

Preface

Perhaps only the unemployed can speak with final authority about the experience of their condition. So, in this book we have gathered together a series of empirical studies undertaken to bring forward experiences around contemporary unemployment.

The project came into being against the backdrop of a rapid increase in the number of people unemployed in Ireland (having increased from 4.2 per cent of the labour force in February 2006 to 15 per cent in February 2012), with Waterford City and its hinterland, the site of much of this study, being particularly impacted, with unemployment running to almost 20 per cent. Although each space and time has its own unique features, one reviewer commented that Waterford could be any industrial city in long-term decline, an unremarkable unemployment black spot; Waterford could be a Essen, Lille, Flint, Sheffield; anywhere like the Hammertown of Paul Willis's (1977) classic *Learning to Labor*. Unemployment is once again a significant feature of Irish life, and in undertaking this study we hope to respond to the impetus to do social research of relevance and to undertake research that offers participants a voice in narrating their own experience.

Unemployment has totemic importance in contemporary Irish culture and social life. In the aftermath of the Great Hunger (the famine of 1845–7, in which the population of Ireland fell by 25 per cent) the overall population of the country declined for the following 120 years through a combination of emigration and social control of family formation (O'Gráda, 1994). By the 1950s many were posing the existential question of whether Ireland was a failed state (Garvin, 2004). From the late 1950s onwards, Ireland rapidly modernised, returned to population growth and enjoyed some periods of strong, if inconsistent, economic growth. A number of theorists have argued that all hues of the political spectrum operated the same policy of creating jobs (Lee, 1989), with a singular aspiration of full employment. As a result unemployment is central to political life, and transfer payments

represent around one-third of all government expenditure. The system of social protection broadly mimics the Beveridge-designed UK approach, with some local modifications. While all systems of welfare are in constant revision, this study takes place against the backdrop of renewed vigour around labour activation policies.

This book may be read as either a collection of separate chapters in their own right, or as a singular thesis on the experience of unemployment. So in a sense we claim that these proximate studies contribute, to a greater or lesser extent, to a unified and coherent perspective on unemployment: unemployment is not just the absence of work but an experience shaped by governmental policies and organisations as well as broader social structures and cultural values. In arranging these materials, and in the editorial introduction and conclusion, we have aimed at supporting this argument, hoping that the readers will feel as we do that the thesis emerges rather than is forced. Beyond this, we have confined ourselves to resolutely empirical considerations on the experience of unemployment. For this reason, this project raises as many questions as it answers.

We must not end without expressing our gratitude to everyone who has contributed or helped us to prepare this book for the press. We thank our co-authors who took time to find shared ground around the central ideas of this book. Some of the chapters grew out of the 2012 WIT summer research project – Waterford Unemployment Experiences Research Collaborative (WUERC) – a collective of unemployed graduates and social-science academics on the experience of unemployment during summer 2012 in Waterford in the south-east of Ireland. The WUERC team were Aisling Tuite, Bernard Flanagan, J.P. Coleman, Alan Corish, Daniel Hayden, Bobby Comerford, Rose Shearer, Mark Doyle, Zach Roche, Catriona O’Sullivan, Alexandra Anton, Siona Finlayson and Daniel Fell. A second team of researchers was assembled in the summer of 2014 to investigate the new experience of unemployment under *Pathways to Work*, consisting of Ameenah Busairi, Jason Colclough, Sarah Dee, Kirsty Doyle, Cathal Harte, Naomi Long, Marc Mbanda and Kris McGuire. We must also warmly thank our employers the Waterford Institute of Technology for supporting this venture.

Tom Boland and Ray Griffin

Introduction and general remarks

What is there to know about unemployment? It is a familiar topic, seemingly always with us. Indeed it sometimes seems as though there is nothing to know about unemployment, as though it were nothing in itself, just the absence of work. However, our approach suggests that unemployment is something concrete, varied and elusive; a curious and veiled experience.

Unemployment is a substantial economic, social and political issue, and can have enormous significance in the lives of the unemployed. It has also been extensively worked over in the fields of economics, econometrics, political science, sociology, psychology, history and social policy, as well as being subject to broad discourse in media. All this effort means we know quite a lot about how and why unemployment arises and the social and personal consequences of unemployment. As a result, and with the aspiration of saying something new, this book attempts to produce a first principles consideration of the experience. In this line of thinking, the experience of unemployment is not just the experience of being without work, rather the contemporary experience of unemployment is manifested in the way we talk about unemployment, individually, collectively, politically and publicly, the spaces and places produced around unemployment as well as in the work that individuals do and are encouraged or required to do in order to end their unemployment. Taken together the eleven areas explored in this book map out the experience of unemployment, looking at it anew and then attempting to produce some sense of what it means.

Confirming deprivation

Much of what we found has been found already and elsewhere. We encountered the pity of unemployment, the natural concern for the fate of individual suffering, poverty and the caustic consequences of unemployment on people's wellbeing. Thus the research could be seen to confirm and

contribute to the prevailing sociological theory of unemployment; the ‘deprivation theory’, which suggests the unemployed lack the social benefits created by work. In this line of thinking, the unemployed are without the social status, solidarity, regular activity, sense of collective purpose and structured experience of time that are available to those in work. This axiology, that unemployment is a problem to be solved by employment, dominates social, economic and political thinking. This thesis, within sociology, emerged from Marienthal study by Jahoda *et al.* (1933; English translation, 1972), an exhaustive case study of an Austrian town in the 1930s that has become a standard of sociology (Cole, 2007b; Edgell, 2012), right up to recent contributions by Brodtkin and Marsden (2013), Gallie and Paugam (2000) and Sharone (2013). Importantly, deprivation theory explains the psychological, health and economic consequences of unemployment for individuals and communities. This notion of deprivation also suffuses economic and political thinking, from Keynes to Hayek, from Beveridge to Friedman. Furthermore, unemployed people are profoundly aware that they are supposed to be wishing for work; and certainly that perspective emerges in many of our chapters.

Beyond deprivation

This book considers that unemployment is more than simply the absence of work. As an experience unemployment is very different from the lives of children, retirees, home-makers, the wealthy, artists, travellers and hippies. Unemployment is not just the absence of work; it is an experience of being defined by the state as a certain type of individual, with a certain relationship to the labour market and then being subject to a host of governmental interventions. Instead of a neutrally observed occurrence, unemployment is an actively produced category. Only by applying to the social welfare office can one become defined as unemployed, and even if the application is successful, the state might only add the claim to the Live Register, and not to the official unemployment rate. So unemployment is not a natural condition, but is defined by institutions, particularly the International Labour Organization definition; the unemployed are without work, available for work and actively seeking work. This definition dates from 1954; clearly unemployment is a twentieth-century invention, and something which is open to transformation over time as policy, politics and social philosophies change. The ambivalences and tensions of the apparatus of the welfare state at the point at which it provides care and a safety net are a central theme running throughout this book.

The governmentality approach introduced by Foucault has become a fully-fledged paradigm in itself (Dean, M., 2010). Governmentality refers

to the myriad discrete interventions of state agencies, from the most minuscule of procedures up to social policy. The power of governmentality is not identical to that of the king or any other powerful political actor, rather it is the constant and methodical application of a particular rationality through certain interventions or categorisations or policies. The target of these efforts is less particular people than the population as a whole, or the economy, or more specific targets; for instance, recent social welfare policy in Ireland is directed towards those the government categorise as long-term unemployed.

Governmentality emerges gradually with the modern state, as it seeks to manage and optimise the productivity of its population; and unemployment schemes emerge to methodically alleviate poverty in a careful contribution to the broader economy. Every welfare state has a range of organisations and interventions; these range from the forms that must be filled out by new claimants, the architecture of the social welfare offices, media reportage, career advice in books and websites, to the new procedures and social policies around unemployment benefits – or ‘job-seeker’s benefit’ as it is now known. The assemblage of ‘governmental’ interventions and institutions that has emerged over time is called a system but hardly a systematic attempt to produce a coherent experience of unemployment. Indeed no single actor or agency or time period have produced the social welfare system. Rather, over time, ad hoc, trial-and-error and issue-specific elements of the system are put into place – what anthropologists call bricolage – and so the system at any point in time is made up of fundamentally uneven, sometimes contradictory, and often inefficient sets of practices that are continually reshaped by priorities, interests and values that emerge in the short term. Over time, as the system becomes increasingly layered and structured, it ossifies as more and more priorities, interests and values become settled, which narrows the potential for change and reform.

Thus, a key focus of this book is to report on the experience of the structures and organisations which create and shape unemployment. Therefore we present chapters on social welfare policy, on the social welfare office, and the forms one fills in becoming registered as ‘unemployed’. These are complemented in turn by the wider environment around ‘unemployment’, by chapters on the media, on job-seeking advice and the built environment of unemployment black spots. Our argument is that the unpleasant and often meaningless experience of unemployment is created by the cumulative effect of these elements, rather than just stemming from joblessness.

Two moral principles are at play in the contemporary social welfare system (Bauman, 2000). The first principle is to care for the vulnerable; that society must take care of those who have no means of support. Allowing people to become destitute, to suffer from poverty, cold and hunger, is

simply unacceptable and repugnant. Since we live in a modern nation, this care is mainly directed through the state, communal acts of charity are no longer feasible in a large-scale anonymous society. Instead, we presume that there are sufficient state services available for the poor, the unemployed and the homeless. The second principle is the insistence that everyone should pay their way if they can and not depend on others. Those who are without support today should attempt to gain work tomorrow and pay taxes in their turn. The poor and vulnerable must be ‘deserving’, not ‘scroungers’ or ‘parasites’. There is no objection to disability payments, for instance; what rankles is the possibility that an unspecified number of people are simply taking from the public purse without ever giving anything back.

The modern welfare state embodies the first principle where it gives support to the unemployed. The second principle is reflected in the International Labour Organization (ILO) definition of unemployment as being without work, but available for it and actively seeking it. In the twenty-first century, there has been a clear shift in the balance of these moral principles, with an increasing emphasis on work as a moral good. This is reflected in the general adoption of the ‘deprivation’ theory of unemployment, from policy makers to ordinary people. This shift is partially created through new governmental interventions, from politicians and policy makers to street-level bureaucrats. However, it also has clear popular support, as is reflected in media reportage on unemployment and among the unemployed themselves, who express suspicion and censure of real or imagined ‘scroungers’ and ‘spongers’. While there are opinion leaders and agenda setting, the polity is not a passive passenger in the transformation of the state, but expresses its support vocally or through the silence of refusing to object.

The self-work of unemployment

Government becomes governmentality, when those subject to the regime and regulation of unemployment come to accept how they are defined, taking it on as an identity. Yet, since the beginnings of modern work, free time is yearned for, the reduction of working hours has been the ambition of unions, free time is the goal of technological innovation and the promise of labour-saving household devices. Unemployment is often associated with poverty but equally significant is the way in which unemployment transforms ordinary life. The free time of unemployment is experienced as a burden; it is the limbo of constantly waiting with intermittent frantic job-seeking. Ordinary life becomes peculiarly drained of meaning. Isolation, alienation, cynicism and despair tend to set in. Indeed the ‘reality’ of experience is decisively shaped by how it is understood; that is, our way of thinking about things shapes the meanings they have for us. And, repeatedly, the ‘free time’ of

unemployment is considered meaningless because people accept that deprivation of work is what ails them.

In this line, the repositioning of unemployment as job-seeking, part of the grand project of activating the unemployed, is more than a change of political lexicon. Job-seekers are subject to an ever greater range of processes to surveil, assess and intervene by the State; and these interventions remake the experience, and to a certain extent transform the identity of those subject to them. This theme emerges in a number of ways across the book, particularly in those chapters that focus on the voices of the unemployed. So the chapter on talk relays the meaningless void of time spent unemployed, the chapter on job-seeking examines the self-work prescribed by career guidance or job advice books that simultaneously position unemployment in the harshest of terms while cajoling those subject to it to cheer up and put their best foot forward.

Thus, this book is broadly written to broaden our understanding of unemployment, to go beyond deprivation theory. In its chapters on experience it suggests that unemployment is a specific experience in itself, and not merely the absence of work. In the chapters on governmentality, it addresses how the experience of unemployment is shaped by specific forces. But, beyond theory, it also challenges policy makers and the polity at large to look beyond the central value of work on which deprivation theory is based. Obviously, there are more important things to life than work, and for that reason, being unemployed should be more than just doing nothing.

Outline

Running throughout various experiences explored in the book are the key themes of deprivation, government and governmentality. The first part of the book explores the experience in detail, giving voice to the unemployed, but also making sense of their experience. The second part looks at key elements which govern this experience. As such, the book is a synthesis of the insights of interpretive sociology and anthropology with governmentality. The system and the subject are intertwined, as are state and society; with this in mind, we attempt to substantiate a new theory of unemployment. The final part addresses unemployment at a remove, examining media discourse on unemployment and the statistical representation of unemployment.

The first part of the book is directly concerned with experience. The opening chapter analyses a corpus of interviews with unemployed people. It introduces the concept of 'liminality' from anthropology as a way of analysing 'in-between' and unstructured experiences like unemployment. Furthermore, in order to fully understand the meaning of what people say about their experience of unemployment, it draws on Beckett's *Waiting for*

Godot, which artistically expresses the experience of futility in unemployment. Jennifer Yeager and Jonathon Culleton analyse and compare two focus groups with a younger and more mature age group, picking up on the different experiences for age cohorts who have a strong attachment to the labour market and the work ethic. They introduce the ideas of self, social and State valuation to highlight the psychological consequences of unemployment. Josh Lalor then analyses the experience of redundancy through extensive interviews with ex-Waterford Crystal workers. His analysis emphasises the importance of the wider political situation in which unemployment occurs. John O'Brien presents an innovative methodology for studying the built environment of high-unemployment areas. This chapter introduces Putnam's idea of social capital (2000) and Goffman's idea of self-presentation (1959), in order to demonstrate exactly how the environment of 'unemployment' black spots is problematic. This study first identifies statistically significant differences in the built environment of high and low unemployment areas, then illustrates these differences qualitatively in terms of aesthetic qualities such as beauty, harmony and nature, issues of control over the environment and the presentation of identity through the 'face' of dwellings. With most of these direct experience chapters dealing with the experience of unemployment as deprivation, the final chapter in this part addresses some counter-narratives of unemployment, stories from the experience of rural unemployment that allow Gordon Cooke *et al.* to consider the dominance of deprivation theory.

The second part of the book addresses the micro-practices that surround the experience of unemployment, which examines more explicitly the agency of government and consequential governmentality of the experience. Ray Griffin presents an analysis of the UP1 form, forensically parsing the detail of the form that effectively defines a person as unemployed. The multiple and divergent intentions of governmentality are made evident here, from parentalism to suspicion. Following on from that, and drawing on the emergent anthropological method of autoethnography, we present sixteen unemployed graduates' accounts of their own experience in going to the social welfare office. The insights of these accounts, and how they are themselves shaped by the office, are analysed here. Tom Boland then analyses new government policy on unemployment, particularly *Pathways to Work* (2012). The chapter draws attention to the ordo-liberal impulse in the contractualisation of welfare entitlements, and argues that the new increased demands for surveillance and labour-market activity introduced in *Pathways* further denigrates the 'gift' of social welfare and intensifies the negative experience of unemployment. Finally, Tom Boland analyses job-seeking manuals, particularly how most books construct unemployment as an individual problem and job-seeking as a job in itself. The negative

consequences of unemployment are increasingly acknowledged, but to be dealt with through positive thinking or even cognitive behavioural therapy, in exercises suggested by each book. An aspect of the work of job-seeking is maintaining a positive attitude, so that negative feelings are a personal failure.

The last section of the book is particularly concerned with the experience of unemployment in the public sphere, often distant from actual unemployment. In an analysis of print media coverage of the issue of unemployment, Tom Boland, Rose Shearer and Aisling Tuite analyse the tendency to view the nation as a form of economic unit, on the model of a factory or even a farm, the presumption that work equals worth, and the dichotomy between the deserving poor and victims of unemployment and supposed 'scroungers' or 'spongers'. The final chapter by Ray Griffin and John O'Brien explores the practices of producing statistical knowledge about unemployment, surfacing the tensions that arise in defining and categorising individuals; before examining how unemployment is an example of statistical performativity whereby politicians and policy makers have created an abstraction, which has now come to define how they must act.

From this empirical research into the concrete experiences of unemployment and the forces which create it, we seek to present a richer understanding than merely saying that unemployment is the absence of work.