

## THE 'BAGGAGE' OF THE UNEMPLOYED, HUNGARY, 1993<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

Although the topic touches two different fields, this study will concentrate rather on the sociological aspects of the problem, restricting the analysis of psychological phenomena to showing the possible points of contact.

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The following study aims at highlighting some aspects of a specific problem related to unemployment which until now has not been thoroughly researched, and is therefore less-known. This question, less in the center of interest, is the following: what kinds of ideas and values can be found in the 'baggage' of someone who has lost his job during the last few years.

Although the topic touches two different fields, this study will concentrate rather on the sociological aspects of the problem, restricting the analysis of psychological phenomena to showing the possible points of contact. The sociological significance of unemployment arises from two main sources. The first one is the fact that this stratum is very important to both the economic and political elite of the society. The second is that in certain situations the problem can have strong political connotations.

For the economic elite the unemployed appear as a considerable potential work force. Since manpower is a determining factor of production, influencing both its costs and quality, the level of qualification, professional composition and employee attitude of this stratum can have an immediate effect on the basic objectives and potential growth of the economic elite. The stratum of the unemployed, increasing constantly both in number and level of qualification, is very important for the political elite as well because it represents a group of voters easy to activate, the loss of which would be

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<sup>1</sup>The article is based on work done with László Benedek and Ágnes Darits at the Institute of Sociology of ELTE and at the Hungarian Conflict Resolution Center for Training and Research.

politically irrational. Satisfying the needs of this stratum is therefore an important question to every active political association.

With the elections drawing closer this problem will presumably gain strong political significance, as the elaboration of possible solutions becomes part of the competition between the platforms of different parties. The rising of unemployment to the level of high politics that is its use as a political weapon, can divide civil society to an extent that can be hardly estimated in advance. The most important problem is that the tension between the unemployed and people with secure jobs (or at least momentarily secure jobs) can increase. In addition to this, almost any group, with a particular common interest based for instance on age, sex, ethnicity or education can be turned against others.

The importance of the problem makes its proper handling crucial for society. From the sociologist's point of view unemployment has to be seen as a process, that starts with lay-off and ends when the person in question finds a new job. The description of our method is therefore based on presenting the different stages of unemployment, that is, the possible phases of a person's 'unemployment career'. This process has to be considered as a whole, and the unemployed individual has to be helped through all the specific problems related to each different period. Therefore, we are convinced that easing the psychological burden of the unemployed is at least as important as creating the institutional system of welfare-mediating-retraining. That is why during our retraining courses and outplacement works we tried to gather information about the following questions:

What kind of private and work conditions do unemployed people leave behind?

How can they accept their situation, and how can they make their environment accept it?

How are they able to find their way in the maze of an official and exclusively result-oriented environment?

Are they able to take advantage of the possibilities offered by their environment?

What kind of resources can they gather to improve their chances of finding a new job, and how?

To what extent does unemployment itself become their 'main occupation', and therefore an obstacle to their escape from this situation?

Based on the above information, as well as on the results of research of local and global labour markets, we have worked out a new typology of unemployed groups. The relevant literature generally defines types of unemployment as social phenomena, and types of unemployed people as related social groups. They consider the following three categories: structural, 'frictional' and absolute unemployment, most common.

What concerns us in these categories is the general approach that lies behind them. There is always an attempt to apply some kinds of techniques and procedures, planned on a global level, to the problem. The level of planning and controlling results is very 'high', and thus is very far removed from the realities of unemployment, not to mention the unemployed themselves. In other words, the individuals are considered as objects rather than subjects of the measures taken. According to this logic, there are three main fields of global intervention: increasing the demand in manpower by direct or indirect methods; decreasing the supply; and maintaining the balance between supply and demand also by direct regulation.

Our way of thinking is rather different from this logic. The essential point of our activity is to concentrate on the unemployed individuals, and to help them keep or resume their active participation in solving their own problems. Consequently, in our programs the unemployed actively take part in working out plans for career correction, retraining and searching for a job, while at the same time receiving specific help and information concerning the given problems. In order to characterize and classify the facts and experiences that fill the 'baggage' of someone unemployed, we have created three distinct typologies dealing with the different groups, employer/employee relations and processes related to the economic transformation of the companies in question.

We have defined the categories based on the following three aspects of differentiation. The first one is closely related to the individual, that is to say, this category is based on the abilities fixing the person's position in the labour market (type of group based on age and qualifications). The second factor in establishing categories is the person's position in a specific sector of the economy and a specific region of the country.

The third question to be considered is where the person comes from, what kind of 'lay-off history' his former company has. On the basis of the responses to these questions, a typology of the transformation process of companies, and a typology of the employer/employee relations can be formed. As it has been made clear in the previous section, we consider it vital that the unemployed maintain their activity related to the world of labor, or resume it in an early phase of their 'unemployment career'. The loss of activity generally results from negative experiences gained in the different stages of unemployment, and which have never been properly addressed. According to our experience, in terms of activity two groups of unemployed people can be distinguished. The following description of the groups is based on the characteristic behaviour during the three main phases of unemployment (entrance period, 'permanent' or 'active' unemployment, period of leaving.)

Activity in the first group decreases fast after entering, remains low during the permanent phase and then increases considerably as quitting period approaches. This group can generally be characterized by relatively good qualifications, few negative experiences, a stable identity and a rather sound family structure. The other group can be described by a higher commitment towards employment upon entering. Their basic feeling is that work is due to them, and someone should solve the problem for them. Activity in searching for a job is in inverse proportion to the amount of time spent out of work.

The following analysis describes the main actors, basic types of experiences and characteristic problems to be faced during the particular phases of the 'unemployment career'.

### 1. The Entrance Period

Two different cases can be distinguished within this situation: (1) although still working, the person is aware of his imminent unemployment; (2) he is in fact already unemployed.

The basic types of experience are, in this case, the ones linked to the nature of the actual work,  
the character of the organization of work and the employer/employee relationship,  
the rate of the decrease in the financial and social status of the individual,  
the amount of reserves (money, relations, abilities),  
the support provided by the family,  
the reactions of the 'micro-environment'.

The main actors of this phase are:

the workplace, more specifically the 'boss', the personnel department and the colleagues staying or leaving,  
the unions or other civil organizations, if any,  
the unemployed from different companies,  
advisers,  
the family.

The characteristic types of problems are:

easing the crisis of separation,  
dealing with the loss,  
solving conflicts connected with the work and the workplace,  
maintaining activity, developing personal abilities.

According to western studies in the case of negative work-related experiences (oversimplified tasks and responsibilities, over-hierarchized work-

organization, inefficient unions), losing one's job can actually be a positive experience. This fact, especially if the financial and social deprivation is not too serious, may decrease the unemployed's activity in looking for a job for a longer period.

## 2. The Active Unemployment Career

According to our experience, two steps can be distinguished within this period. One of them is the first few months (1/2) after the entrance period, followed by a period of orientation and increased pressure. The unemployed then take part in retraining, and start looking for alternative solutions or a new job.

The basic types of experience, in this case, are:  
 the stress resulting from losing a job,  
 the bureaucratic ways in which employment centres deal with people while providing welfare and necessary documents,  
 experiences recounted by other unemployed people,  
 experiences during retraining,  
 family background and reactions,  
 positive and negative effects of the job-search,  
 influences of the 'micro-environment'.

The main actors of this phase are:  
 employment centers and their branch agencies,  
 retraining institutions,  
 family,  
 people in similar situations,  
 advisers,  
 potential employers.

The dominant actor and source of experiences is the employment center and its methods.

The characteristic types of problems are:  
 resuming activity,  
 improving personal abilities,  
 developing a career-correctional plan,  
 proper handling of the crisis of separation and the feeling of loss,  
 dealing with new types of conflicts, for example, recurring identity crisis, family role-conflicts, etc.  
 improving self-awareness,  
 creating a professional image.

According to our experience, in this phase, the employment centers definitely do not help increase the activity of the unemployed because of their

official nature, considerably inefficient and bureaucratic practices. If the given person has a supporting family background and relationships, alternative resources of income and time structuring possibilities, he will still remain inactive in searching for formal employment. Other factors that can make this period rather difficult are the failure to address properly the crisis of separation and loss, as well as the lack of personal career-correctional programs. The situation can be further aggravated by the fact that the accumulation of negative experiences may not only decrease the level of activity but it can also make it impossible for the unemployed to acquire new information or abilities, thus, preventing them from improving their position in the labor market.

### 3. The Period of Resuming Activity

This phase generally appears when the end of unemployment is drawing near, although it depends considerably on the individual and the influences he has had to endure in the previous stages.

The basic types of experience, in this case, are:  
 experiences resulting from the job-search,  
 the 'end of welfare' experience,  
 all the information and experiences gathered during the 'unemployment career',  
 the rate of activity or passivity of others in similar situations.

The main actors of this phase are:

potential employers,  
 the employment center,  
 other unemployed people in similar situations,  
 family and the network of relations in the 'micro-environment'.

In this phase the basic types of experience are related to the potential employers and workplaces.

The characteristic types of problems are:

collation of the professional and personal image,  
 improvement in the ability of self-presentation,  
 acquisition of and improvement in job-searching techniques.

In this phase success in resuming employment is impossible if serious emotional problems remain unsolved. That is why the successful and positive 'accomplishment' of the previous phases is crucial. This period is doubly precarious. First of all, the potential employers meet the unemployed at a moment when the latter have already left their safe situation. Moreover, the employers are generally unwilling to take into consideration the plight of the unemployed, who, if once again faced with failure, may have an extremely difficult time returning to the world of labour.