a considerable unemployment chock in recent decade. Further, there are considerable variations concerning the relative risks of becoming unemployed between different categories of people. During the period from 1975 to 1995, the risk of becoming unemployed was greater for singles, youths, poorly educated, non-Swedish citizens and people living in rural areas, compared with other categories. However, the *relative* risks of becoming unemployed for singles (aside from singles with children), youths, poorly educated, non-Swedish citizens and people living in rural areas, during the business recession in the 1990s, has actually decreased, compared to the end of 1980s. This is a result of the unemployment rates among other categories that traditionally have had a secure position on the labour market, increasing relatively more during 1992 to 1995. We have what one could call a normalisation of the unemployment category, which means that during the last decade, the unemployed have become more equal to the employed. This means that this unemployment study far from includes only marginalised categories of people.

As a result of the dramatic changes in the labour market situation during recent years in Sweden a project was started up at the Department of Sociology at Umeå University, called The Long-term Unemployment Project (LUP). The project studies causes to, and consequences of, unemployment on a micro-level. In Sweden, economic research has dominated the public debate on the problems of unemployment. Focus has been on how to strengthen the economic incentives for employment among unemployed. As a counterweight to the economic unemployment research, LUP aims at highlighting the social meaning that unemployment has for the individual. The general aim of this study, carried out within the framework of the Long-term Unemployment Project, is to study the differentiated psychosocial meaning of unemployment among men and women. The focus is on the relationship between unemployment, employment commitment and mental well-being. But before moving on to the results of this study, I will present a critical review of previous unemployment research within the behavioural science.

Research on the meaning of unemployment

Each article in the Doctoral thesis gives an account of the unemployment research that is relevant for the actual question that each article deals with. The main purpose with this section is to give a broader picture of the unemployment studies and theories that have been produced within the behavioural science. It can be seen as an attempt to discern the main themes that have been discussed in different studies of the meaning of unemployment for individuals. Which aspects of unemployment have been in focus? Is it possible to discover some main themes that run through the research on unemployment? Which methods have been used in studies about the consequences of unemployment? From when and where do most of the studies about unemployment arise and finally, what is problematic about previous research on unemployment?

Previous unemployment studies

The high individual value of employment has been established by unemployment research analysing the consequences of loosing a paid job. In early studies, Jahoda et al. (1933/1971), Backe (1933) and Komarvsky and College (1940/1973) illustrated in an animated way life as unemployed during the economic crisis of the 1930s in Austria, England and the USA. Above all, it was the negative economic consequences of unemployment that were the focus, but their studies also indicated that unemployment affected individuals' social life, identity and mental well-being, negatively. Aside from the fact that the factory was the place where one earned a livelihood, it was also a central social meeting place that was hard to replace. Furthermore, the strained economy implied that many of the unemployed could not afford to pay the costs that a social life outside of the home usually brings about. Deterioration of the economy and a social life often led to depression, resignation, apathy and a feeling of being worthless as a human being. Even social relationships within the family were often strained by the unemployment situation. The relationships that were most negatively affected were the ones that were already having difficulties before the husband or/and the wife became unemployed. For those families, unemployment was often the factor that started quarrels.

The strength with the unemployment studies done during the 1930s is that they truly tried to get close to the unemployed and the unemployment situation. Both Jahoda et al. and Backe actually lived among the unemployed people they were studying and tried to be a part of their lives. At the same time as this was a strength with their studies, this was also a weakness. The results and the conclusions are generated from samples that are not randomly selected and the investigations are restricted in time and space and include a restricted number of people. First, this means that it is difficult to generalise from the results. Second, it is problematic to form an picture of the consequences of unemployment for different groups of people, such as short-term and long-term unemployed, men and women, youths and older generations, poorly and well educated and so on. The studies include mostly poorly educated men and are concentrated to certain geographical areas with high unemployment rates. In spite of the fact that the researchers lived among the unemployed for a time, it is also difficult to comment on the consequences of being unemployed for a short period compared to being unemployed for longer periods of time, for instance several years.

These problems have in some sense been solved by more modern studies of unemployment. However, it is perhaps the similarities between older and newer studies, rather than the differences, that are most striking. The only obvious difference between the classic and the more recent studies is that the studies done during the last decades have, as a consequence of the development of welfare states and welfare transfers, concentrated more on the psycho-social side of unemployment, instead of the economic side. A majority of the studies that were done during the 1970s to the 1990s focused on mental well-being among the unemployed. As with the investigations from the 1930s, most of these studies show that unemployment is related to a deterioration of both individual and family well-being (articles 1, 2 and 4). However, there also exist some investigations emphasising that unemployment, today, does not necessarily have to be something negative. The unemployment period, and especially a shorter time in unemployment, can be a welcome break from burdensome employment and can be used for reflection and development of spare time activities (Maccoby, 1988 and studies presented in Meidner, 1982 and Olsén, 1985).

Despite the fact that a majority of the research points out the negative consequences of unemployment and a few studies emphasise the positive sides of not having a paid job, some of the investigations indicate that reactions to the unemployment situations differ between groups of people. A majority of the unemployment studies that have compared women's and men's reactions to unemployment have found that men suffer more than women do. A main explanation for these results is that women usually have unqualified jobs and are strongly engaged in housework and therefore do not miss employment as much as men do. On the other hand, there have been some studies during the last decades indicating that unemployed women miss employment as much as men do (Article 1). Other studies also indicate that the negative consequences differ between occupational groups and age categories (studies reported in Folkhälsogruppen, 1992 and Olsén, 1985) and between rural and urban areas (Hagström, 1988) and so on.

One moderating factor of the negative consequences of unemployment has proven to be the level of work involvement, or non-financial commitment to be employed. Employment commitment has been defined as the extent to which a person wants to be engaged in paid work in general, which means that it is not connected to a specific job (Warr et al., 1979). Studies have found that there is a strong relationship between the level of non-financial employment commitment and mental well-being. Unemployed who have strong employment commitment have poorer mental health than those who have weaker motivation to be employed (Articles 1 and 2). The level of employment commitment has in turn proven to be structured by factors like labour market situation, gender and age. However, the results are not consistent regarding the nature of the differences. For instance, a majority of the investigations studying gender differences indicate that men are more motivated to be engaged in paid work than are women, but others show that employment commitment is at least as high among women as among men. Furthermore, some studies show that unemployed have a stronger non-financial job motivation than employed, while others indicate that employed have a stronger employment commitment than unemployed (Articles 1 and 2).

There are also unemployment studies, that discuss the level of non-financial employment commitment among long-term unemployed and unemployed who have a social network consisting of a great share of other unemployed persons. Some maintain that it is these categories that develop what one can call "a culture of unemployment", which is characterised by low

motivation to be engaged in paid work, a development of alternative activities to employment and an adaptation to the unemployment situation (Article 3). The notion that duration of unemployment is related to a gradual adaptation can be traced as far back as Jahoda's, Lazarsfeld's and Zeisel's Marienthal study. However, there are few empirical results that confirm this hypothesis.

Most of the research discussed above originates from outside of Sweden, mainly from countries like Great Britain, USA and the Netherlands. On account of the relatively low unemployment rates in Sweden up until the 1990s, research about the individual consequences of unemployment has been rare. Most of the research that has been done within this area focuses on how certain occupational groups, in relation to for instance plant closures, experience the unemployment situation (Janlert, 1983, Isaksson, 1990). There also exists research concerning the meaning of unemployment among youths (Rantakeisu et al., 1996, Hammarström, 1996). The results from these studies show results similar to the non-Swedish investigations presented above, namely that unemployment in general is connected to a deterioration of the individual's physical and psychological well-being. Finally, during the 1990s, there have been an increasing number of studies analysing different aspects of unemployment in Sweden. Besides the above studies, unemployment research is also conducted at the Department of Sociology at Gothenburg University and at the Swedish Institute for Social Research at Stockholm University (see Palme & Stenberg (eds.), 1998 for an overview).

Theories about the consequences of unemployment

The most commonly used theoretical perspective for explaining the consequences of unemployment is the functionalistic approach developed by Maria Jahoda (1982). She looks at the meaning of unemployment in the light of the psychosocial meaning of employment. Jahoda maintains that a paid job fulfils five psychosocial or latent functions, in addition to the economic or the manifest function. First, employment provides a time structure in that it offers a time schedule that organises daily activities. In spite of this structure being in some sense understood as a burden, it is often traumatic for the individual when it no longer exists. Furthermore, a paid job provides social contacts. It is in the work place that adults have most of their daily contacts outside of the family. Third, employment also offers participation in collective purposes, which means that a paid job offers the opportunity to work together with others towards collective goals. According to Jahoda, people also need to be engaged in a regular activity, which is the fourth latent function of employment and finally, employment also provides status and identity in a society where employment is seen as the norm. It is the loss of these functions that are the main causes of the negative individual consequences of unemployment.

However, the theory about the latent functions of employment has been criticised on several points. One main critique is that the theory sees all kinds of paid work as equally important for the individual's well-being. It does not allow for the possibility that strenuous and alienating jobs can be less important for the individual's psychosocial situation than more stimulating jobs, which also means that some unemployed will miss their former job more than others. Another objection is that the theory is not precise. For instance, it does not establish what level of time structure and regular activity that is needed to satisfy the individual.

Peter Warr tries to solve some of the problems with Jahoda's theory with his vitamin theory (Warr, 1987). This theory has been used to analyse the experience of employment as well as unemployment. Warr starts with the idea that both employment and unemployment have negative as well as positive sides. This means that he does not assume that paid work in itself is something good for the individual. According to the theory, there are nine criteria that characterise a good activity, which are central for individuals' well-being. These criteria are vitamins that a human being needs for staying healthy and the vitamins can be consumed both in an unemployment, as well as in an employment, situation. This also means that both unemployment and employment can be bad activities. Because the theory assumes that employment, and the loss of employment, can have different meanings for different individuals it can be used to explain differences between categories of unemployed, concerning levels of mental well-being.

But, perhaps the most serious critique against both Jahoda's theory about the latent functions of employment and against Warr's vitamin theory is the minimal role that the individual, or the actor, is assumed to play. The theories focus on how factors in the social environment affect the individuals rather than on how the individuals experience, interpret and act towards their social structure. Further, they do not take into consideration the possibility that people may have different psychosocial needs that also can be changeable over a time period. All this means that the theories leave little room for individual and social change. This, which could be called a functionalistic perspective on the consequences of unemployment, has been criticised by David Fryer (Fryer & Payne, 1984, Fryer, 1986), who means that the perspective sees individuals as passive reactors who are totally depended on, and determined by, psychosocial functions of social institutions. In his agency theory, he assumes that individuals are active and motivated individuals who influence their environment and try to do their best to realise themselves. Individuals' well-being is dependent on whether, and to what degree, the social structure restricts their efforts to control their lives. The effects of unemployment on mental health are then dependent on the degree to which the unemployment situation restricts the agents from reaching what they see as desirable goals. In addition to being useful when analysing various consequences of unemployment, agency theory can also explain individual changes in mental well-being during, for instance, a longer unemployment period.

However, Fryer's agency theory has also been criticised for its shortcomings. While Jahoda and Warr are criticised for over-emphasising the importance of the social structure, Fryer is blamed for over-emphasising the role of the individual and not paying sufficient attention to the restrictions of the social environment. One attempt to pay adequate attention to both individual and structural factors, within one theory, has been put forward by Douglas Ezzy (1993). According to Ezzy, the problem is not whether the individual is passive or active, a reactor or actor etc.; she is undoubtedly both. In his status passage theory, Ezzy tries to integrate both structural factors and an acting agent. According to Ezzy, the level of mental well-being among unemployed is mainly decided by the individual's subjective interpretations of the objective social context. The subjective meaning of the social environment for the individual is dependent on both past and present experiences. If a paid job is central for the individual's social identity, unemployment will decrease the level of well-being to a greater extent than if the loss off employment does not disrupt the strategies used for sustaining a positive self-image.

In the light of the status passage theory, the meaning of becoming unemployed is dependent on how well the unemployed individual manages to maintain a positive self-image, or social identity, without a paid job. As described in the introduction, we live in a society, or a social context, which emphasises the high societal and individual value of employment. In such a context, employment is often a central source for satisfying the socially defined needs of the individual. When employment is central for the individual's strategy of maintaining a positive self-image, it can be difficult to uphold social position and identity when interacting with other people during unemployment. In such a case, the risk is high that the unemployed will look at himself as a miserable person. However, if the individual can for the most part satisfy social needs through, for example leisure activities or housework, and not mainly through employment, the chances are high that the unemployment situation will not affect the level of well-being in a considerable way. It is also possible that the individual may re-interpret the unemployment situation and change strategies and behaviour. Because of the fact that the theoretical perspective emphasises that both individual strategies for maintaining a positive self-image and the social environment may change over time, it is also possible to explain changes in mental well-being among those continuously unemployed.

What, then, is the main criticism against previous research results and theories about the meaning of unemployment? In general, the unemployment research has gone from implementing a general to a more differentiated view of the meaning of unemployment. However, there still exists a strong uncertainty about which main factors that structure the consequences of becoming unemployed. Further, much of the research about the consequences of unemployment can also be criticised for the methods that have been used and for how the selections of the respondents have been done. A majority of the studies during the 1930s and the unemployment studies during the last decades have been carried out in restricted areas with limited, and non- randomly selected, populations. This means that it may be problematic to generalise from the results and to analyse what unemployment means for different categories of unemployed. Another problem is that a majority of the investigations about unemployment within the social sciences are cross-sectional. This means that it is hard to judge whether the relationships between unemployment and, for instance, employment commitment and well-being are caused by the unemployment situation or whether they are a result of a selection process. Finally, there is a lack of theoretical explanations for the facts that the meaning of unemployment varies between categories of unemployed and may change over time. These theoretical problems are in some sense solved by Ezzy in his status passage theory, but the main problem with Ezzy's theory is that he does not develop a model that can be used for empirical analyses of the mental well-being consequences of unemployment, which means that it is hard to test the theory empirically.

General and specific aims

The overall aim of this doctoral thesis is to further develop the research on the psychosocial, or the non-financial, meaning of unemployment. More precisely, this implies providing a differentiated picture of what the unemployment situation means for activity level, social life status and identity. The study interprets what it means to be continuously unemployed in relation to finding various types of jobs and how the psychosocial need for employment is related to unemployment duration, unemployment concentration and gender. It also integrates the results concerning the psychosocial meaning of unemployment with results about the economic meaning of employment into a theoretical model, which can be used for analysis of different aspects of unemployment.

The psychosocial situation is mainly analysed by studying the level of non-financial employment commitment and mental well-being among unemployed individuals. Both these variables can be seen as indicators of the psychosocial need for, or value of, a paid job. Strong employment commitment and poor mental well-being among the unemployed imply that employment is important for the psychosocial life situation and weak commitment to paid work and a good health point to the idea that employment is not central for the psychosocial situation. Each article deals with a clearly defined research question and area concerning the psychosocial situation among unemployed individuals and their families. The following questions are of special interest in the five articles.

- The first article studies which factors that structure the level of non-financial employment commitment among unemployed and if there are any substantial differences between unemployed men and women in this respect. It also analyses how the level of employment commitment is related to mental well-being.
- The main question in the second article to be answered is whether employment has a different psychosocial meaning for unemployed compared to people in varying types of jobs, for instance in instrumental and stimulating employment. This article also discusses whether the level of employment commitment and well-being is mainly caused by the labour market situation or if it is a result of a selection process.
- The third article analyses whether concentration of unemployment is caused by negative attitudes towards paid work or by structural factors. It also discusses the possibility that "a culture of unemployment" develops within groups that is characterised by unemployment concentration.
- The fourth article studies what the labour market situation means for the household division of labour between men and women and how the division of housework effects women and men's individual and family well-being.
- The fifth and last article develops and empirically tests a theoretical model for understanding the differentiated mental well-being consequences of becoming unemployed by integrating both the structural restrictions of the unemployment situation and the agency of the individual.

Data

The main data used in this study is a large data set collected within the framework of the "Long-term Unemployment Project" (LUP) at the Department of Sociology at Umeå University. It consists of a national random sample of 3500 unemployed[1], which was drawn from the register of all unemployed persons (HÄNDEL). HÄNDEL is compiled by the Swedish Labour Market Board and includes information about several individual variables like age, sex, citizenship, education and labour market status (openly unemployed, in labour market program and not unemployed) from the beginning of 1992 and forward. These statistics have been complemented with two telephone surveys, one in connection to the sampling in the beginning of 1996 and another one at the end of 1997, when the labour market statuses varied between the respondents. This means that the data set is longitudinal and includes both subjective data from two points in time and labour market histories and changes in labour market status between the two points in time.

The first telephone survey was conducted in February 1996 and the second survey was carried out almost two years later, including those who were unemployed in the first study and answered the questions on this occasion. The interview surveys include questions in areas such as mental well-being, private economy, employment commitment, social relations, family life, activity level, job-search behaviour, job demands, belief in the future etc. The questionnaires in 1996 and 1997 included similar questions, but the second interview was supplemented with questions concerning the labour market situation in 1997. The first interview survey had a response rate of 74 percent and in the last survey the response rate was about 80 percent. Only around 7 percent of non-responses in the first telephone survey, and about 5 percent in the second survey, was caused by a refusal to take part in the studies. The rest of the non-response rate was due to factors as follows. About 17 percent of the respondents in the first survey, and 14 percent in the second survey, were difficult to locate (had unpublished telephone number, had no telephone, had moved to an unknown address etc.). Further, around one percent was prevented from participating in the two studies (were sick, lived at an institution etc.) and about one percent were not residing in Sweden at the time of the studies. (A more detailed discussion of non-responses and main dependent variables is given in the Appendix).

[1] In this study, an individual is regarded as unemployed when she or he is registered at an employment office.

Main results

Article 1. Employment commitment and psychological well-being among unemployed men and women

This paper studies employment commitment, or non-financial employment motivation, and psychological or mental well-being among unemployed men and women in Sweden. The study observes which factors that govern the level of employment commitment and if there are any substantial differences between unemployed men and women in this respect. The article also discusses the importance of non-financial employment motivation when analysing psychological well-being among unemployed. The results show that the level of employment commitment, in general, is a measurement of the psychosocial meaning of employment and not of the economic meaning. A strong non-financial motivation to be employed indicates that employment is important because it provides a social and meaningful activity as well as status and identity. These are basically the same functions that Marie Jahoda focuses on in her theory about the latent functions of employment.

Further, the results indicate that the psychosocial meaning of paid work varies within the unemployment group. First of all, when measuring employment commitment among unemployed men and women, it becomes clear that the variable labour market situation is important. Those who have had a job that mainly had an economic, or instrumental, value have a weaker non-financial motivation to be employed than those who have had a job that provided a meaningful activity and a sense of community. Also the variables measuring the extent to which the unemployed have succeeded in replacing the psychosocial functions of employment with other activities are central when studying the degree of employment commitment. Those who manage to fill their time with meaningful activities have a relatively weak commitment to paid work and the unemployed who do not succeed in replacing the psychosocial value of employment have a strong non-financial motivation to be employed. These results are valid for women as well as for men. However, the results also indicate that the level of employment commitment varies between unemployed men and women in similar social positions. Among older age categories men are more committed to employment than women, but among younger persons, women seem to have a stronger non-financial motivation to be employed than men have. Finally, the variable family situation indicates that, among women, those cohabiting with children have the weakest, and singles with children the strongest, commitment to a paid job. For men it is vice versa.

Employment commitment is significantly connected to well-being among unemployed men and women, even when controlling for economic situation. Those with a strong employment commitment have a significantly higher risk of poor mental well-being compared to unemployed with weaker non-financial employment motivation. Furthermore, the unemployed who manage to satisfy both psychosocial and economical needs in ways other than employment feel quite well mentally, while the unemployed who miss employment for both economical and psychosocial reasons generally have poorer mental health.

In conclusion, this study has shown that there, besides the economic incentives, exist psychosocial motives to be engaged in paid work. An interesting point here is that the categories of unemployed who strongly miss employment for psychosocial reasons in this study in some

sense are the same categories that in a study by Strandh proved to have a marginal economic situation (for instance non-Scandinavians, youths and single mothers), and because of this, have both economic and psychosocial incentives for employment. In spite of this, the unemployment level is relatively high among these categories in Sweden. These facts speak against the hypothesis that the high unemployment rates among certain categories of people are mainly a result of low motivation to be employed.

Article 2. Non-financial employment motivation and well-being in different labour market situations: A longitudinal study

Some argue that the unemployed have relatively weak motivation to be employed and are too comfortable in their unemployment situation, while others state that unemployed have as strong employment commitment as employed and have a lower level of well-being. The main aim of this article is to study non-financial employment motivation and mental well-being among persons in different labour market situations, such as unemployment and instrumental or stimulating employment, by testing the following hypotheses. **1** (a) The psychosocial motivation to be engaged in paid work is *weak* among unemployed, which means that the non-financial employment motivation is weak and the mental health is relatively good among unemployed in relation to individuals who have some kind of paid work. (b) The psychosocial motivation to be engaged in paid work is *strong* among unemployed, which means that the employment commitment is as strong among unemployed as it is among employed and that the unemployed have relatively poor mental health. **2** (a) The level of non-financial employment commitment and mental well-being *affect* the current labour market situation. (b) The level of non-financial employment commitment and mental well-being are *caused* by the current labour market situation.

Further, the paper also analyses the relationship between employment commitment and mental health by testing the following hypotheses. **3** Unemployed with strong non-financial job motivation experience a greater improvement in their mental well-being when re-entering employment than do those with weaker motivation. **4** Unemployed who adapt to the unemployment situation by lowering their employment commitment, will experience greater improvement in their mental well-being than those who maintain stable or raise their commitment to employment.

The results, which are based on a panel study of approximately 1800 Swedes who were interviewed in the beginning of 1996, when all were unemployed and in the end of 1997, when the labour market statuses varied, show that the psychosocial need for employment in general seems to be strong among unemployed. This is shown both by the substantial improvement in the mental well-being of unemployed who find a job, even when controlling for improvements in the household economy, and by the relatively strong employment commitment among unemployed. The great improvement in mental health is especially significant for persons finding social and/or stimulating employment. When studying non-financial employment motivation the results show that self-employed and those who have a stimulating job are more motivated than unemployed. However, when comparing continuously unemployed with short term unemployed (less than two years), those who have found a job with mainly an instrumental value, students, retired persons, sick-listed and those on parental leave, there are no significant differences.

Further, the results indicate that the effect of the present labour market status is stronger than the selection to the labour market situation. First, this is shown by relatively small differences in non-financial employment motivation and mental well-being when all were unemployed about two years before the actual labour market situation in 1997. Second, this conclusion is based on the substantial changes in WIS and GHQ, especially for the category that found a stimulating job in 1997, relative to continuously unemployed. The result concerning the non-financial motivation to be employed speaks against the notion that the level of employment motivation is a main determinant of the chances to get a paid job.

Finally, the results show that the level of non-financial employment motivation affects mental well-being consequences of becoming re-employed. Persons having a relatively strong non-financial job motivation experience a greater improvement in their mental well-being when re-entering a paid job than do those with weaker commitment to employment. The results also show that changes in the level of employment commitment among those continuously unemployed are significantly correlated to mental health. Unemployed who lower their non-financial employment commitment show greater improvement in their mental well-being than those who remain stable, or raise their commitment to employment.

Article 3. The concentration of unemployment within families and social networks. A question of attitudes or structural factors?

This article studies concentration of unemployment within families and social networks in Sweden. Unemployment concentration is a phenomenon that exists when unemployment is concentrated to two or more members of a family or to a number of people within a friendship network. The study, which is based on two random samples, one consisting of about 47 000 young people and their parents and one consisting of 3 500 unemployed persons, raises the question of whether unemployment concentration mainly is caused by negative values towards employment or by structural factors.

The few results and hypotheses that have been put forward concerning the causes of unemployment concentration can be divided into two models of explanation, one structural and one attitudinal. The results supporting structural causes of unemployment concentration have indicated that it is primarily factors which, at least in some way, are beyond individuals' control that affect the occurrence of unemployment concentration. Variables that have been tested, and in some contexts have been shown to have some relevance, are the benefit system, region, age and the occurrence of children. However, when structural factors have not generated the expected effects, some of the studies argue that concentration of unemployment might be caused by negative attitudes towards paid work. Several studies during recent years have observed this kind of value orientation, often referred to as 'a culture of unemployment', in certain groups with high levels of unemployment. These values are characterised by an acceptance of unemployment, a rejection of work ethic, a low commitment to employment and the development of alternative activities and survival strategies.

The results from this study show that unemployment tends to be concentrated to certain families and social networks, in Sweden as well. About 23 percent of the unemployed youths have at least one unemployed parent, 20 percent of the cohabiting unemployed live together with an unemployed partner and about one fourth of the unemployed state that at least half of their friends are unemployed. The figures, that are comparable over time, indicate that the

phenomenon was more common during 1994 than in 1992 and 1993. The concentration phenomenon is also related to duration of unemployment. Respondents with longer unemployment experiences have unemployed parents, partners and friends more often than those with shorter unemployment periods.

When analysing the variables associated with commitment to paid work and adaptability, there is no sign of an existing "unemployment culture" in categories with high levels of unemployment. The results even show that the unemployed with unemployed partners and friends find it harder than others do to adapt to their unemployment situation. Furthermore, the data indicate that unemployment concentration affects categories of people who already have a marginal position on the labour market. It is primarily the young, non-Scandinavians, poorly educated and those living in rural areas showing high levels of unemployment, who are at great risk of experiencing concentration of unemployment. These results support the structural model of explanation for unemployment concentration, which maintains that the phenomenon is mainly due to factors connected to one's structural position in life, and weakens the attitudinal model of explanation, which argues that the concentration of employment is caused by negative values towards employment and a high adaptability to the unemployment situation.

Article 4. Unemployment and family life: The relationship between employment status, household division of labour and well-being

The main aim of the study is twofold. First, the paper examines the effect of partner's employment status on the household division of labour. Do unemployed women and men use the additional spare-time that usually accompanies unemployment, to do housework? The second issue to be investigated is whether the division of household tasks is related to well-being and the quality of the relationship between cohabiting/married men and women. Is a high level of engagement in household tasks related to a high level of individual and family well-being among unemployed, and if this is the case, is it valid mainly for women? Finally, the article also discusses the relationship between individual and family reactions to unemployment.

When analysing the relationship between partners' labour market situation and the household division of labour, two somewhat contradictory results appear. On one hand, there seems to be a relatively strong effect of partners' labour market status. Both men and women do a greater share of the domestic work when they are unemployed compared to when they are employed, indicating that there is a notable flexibility in gender roles. On the other hand, the study also shows that women are responsible for a large share of the household tasks irrespective of their husband's labour market status. The results indicate that the most equal couples, concerning the household division of labour, are the ones that consist of an employed woman and an unemployed man, which of course on the whole not can be seen as an equal distribution of labour. This indicates that there exists today a social construction of sexual roles, which results in many women filling the role of both "housewife" and employed.

Some argue that a high level of participation in household tasks protects especially women from the negative psychological effects of unemployment. The explanation for this is that the role of the housewife provides some degree of time structure and meaningful activity and therefore, at least in some sense, replaces the psychosocial functions of employment. On the other hand, recent studies have shown that the role of the housewife is no longer an alternative

to employment, especially among younger women. The results show that the household division of labour is significantly related to psychological well-being and the quality of the marital relationship among female respondents. However, the results do not support the hypothesis that declares that housework can be a substitute for employment among unemployed women. The greater the share of the work at home that the unemployed woman does, the more negative she is about her psychological well-being and her satisfaction with her relationship with her partner. Further, there is a strong correlation between reactions on an individual and on a family level. Persons whose psychological well-being is low also experience less satisfaction in the marital relationship, and this is especially valid for women.

There are two main implications that that can be drawn from this study. First, the results underline the importance of employment for women for the existence of equity in the sharing of housework. If the wife is unemployed, at the same time as the husband is employed, this study shows that she has to handle most of the domestic work. This is not the case for unemployed men with an employed partner. Second, the results concerning the relationship between the household division of labour and well-being indicate that housework is no longer an alternative to employment for a majority of unemployed women. This supports the hypothesis that employment nowadays, at least in a Swedish context, is as central for women's well-being as for men's.

Article 5. Towards a sociological understanding of mental well-being among the unemployed – The role of economic and psychosocial factors

Classic research on unemployment and mental health has focused on the latent functions of employment. These functions are considered to be of equal importance for all unemployed. A critique of this perspective has been that it views the unemployed as passive and homogenous. Instead, an agency approach has been suggested, which focuses on the individual goals of the unemployed.

This article aims at developing and empirically testing a model for understanding both the differences in mental well-being among unemployed and the changes in individual mental well-being during unemployment and upon re-entering a paid job. The theory integrates both the structural restrictions of the unemployment situation and the agency of the individual and is based on previous findings, which indicate that mental well-being is dependent on the economic need for employment, on the one hand, and on the psychosocial need for employment, on the other hand. The model assumes that when both the economic and the psychosocial need for employment are strong, there will be a dissonance between socially defined needs and individuals' ability to meet them. This should frustrated the unemployed individual and deteriorate the level of mental well-being. On the other hand, if the unemployed manages to satisfy her socially defined needs in ways other than employment - if her economic and psychosocial need for employment is weak - the unemployed is assumed to have relatively good mental well-being.

The paper address the relevance of the model by empirically testing the following hypotheses: (a) Unemployed who have a strong psychosocial and economic need for employment will have lower mental well-being than those with weaker psychosocial and economic need for employment. (b) Those with a strong economic and psychosocial need for employment will experience greater improvement in their mental well-being upon re-entering employment than

those with a weaker need for employment. (c) Individuals who manage to adapt, economically and psychosocially, to the unemployment situation during unemployment will improve their mental well-being, while those who do not will remain stable. The results verified all three hypotheses and thus provide strong evidence for the importance of including the variables economic and psychosocial need for employment in analyses of the differentiated mental well-being outcome of unemployment. This also means that there is strong support for the predictive power of the model for explaining differences in mental well-being among unemployed, as well as the changes in individual mental well-being during unemployment and upon re-entering employment.

As concluded above, this study has shown that the model is a useful instrument for explaining the level of mental health among unemployed. Another study within the framework of the Long-term Unemployment Project, which uses a similar version of the present model developed, shows that the economic and psychosocial need for a paying job are also of importance for the level of job search activity among unemployed. Those who miss their former employment for both economic and psychosocial reasons search for a new job more frequently than those who manage to maintain a social identity and a stable economy despite unemployment. This result indicates that the model can also be useful when analysing other aspects of unemployment. In light of this, our hope is that the sociological model developed and tested in this paper will be a useful tool in future analyses of the behaviour and the overall life situation of the unemployed.

The results within an empirical and a theoretical framework

The purpose of this section is to discuss some implications of the findings and to integrate them into a theoretical framework. First, the results from this study will be related to previous unemployment studies and to the social context of the study, which includes the view of employment in our society and the labour market situation at the time for the investigation. This part also, on the basis of the results in this study, discusses possible causes of, and possible effects of different measures against, unemployment. Second, the section will be completed with a part that integrates the research results into a theoretical framework, which aims to facilitate the understanding and interpretation of the differentiated meaning of unemployment.

The psychosocial meaning of (un)employment

In spite of the positive view of the value of paid work in Western society, there has been a lively discussion within the scientific community and in the public debate on problems of modern society, on whether the psychosocial value of employment, or the non-financial motivation to be employed, is generally high or low among individuals. Do people choose unemployment over employment if the family economy can be secured in another way, or is it vice versa, that a majority prefer to be engaged in paid work, even though it is not necessary for economic reasons? Which of the two hypotheses receive the strongest support in this Swedish study?

In general, the results from this study support the unemployment studies that have emphasised the importance of employment for the possibility to create and maintain a satisfactory life situation. This conclusion is based on the strong non-financial employment commitment among employed as well as among unemployed and on the fact that persons who find a paid job improve their mental health more than those continuously unemployed. The latter result is valid even when controlling for the economic improvement that usually accompanies re-employment (concerning studies investigating the relationship between income and re-employment, see Furåker & Schedin, 1998). A main explanation for the high psychosocial value of a paid job on a general level is that the central position of employment in Sweden makes it hard to be engaged in an alternative activity, or a role, that generates an identity that is socially accepted. It is of course possible that the individual need for employment may be different in a totally different context. However, there is not much in this study, and in the majority of previous unemployment studies carried out in Western societies, that suggest that employment in general does *not* have a central position as a provider of meaningful and social activity.

Even though employment in general seems to be important for unemployed as well as for employed, there is also some variation concerning the psychosocial value of paid work. Employment is more important for unemployed who do not manage to fill their time in unemployment with meaningful and social activities, compared to those who do succeed in replacing employment with satisfying non-employment activities. Further, persons who manage to find stimulating employment have a stronger level of non-financial commitment and a better mental well-being relative to both individuals who get a job with primarily an

economic value and the continuously unemployed. This indicates that the psychosocial value of a paid job seems to be strongest for individuals who have a paid job that provides social and meaningful activity. These results support the research results predicting that meaningful and social jobs have a higher psychosocial value for the individual than jobs that mainly provide economic rewards. In the light of these results, it is also likely that the lack of the previous job, and negative well-being consequences of becoming unemployed, are most obvious for individuals that have been engaged in stimulating jobs.

However, when analysing how employment commitment and well-being are related to unemployment duration and the degree of unemployment concentration, there are no substantial differences. Whether one has a job or not seems to be more important than whether one is long-term or short-term unemployed and whether one interacts, or does not interact, with many unemployed friends and family members. When there are differences they point to a stronger psychosocial need for employment among long-term unemployed and unemployed with a lot of unemployed friends than among short-term unemployed and people who do not have a great share of unemployed in their social network. For instance, this is shown by the relatively low levels of mental well-being in those categories and by the fact that unemployed, stating that *most* of their friends are unemployed, find it harder than others to find some alternative activities to a paid job. (The last result is presented in Nordenmark, 1998) However, in the longitudinal analyses there are no significant differences in mental health between short-term and long-term unemployed. All these results speak against the hypothesis assuming that there develops a "culture of unemployment" which is characterised by a weak motivation to be employed, a development of alternative activities and identities and an overall adaptation to the unemployment situation, among persons who get exposed to long-term unemployment and unemployment concentration. These categories seem to be at least as motivated as others are to be engaged in employment.

Even when analysing the relationship between gender and the psychosocial meaning of unemployment, it is the similarities rather than the differences between men and women that are most striking. It is true that women do a greater share of the housework, independent of the employment situation within the family. But the results also indicate that both women and men do a greater share of the work at home when they are unemployed compared to when they are employed. Further, men have a somewhat stronger employment commitment than women do and youths are more motivated to be engaged in paid work than older age groups are. The results show that the age difference is most striking among women. Older women have a relatively weak non-financial employment motivation, but among the younger age categories the level of employment commitment is even higher for women than it is for the men of the same age. The strong motivation to be employed among younger women, in relation to older women, may be a result of a stronger willingness and possibility to be physically and psychologically independent. There may also exist anxiety about getting stuck in a housewife role, in a situation where it is no longer certain that one can become established on the labour market.

However, there are also some notable differences between men and women. When analysing non-financial employment commitment among men and women in different family situations, the results show that among women, singles with children have the strongest employment commitment and among men, cohabiting with children are most motivated to be employed. Even if it is hard to explain these differences, the results indicate that certain social positions

can have different meanings for men and women respectively, at least concerning the importance of employment. The strong psychosocial need to be employed among solo mothers is, in the light of the increasing risk for unemployment for this category during the 1990s, problematic. This means that there is also an increased risk for a deterioration of mental health among single mothers in today's labour market situation. Further, the results show that it is only among unemployed women that the household division of labour is significantly related to individual and family well-being. However, the results do not imply that housework can be a substitute for employment among unemployed women. The greater the share of the work at home the unemployed woman does, the more negative she is about her psychological well-being and her satisfaction with the relationship to her partner.

To sum up, the results concerning the relationship between gender and the psychosocial meaning of unemployment support the studies showing that unemployment today is as problematic for women as it is for men and speak against the results indicating that women find it easier to adapt to the unemployment situation. This is shown by both the relatively strong non-financial motivation to be employed among women in general, and among younger women in particular, and by the fact that a strong engagement in household tasks among unemployed women do not make the adaptation to the unemployment situation easier. The importance of employment among women could probably be seen as a consequence of the substantial increase in the number of women entering the labour force during the 1970s and 1980s. In today's society, employment in general has the same importance for women as for men, regarding the development and maintenance of a satisfying social identity and independence from others. This is most striking among the younger generations.

What implications can be drawn from the above discussion concerning causes of, and measures against, unemployment? As shown in Article 2, some argue that a main cause of unemployment duration is a weak non-financial motivation to be engaged in paid work. If this hypothesis is true, then the level of employment commitment should be low among unemployed in general, among the long-term unemployed and among categories of people having high unemployment rates. It is true that this study has shown that there were some marginal differences between employed and unemployed almost two years before their actual labour market situation, indicating that some employed found a job because they had a stronger motivation than continuously unemployed. Also Åberg (1998) has, in a study based on the same data used in this investigation, shown that the level of non-financial motivation has some effect on the chances to get a job. In spite of some signs of a weak selection effect, indicating that the level of employment commitment in some sense affects the chances to get a job, this is not the main result in the two studies. First, the general picture from Åberg's study is that the main causes of unemployment duration are factors like relative qualifications, recall-expectations and local labour market conditions and not the individuals willingness, or unwillingness, to find a paid job. Second, this study has indicated that the differences, that indeed do exist, between persons with different labour market statuses is mainly an effect of the actual labour market situation and not mainly a result of a selection effect.

Even concerning the levels of non-financial employment commitment among long-term unemployed and within categories with high unemployment rates, the results speak against the hypothesis stating that the motivation to be engaged in paid work is a primary explanation of unemployment duration. Long-term unemployed are as motivated to find a job as persons with less experience of unemployment. Further, most of the categories that are exposed to

high employment levels, like youths, immigrants and single mothers, are actually the categories having the strongest non-financial motivation to be employed. The above results are in any case valid for a labour market situation that is characterised by a relatively high unemployment level. It is possible that the results may be different in a boom period. The conclusion that can be drawn on the basis of these results is that measures against unemployment, at least in the actual labour market situation, should be concentrated on other areas than strengthening the incentives for paid work among individuals. In addition to striving to create more jobs, the measures should aim at stimulating, and increasing the qualifications of the unemployed through an active and a relevant labour market policy so that they stay employable until suitable jobs emerge.

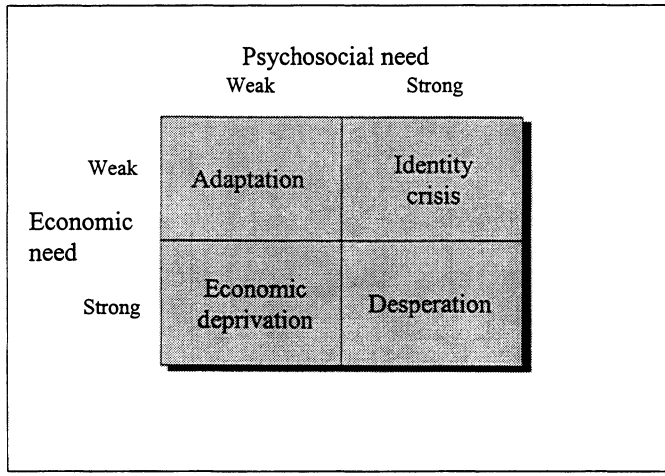
A theoretical framework for understanding the meaning of unemployment

As discussed in the theoretical section presented earlier, there have been some attempts to develop theories aiming at explaining the well-being consequences of becoming unemployed. The most commonly used have a functionalistic approach and emphasise that it is the loss of central psychosocial functions that employment usually provides that is the main explanation for why most of the studies show that unemployment deteriorates mental well-being. Some have criticised the functionalistic approach and proposed a theoretical perspective paying more attention to the reflexive and acting individual. In line with Ezzy's thoughts, this last part gathers together the strong points in the functionalistic and agency theories about the meaning of unemployment into one theoretical framework. The aim is to discuss a theoretical model that can be used as a fruitful tool when analysing and interpreting different aspects of unemployment. This will be done by combining the results from this study concerning the psychosocial need for employment with other LUP-results about the economic need for employment.

The results from previous unemployment studies show that mental well-being consequences of unemployment are mainly structured by the need for employment. This fact can be further interpreted in light of the status passage theory. The theory assumes that individuals are reflexive actors who try to do their best to create and maintain a satisfying identity and life situation. In our society, individuals are socialised through the family, the day care and the school system, all the way from childhood up to adult life, to be a good worker. Because society so heavily emphasises the psychosocial and economic value of employment, a majority of the individuals try to develop and maintain a positive self-image through paid work. However, this may not be relevant for everyone. Some can choose other strategies for upholding a satisfactory life situation, like being strongly engaged in other activities not directly connected to the regular labour market, such as housework. It is also relevant to point out that it is not only a question of whether or not employment is important for the individual. Rather, it should be seen as a continuum, varying from more to less important or unimportant. Finally, this does not mean that the strategies used for developing a satisfying life situation can be understood as a totally voluntary and free choice. It is a choice that individuals make in the light of the previous and present social conditions that characterise them. This means that structural factors like belonging to a certain social class, age category or sex, strongly influence the choices that individuals will make.

In light of the results within the framework of the Long-term Unemployment Project, it is possible to distinguish two main dimensions of employment that structure the level of mental well-being among the unemployed, namely the psychosocial and economic dimensions. If the individual has chosen to invest a lot off energy and time in a well-paid career, employment probably means a great deal for both the economic situation and social identity and therefore, she or he will have a greatly decreased level of well-being when becoming unemployed. On the other hand, if employment is not central to the strategy for developing and upholding a satisfying consumption level and positive self-image, the unemployment situation does not affect mental health in a considerable way. Finally, between those two extremes we also have some unemployed who have a strong psychosocial need for employment, but a weak economic need, and some who have a strong economic need, but a weak psychosocial need for employment. The relationship between the life situation as unemployed and the psychosocial and economic need for employment can be illustrated by the following model.

Figure 1. The PEN-model. Psychosocial and Economic Need for employment.



When the unemployed have both a weak psychosocial and economic need for a paid job, the individual is relatively satisfied with her life situation. This condition is called adaptation because the individuals are adapted to the unemployment situation in that they satisfy their social needs for consumption and find an alternative identity to the role of employed in other ways than through employment. The results indicate that paid work is not central to the strategy for creating a satisfactory life situation for this category. One explanation for the fact that the adapted manage to uphold an identity and consumption level desirable in their social context can be that they are strongly engaged in non-employment activities and have access to economic resources through a well-paid partner.

The category that is in a condition of identity crisis consists of the unemployed who have a strong psychosocial and a weak economic need for employment. This category manages to maintain a satisfying economic standard of living, but has problems finding an alternative identity, or role, to the social position as employed. In the left corner, below adaptation in

Figure 1, we find the state of economic deprivation. In contrast to the notion that employment is mainly important for maintaining a socially accepted identity as employed, a paid job for this group is central for upholding a desirable consumption level. These two categories have poorer mental health than the adapted, but better than the unemployed who experience a sense of desperation.

The latter category is the one that has the roughest time as unemployed, which is indicated by the fact that it has the highest medium score on the GHQ-scale. For this category of unemployed, paid work is a central source for satisfying both their psychosocial and economic needs. They have difficulties finding an alternative identity to the role as employed and they do not manage to uphold a socially desirable consumption level as unemployed. Because of the fact that employment in general plays an important role in the strategy for developing and maintaining a socially accepted identity and standard of living in today's Sweden, a majority of the unemployed belong to this category.

In spite of the fact that individuals choose strategies for creating a satisfactory life situation, the choices are heavily influenced by previous and present social structures. This has in this study been indicated by the varying importance of employment for maintaining a satisfying psychosocial and/or economic situation, for categories in different life positions. For instance, the results from the LUP indicate that non-Scandinavians and single mothers are over-represented among the category experiencing a sense of desperation. It seems then that factors like being raised in a social context outside of Scandinavia and living as single with the main responsibility for a child affects people's strategies in that they see employment as a central resource for creating a satisfactory life situation. The strong need for a paid job among non-Scandinavians can be explained by the fact that foreigners often have a restricted social network, which can effect both the economic and the psychosocial situation negatively. Employment is probably also seen as a central resource for facilitating the incorporation in to Swedish society for this category. Solo mothers are often the main breadwinners, at the same time as they have the main social responsibility for children. These responsibilities often restrict their possibility to interact with other adults. These are factors that can explain why the economic and psychosocial need for employment is relatively strong for this category.

On the other side of the continuum we have the category that is characterised by adaptation. Older age categories (especially older women), are over-represented. This is a social position that in general seems to lessen the importance of employment for the individual. Persons belonging to this category do not see a paid job as central to their strategy for developing and maintaining a satisfactory life situation, as do the groups of unemployed discussed above. This means that the economic and psychosocial need for employment is relatively weak among older age categories, which can be explained by the fact that older unemployed may be worn out after a long working career and they may feel that they have completed their "mission" as an employed. A majority in the older age categories have also built up a stable economy and often have relatively few expenditures, which means that they find it relatively easy to make ends meet, even without a paying job.

The above discussion shows that the model can be used as an instrument for identifying categories of people who have a strong and a weak psychosocial and economic need for employment. Because the psychosocial and economic need for a paid job is central for mental health, the model is also useful when analysing levels of well-being among unemployed.

Furthermore, research within the framework of the Long-term Unemployment Project has shown that the model is also of relevance when analysing job-search behaviour among the unemployed. Those who have a strong economic and psychosocial need for employment also search for jobs more frequently than unemployed who have a weaker need for employment. This indicates that the theoretical model can be a useful tool when analysing and interpreting varying aspects of unemployment.

Concluding discussion

What then can this dissertation add to the previous research results and theories about the meaning of unemployment? First, the fact that there are few Swedish studies concentrating on the psychosocial situation among unemployed means that the results from this doctoral thesis are of importance. Another important point with this study, in relation to many of the previous studies, is that it is based on a large and randomly selected sample. This means that it is possible to generalise from the results, at least in a Swedish context, and to compare different categories of people. As described, a majority of the previous unemployment studies and theories have looked at the unemployed and employed as two separate and homogenous categories. This study has tried to analyse what it means to be continuously unemployed in relation to finding a job that has mainly an economic value, or a job that provides a social/meaningful activity. It has also analysed possible differences in the psychosocial need for a paid job by distinguishing between short-term and long-term unemployed and between unemployed who interact with many other unemployed and those who do not. A main aim has also been to add information to the body of research about the meaning of unemployment for women and men respectively, by comparing men and women in a Swedish context where the labour market participation is nearly as high among women as among men.

Further, the study has empirically identified which main factors that structure the mental consequences of becoming unemployed and integrated these results into a theoretical model, which can be further used for systematically analysing differentiated mental well-being consequences of unemployment. The model is based on the ideas of Ezzy, but the strong point with this model in relation to Ezzy's status passage theory is that it can easily be tested empirically. Finally, a strong point with this study, in relation to a majority of the previous studies, is that it, at least in some part, is based on panel data. This is a fact that makes it easier to identify the casual mechanisms, compared to when investigations are based on cross sectional data.

Although this study in some sense has complemented and developed previous unemployment research, there still is a great deal left to do. One central issue for forthcoming unemployment studies is to further analyse in what way the consequences of unemployment varies between different categories of people, regions and unemployment levels. Another is to penetrate the unemployment process, which means to study individual and structural changes during unemployment. This can be done with the help of longitudinal quantitative studies but also through qualitative case studies. In connection to this it is also vital to map out the strategies that unemployed develop and use to overcome the unemployment situation. A further issue for unemployment research is to develop theoretical explanations for the individual consequences of unemployment. This can for instance be done by further developing and modifying the theoretical model developed within the LUP or by identifying other theoretical tools that can be useful for analysing and understanding different aspects of unemployment. A final, but important, task for further unemployment research is to integrate research results from the different social sciences with one another. Economics usually focus on the economic side of, and output from, unemployment while other social scientists have mainly concentrated on the psychosocial meaning of, and input into, unemployment. However, the only way to reach a deeper understanding of both the causes, and consequences, of unemployment is to combine economic research with research from other social sciences.

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Appendix

Non-responses among certain categories of unemployed (%)

	1996	*1997*
Total	26,2	19,9
Unemployment duration '92-'96		
- 1 year	24,0	20,7
1-2 years	23,9	21,0
2-3 years	25,6	16,2
3 years-	30,1	20,7
Age in '96		
18-25	22,2	21,1
26-30	27,0	21,1
31-40	31,0	21,1
41-50	30,6	20,4
51-66	18,8	15,6
Sex		
Woman	24,0	17,1
Man	28,2	22,2
Citizenship		
Swedish	23,7	18,7
Scandinavian	44,0	38,5
Non-Scandinavian	42,1	28,0
Education		
Comprehensive school	30,5	23,0
Upper secondary school	24,2	18,7
University	24,8	16,2
Population in the district		
-10 000	20,4	13,9
10-50 000	24,9	20,3
50-100 000	25,7	20,4
100 000-	35,6	25,5

In the first survey in 1996 the non-response rate is greater among long-term unemployed and middle aged than among persons who have been unemployed for fewer days and belong to the categories youths or older persons. The variables sex and citizenship indicate that men and non-Swedish citizens are over-represented in the falling off both in 1996 and 1997. Further, the non-responses among unemployed with only comprehensive schooling and those residing in densely populated areas is greater than among unemployed who have a higher education and those living in rural areas. Even this is valid for both 1996 and 1997. This means that long-term unemployed and the categories that have high unemployment rates in Sweden, like non-Swedes and poorly educated, are under-represented among those who participated in the two telephone interviews. What do these results mean for the results in this study? This is hard to tell. One thing that can be pointed out, in light of the non-responses, is that the general

picture from this study is that factors like long-term unemployment and non-Swedish citizenship are related to relatively low levels of well-being. On a general level, this means that the levels of poor health that are reported in this study are probably underestimated.

Main independent variables

A primary aim in this dissertation is to study how unemployment is related to subjective factors like mental well-being and non-financial employment commitment. This is not so easily done however. How does one know if different respondents understand and interpret the questions in the same way, and if they do so, how does one know that they are being honest towards the interviewer? All the interview questions are not so easy to understand and, for instance, it may be hard to tell an unknown interviewer that one really does not want to be engaged in paid work when this is a condition for receiving unemployment benefit in Sweden.

In an attempt to decrease the risk of the first, the subjective areas have been measured by indexes consisting of a number of questions or statements. The advantage of using indexes instead of single questions is that the probability that the respondents will misunderstand several questions measuring the same thing is much lower than it is for them misinterpreting only one question. This means that an index is a more stable and valid variable than a single question or statement. The main indexes that are used are the Work Involvement Scale, measuring employment commitment, and the General Health Questionnaire, measuring mental well-being (see Article 1 for a presentation of the statements).

The second question concerning the probability that the respondents do, for some reason, not tell the truth is more difficult to handle. Whether individuals respond honestly or not is a general problem in research that includes human beings. If one assumes that the unemployed on a general level do not speak the truth, the problem is most relevant when discussing the unemployed as one homogenous category. However, the main aim in this study is to relate different categories of unemployed to one another. The assumption here is that the different groups in this study respond with the similar levels of uprightness. This means that it is still fruitful and meaningful to compare responses for short-term and long-term unemployed, men and women, older and younger and so on.