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Social Class, Unemployment and Psychological Distress

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Abstract

Attempts to explain higher rates of psychological distress among lower class people have included reference to social selection, differential exposure to stress and differential vulnerability arising from inequalities in access to resources. Our analysis draws on data from a national survey of the Republic of Ireland in order to examine these hypotheses. No evidence to support the social selection hypothesis was found. In addressing the issue of differential responsiveness attention was focused on the interaction between unemployment and social class in their impact on emotional distress. Some support for the hypothesis of differential vulnerability was found among women, but our examination of the impact of husband's unemployment provided no evidence leading in this direction, while for men, unemployment actually had a stronger effect for men in higher social classes. The major factors leading to higher levels of psychological distress in the lower social classes are greater exposure to unemployment and economic deprivation.

Introduction

One of the most consistently documented associations in psychiatric epidemiology is that between social class and socio-economic status.[1] In attempting to account for the higher rates of distress among lower class people research has been influenced by two contending perspectives: the social selection and social causation perspectives. The former argue that natural competitive conditions lead to the existing distribution of psychological distress across the class structure. The social causation argument emphasises the life conditions to which lower class people are exposed.

> In short then contending hypotheses are: (1) that
> one's mental state helps determine his social
> position; and (2) that one's social position helps
> determine his mental state.[2]

The social selection argument does not depend on a genetic theory of causation. It is sufficient to argue that the factors which influence ability to compete for social position overlap with those which influence ability to cope with stress. The explanation is one which involves reference to "constitutional frailty" because it emphasises intrapsychic propensities to distress rather than environmental influences.[3]

The Social Causation Perspective

Some social-causation theorists have argued that the objective conditions of lower class life and the greater exposure to stressful life experiences associated with such conditions account for the relationship between class and other psychological distress. An alternative view while emphasising the importance of life experiences concentrates on the manner in which the environment shapes social and intrapsychic resources thus influencing one's coping repertoire. Thus attention is again directed to differences in responsiveness to stress.

Early research in this area focused on the hypothesis of differential exposure to life-events. However, while the expected differences in exposure were observed they were not sufficient to account for the observed class differences. Research interest was directed to the issue of differential

vulnerability. Members of lower class groups are hypothesised, not only to have a higher likelihood of experiencing stressful life events, but also to be more vulnerable to such events because the resources they possess to cope with such events are inferior. Some of the most influential contributions in the literature have provided support for this hypothesis.

Two main types of resources have been proposed as crucial to differential vulnerability: financial resources and non-financial resources such as social support and resilient personality characteristics. With regard to financial resources, the distinction between exposure and vulnerability becomes blurred, although this is not a point to which a great deal of attention has been devoted. Thus as McLeod and Kessler note:

> ... this explanation posits a direct role for socio-economic status: being poor causes increased vulnerability.[4]

Vulnerability to one type of stress is being explained by exposure to another type of stress although the explanation is not couched in such terms.

The coping resources explanation, in contrast, argues that differential vulnerability reflects more than economic hardship and social class operates indirectly through its impact on a broad class of coping resources, of which social support and feelings of powerlessness have been most frequently documented.

Life Events and Chronic Strains and Stressors

The bulk of the research relating to the relationship of social class or socio-economic status to psychological distress has proceeded from the life-events theoretical perspective employing the life-events inventory methodology. The pioneering laboratory work of Seyle[5] on somatic responses to stress provided the theoretical foundation for life-events research. Holmes and Rahe[6] developed the Social Readjustment Scale with the in-built assumption that change was stressful. However, the notion that change *per se* is damaging has increasingly been questioned. Research has moved beyond notions relating to the number of events and the magnitude of change in terms of degree of adjustment and has focused attention on issues relating to the quality of events - desirability, degree of control, whether or not they are scheduled.

Life events research, Pearlin,[7] argues, has lacked a sociological character in that the structural contacts of people's lives are treated as if they were extraneous to the stress process. In fact, undesirable events frequently mark a transition to worse positions. Increasingly, attention is being directed to the significance of events whose occurrence varies with people's key social and economic statuses and to the likelihood that events are proxy indicators of chronic hardship. Such considerations have led some to conclude that is

> ... time to give up life events as a measure of
> social stress and concentrate on on-going
> stresses.[8]

It would seem more reasonable, however, to avoid such "either or thinking" and exploit the opportunity to examine the ways in which events and strains converge in people's lives. Of particular interest here is the manner in which events lend to chronic strains. Events can cause strain by altering enduring life conditions which in turn can become potent sources of stress.[9]

The shift of attention from life events to more enduring or recurring life problems has led to a greater emphasis on economic hardship.[10] Studies focusing more intently on a single event have pursued the idea that psychological distress is caused not by abstract "events" but by the stresses and strains associated with such events. Furthermore, differential vulnerability to events is hypothesised to be associated with variations in the stresses and strains produced by the event.[11]

Such considerations suggest that, in examining the role of vulnerability and exposure to stress, it may be particularly useful to focus on the impact of unemployment. Such a focus is made more interesting by the fact that the, admittedly rather limited, research on the manner in which unemployment interacts with social class in affecting psychological distress has not tended to provide clear support for the hypothesis of heightened vulnerability to stress among the lower social classes. In fact, we are left

with a rather confusing picture. Theoretical discussion has pointed to the conflicting expectations arising, on the one hand, from the higher levels of financial strain to which manual workers are exposed, and on the other hand, the higher levels of occupational identification which white collar workers might be expected to exhibit. In fact the available evidence indicates the existence of little difference between manual and white collar workers in the impact of unemployment, despite the fact that manual workers experience higher levels of financial strain.[12]

In order to pursue the issue of exposure versus vulnerability it is necessary to have information available on not only social class, unemployment and psychological distress but on current financial circumstances and physical health status. In the section that follows we describe the data drawn from a national sample of households in the Republic of Ireland which fulfils these requirements and on which our analysis will be based.

Sample and Description of Variables

The survey of Poverty, Income Distribution and State Services carried out by the Economic and Social Research Institute, Dublin in 1987 provides the database for our analysis. The survey was designed to provide a representative national sample. Interviews were conducted with all available adults in 3,294 households.

Psychological Distress

Psychological well-being was measured using the 12 items version of the General Health Questionnaire and the GHQ scoring procedure.[13] In order to make it possible for the GHQ to be administered by interviewers it was necessary to introduce some changes to the combinations of items and answer formats. The procedure adopted was intended to avoid grouping of `positive´ or `negative´ items or the need for repeated changes of response format. The approach taken was to divide the items into two groups of 6, each of which was allocated to one of the two possible response formats. The alpha coefficient for the 12-item scale was found to be .82. The split half correlation coefficient between the sub-scales using changed and unchanged response formats was .73.[14]

Physical Health Status

Respondents were asked if they "had any major illness, physical disability or infirmity that has troubled you for at least the past year or that is likely to go on troubling you.

Unemployment

The concept of unemployment adopted in this study, like that in the Census and Labour Force Survey is dependent upon the respondent´s evaluation of their own employment status.

Life-Style Deprivation

The measures of financial stress we employ are based on the enforced absence of a range of life-style items. The choice of items to be included in the study was influenced by

the range of indicators employed in other major studies of poverty.[15] Mack and Lansley's items were chosen so as to exclude things which almost everyone has or very few people would miss. The 24 items on which our analysis is based are made up of 17 or the Mack and Lansley pool of items together with 7 additional items.

For each of 20 of the life-style items the head of the households or household manager was asked:

(i)   Whether the household had the item in question;
(ii) If not, whether they would like to have it but must do without it due to lack of money;
(iii) Whether they felt the item was a necessity, i.e., "Is something that every household (or person) should be able to have and that nobody should have to do without"?

In addition to the 20 items employing this format the following set of items were included in the index bringing the total number of items to 24:

(i)   Whether there was a day during the previous two weeks when the household manager did not have a substantial meal at all - from getting up to going to bed.
(ii) Whether the household manager has had to go without heating during the last year through lack of money, i.e., having to go without a fire on a cold day, or go to bed early to keep warm or light the fire late because of lack of coal/fuel.
(iii) Head of household has not had an afternoon or evening out in the last fortnight that costs money, because of lack of resources.
(iv) (a) Household is currently in arrears on rent, mortgage, electricity and gas or
      (b) Has had to go into debt in the last 12 months to meet ordinary living expenses such as rent, food, Christmas or lack of school expenses.
           or

(c)   Has had to sell or pawn anything   worth
      £50   or   more to meet   ordinary   living
      expenses.

In our subsequent analysis we distinguish two dimensions of life style deprivation. The first dimension which we label *primary life-style deprivation* involves the enforced absence of socially defined necessities such as new clothes, two pairs of shoes, a warm overcoat, a roast or its equivalent once a week, a meal with meat, chicken or fish every second day; or living in a household which is experiencing severe debt problems or in which the household manager is experiencing extreme food or heat deprivation. *Secondary deprivation* involves the enforced absence of a daily newspaper, a hobby, central heating, car, telephone, annual holidays or being unable to save or afford an afternoon or evening out in the previous two weeks.[16]

Social Class

The class schema employed in this study takes as its starting point the most detailed eleven category class schema used in the Casmin study but introduces a future distinction between semi-skilled and unskilled manual workers.[17] In assessing the impact of unemployment, however, the most appropriate comparison would seem to be between the unemployed and employees; we have therefore excluded the self-employed including farmers from our analysis. In order to test for the relative importance of exposure versus vulnerability it is necessary to operate with a class schema

which displays variation across classes in psychological distress, unemployment levels and life-style deprivation. As one can see from Table 1 the five class collapsed version of the Casmin scheme which we will employ in the rest of this paper fulfils this conditions.

(Insert Table 1 here please)

Social class is significantly associated with psychological distress with the GHQ score increasing from .51 in the highest class to 1.31 in the lowest. Similarly the risk of unemployment varies sharply by social class with less than 3 per cent of the service class unemployed compared with almost one in two of unskilled manual and agricultural workers. Both of the life-style measures also display sharp variation by social class.

While the Casmin class schema does not have a consistently hierarchical form, for the restricted sample with which we are operating, an assumption of hierarchical ordering does not seem unreasonable and in our subsequent multivariate analysis the classes have been scored from "1" for the highest class to "5" for the lowest class.[18]

The Social Selection Hypothesis

The usual procedure when testing the social-selection hypothesis is to investigate social mobility differences between those categorised psychiatric cases and the general population. Fox[19] notes that while most studies investigating

the hypothesis have found that seriously mental ill groups are more downwardly mobile and less upwardly mobile, in relation to their social class origins than are general population control groups. Support for the hypothesis, however, he argues is an artefact of not controlling for group differences in origins and destinations when collapsed origin by destination tables are analysed.

In order to test the hypothesis employing our data we have chosen to compare the mobility experience of those scoring above two on the General Questionnaire Scale with that of those scoring below this level. This contrast was selected because it corresponds with the usual choice of "threshold" score when employing the twelve item GHQ.[20] The threshold score is the one whereby if the results of a set of GHQ scores are compared with the results of an independent psychiatric assessment the probability that an individual will be thought to be a psychiatric case exceeds 0.5.

In testing for the existence of a social selection effect we wish to test the hypothesis that the association between origin and destination is dependent upon whether one is above or below the GHQ threshold. Alternatively the hypothesis of no social selection effect specifies that given the three variables: current class, class of origin and location above or below the GHQ threshold no three way interaction will exist: viz.

  (i) An association will exist between the marginal
      distributions - current (c) original class (o)
      and GHQ classification (g).

(ii) An association also exists between origin and destination class but this latter association does not vary by location above or below the GHQ threshold. The model can be expressed in log-linear terms as follows.

$$\text{Log Fig } k = u + \lambda_i^c + \lambda_j^o + \lambda_k^g + \lambda_{ij}^{co} + \lambda_{ik}^{cg} + \lambda_{jk}^{og}$$

Testing this model against our data produces a chi-square of 34.9 with 24 degrees of freedom. The model just fails to achieve a statistical satisfactory fit with the chi-square having p of .07. However, it does reduce the independence chi-square by 95 per cent of its value. Furthermore an examination of the residuals provides no evidence that the departures from expectation are in the direction predicted by the social selection model. Overall then the analysis suggests that the explanation of the social class-psychological distress relationship must be sought elsewhere.

Exposure to Stress and Responsiveness to Stress

Within the social causation perspective the model of differential responsiveness to stress by social class takes the form:

$$GQ = b_0 + b_1 SC + b_2 UE + b_3 SCxUE + b_4 C$$

where G is psychological stress as measured by the GHQ, SC is social class, UE unemployment, SCxUE is the multiplicative interaction of social class and unemployment, and C is a series of control variables. From the point of view of the vulnerability hypothesis the term of primary interest is the

interaction term. A positive interaction between social class and unemployment shows that those located at a lower end of the class hierarchy are more vulnerable to unemployment than those at the top. A negative interaction shows just the opposite. The variables introduced as controls include mariatal status,[21] physical health status, and primary and secondary deprivation. The equations have been estimated separately for men and for women because of the evidence from our earlier work that marital status interacts with unemployment rather differently than for males and females.

An examination of equation (i) of Table 2 shows that on the basis of the bivariate relationship we expect men in the unskilled manual class to have GHQ scores of .68 units (.17 x 5 - .17) higher than those in the service class. From

(Insert Table 2 here please)

equation (ii) it is clear that the interaction term for social class x unemployment is negative and statistically significant. In the absence of a significant positive interaction term we would suggest that the evidence points to the conclusion that the relationship between social class and psychological distress can be adequately accounted for by the higher risk of unemployment, and greater exposure to life-style deprivation, to which the lower classes are exposed. In fact the results suggest that, when allowance has been made for such factors, we must also take into account

the greater responsiveness of upper class men to unemployment.

Thus our results indicate that when we allow for the differential risks of unemployment and deprivation the impact of unemployment is smaller by 1.16 points on the GHQ scale (-.29 x 5 -.29) in the unskilled class. Alternatively we may express our findings by saying that the impact of social class, having introduced our controls, is such that, among employees, those in the lowest class have GHQ scores of 0.32 units lower than those in the service class, but among the unemployed this rises to 1.49. One possible explanation of this fact is the possibility referred to earlier that:

> ... since the identity and life satisfaction of the highly educated are so highly intertwined with their work, it is reasonable to expect that professionals would experience more severe psychological problems resulting from joblessness than would those in other occupations.[22]

It is important to note, however, that unemployment continues to have a substantial negative effect for unskilled manual workers even when we control for lift-style deprivation and health. Thus while work may provide less opportunity for such workers to relate to society through their work contributions, nevertheless it may still be extremely important in terms of enhancement of self-esteem, opportunities for sociability and provision of a routine and distraction from personal problems.[23]

Unemployment, we may also note, interacts significantly with marital status; with married respondents displaying

higher levels of stress. The impact of unemployment depends on both social class and marital status. The situation for women turns out to be rather different.

From equation (1) in Table 3 it can be seen that, as for men, the bivariate coefficient indicates that psychological distress is higher among women in the lower social classes with those in the unskilled manual class having GHQ scores of 0.76 points higher than those in the service class. Unlike

(Insert Table 3 here please)

the situation for men, however there is a significant positive interaction between social class and unemployment implying that unemployment has it most substantial impact at the bottom of the class hierarchy. Thus for those women located in the service class unemployment increases their GHQ scores by 0.38 points while for those in the unskilled manual working class the corresponding figure is 1.34. The results do provide support for the hypothesis of differential responsiveness to stress by class.

There is, however, an important additional factor operating in the case of women which involves the interaction of social class and marital status. Social class has a significantly stronger effect on psychological distress for married women than is the case for single women; with the former scoring on average. 0.84 points higher. Thus, in predicting the impact of social class, it is necessary to

specify employment status and marital status. In Table 4 we display the predicted differences in GHQ scores between women in the unskilled working class and those in the service class. For single women who are at work the GHQ scores of those at the bottom of the class hierarchy are actually 0.26 points lower than for those at the top. For married women at work, however, this is reversed, and the unskilled working class group have GHQ scores 0.57 points higher; this figure rises to 0.71 points for unemployed single women and to 1.54 points for unemployed married women.

The evidence for women in the labour force thus does provide some support for the hypothesis of greater lower class vulnerability to stress. However, the impact of the interaction between social class and marital status is even stronger providing further evidence for the need to qualify generalisations relating to class vulnerability. The latter interaction is clearly not amenable to interpretation in terms of inferior working class coping capacities; although, clearly, factors such as class differences in social support could play a role.

Before offering a final interpretation of these results, it will be useful to consider one further piece of evidence which relates to the impact of husband's unemployment on wives. From Table 5, it is seen that psychological distress is associated with husband's social class; with a difference in GHQ scores of .88 existing between the lowest and the highest classes. There is no significant interaction,

however, between husband's class and husband's unemployment in their

(Insert Table 5 here please)

impact on wive's GHQ scores. The original class relationship, and indeed the impact of husband's employment are adequately accounted for by differences in life-style deprivation and physical health status.

Conclusion

The objective of this paper has been to provide an assessment of the validity of the hypothesis that the relationship between social class and psychological distress can be accounted for by the greater responsiveness to stress of those in the lower social classes. Our analysis of social mobility experiences provided no support for the social selection version of this hypothesis.

The alternative formulation which points to the potential impact of social class on intrapsychic and environmental resources. In testing this hypothesis we have not employed the conventional life-event approach but have argued rather for the value of concentrating on chronic stress. From this perspective an interaction between social class and unemployment which points to a stronger effect for unemployment among those in the lower classes would provide support for the hypothesis of differential responsiveness.

In testing this hypothesis we have employed measures of life-style deprivation in order to control for differential

exposure to economic stress. In research using the life-events approach, economic stress has sometimes been seen as a factor increasing vulnerability. However, particularly given the role of unemployment in producing such deprivation it seems more reasonable, for our purposes, to view unemployment and life-style deprivation as indicators of exposure to economic stress. This gives the notion of vulnerability a more restricted but, we would argue, a more precise meaning. Vulnerability is then seen to arise from factors such as differences in resilient personality characteristics or systems of social support which are hypothesised to have effects which can not be accounted for by solely in terms of differences in exposure to stress.

In the case of unemployment we find very little evidence to support the hypothesis. Once life-style factors have been taken into account, we find that, for men, the only evidence of differential vulnerability points in the opposite direction to that suggested by the hypothesis; with those located in the higher social classes displaying greater responsiveness to stress. Similarly, for married women, the impact of husband's social class was accounted for entirely by unemployment and deprivation; with no evidence emerging that the impact of husband's unemployment varied across social class.

The only finding to provide any support for the hypothesis was the fact that unemployment does have a significantly stronger effect for women in the lower social

classes. However, the fact that the impact of social class varies significantly by marital status, and the absence of any evidence of variations in responsiveness in the other groups examined, suggests that the explanation of this finding might more fruitfully be sought in an analysis of the problems and opportunities experienced by women in occupational and domestic roles rather than in any notion of generalised vulnerability.

The results of our analysis point to the conclusion that the major factors leading those located in the lower social classes to experience higher levels of psychological distress are their greater exposure to unemployment and economic deprivation; in particular, exposure to deprivation of an extreme kind which involves the enforced absence of necessities such as food, clothing and heat.[24]

Acknowledgements

Notes

1.   See P.R. Hobbs,   "Factors Associated with Psychiatric
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16. These dimensions were identified by use of the procedure for factor analysis of dichotomous items contained in B. Muthen, *Liscomp*, 2nd edition, Chicago, Scientific Software, 1988. The alpha reliability for primary and secondary deprivation are respectively .70 and .76. In employing these variables in multivariate analysis it seems most sensible to think in terms of cumulative deprivation with primary deprivation taking causal precedence over secondary deprivation. In effect the procedure we adopt is one of semi-partial correlation where the influence of primary deprivation is removed from second deprivation before the latter is entered into the analysis. For a more detailed discussion of life-style indicators of deprivation see Whelan *et al.*, op. cit., 1990, and D. Donnison, "Defining and Measuring Poverty, A Reply to Ringen", *Journal of Social Policy,* 1988, pp. 367-74.

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21. Marital status has been dichotomized so as to distinguish between single and all others. The non-single respondents who total 1,883 include 34 respondents who are widows or widowers and 38 who are separated or divorced. They have been included with the married respondents because of our expectation that the interaction of unemployment and social class for them is likely to be more similar to their effect on married rather than single respondents. For ease of presentation we will refer to this group as the "married group".

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24. For a more detailed discussion of the impact of life-style deprivation on psychological distress see Whelan, *et al.,* 1990, op. cit.

Table 1: *Psychological distress, unemployment and life-style deprivation by social class*

Social class	GHQ score	Percentage unemployed	Primary deprivation	Secondary deprivation
Professionals, administrators, officials, managers, higher grade technicans and supervisors of manual workers	.51	3.0	.18	.94
Routine non-manual employees, higher grade administration and commerce	.71	7.9	.27	1.30
Lower grade technicans and supervisors of manual workers	.76	10.5	.54	2.19
Skilled and semi-skilled manual workers	.97	22.6	.77	2.61
Unskilled manual and agricultural workers	1.31	46.9	1.34	3.63
Total	0.86	18.2	0.63	2.16
Eta²	.017		.076	.194
p	<.001		<.001	<.001
N	3,070		2,992	3,024

Table 2:   *Multiple   regression   of   the   determinants   of*
           psychological distress for men

	(i)	(ii)
Social class	.17**	-.08*
Unemployment		2.40***
Social class x unemployment		-.29**
Marital status		.12
Marital status x unemployment		.49*
Primary deprivation		.30***
Secondary deprivation		.05*
Physical health status		.77***
Constant	.31	.44
R²	.016	.233
F	31.1	74.5
N	1,969	1,969

* p‹.00
** p‹.01
*** p‹.1

Table 3: *Multiple regression of the determinants of psychological distress for women*

	(i)	(ii)
Social class	.19***	-.07
Unemployment		.14
Social class* unemployment		.24*
Marital status		-.51
Marital status* unemployment		.21**
Primary deprivation		.34***
Secondary deprivation		.08*
Physical health status		.67***
Constant	.286	.67
R²		.140
F	21.9	20.4
N	1,013	1,013

   * p<.00
  ** p<.01
 *** p<.1

Table 4: *Differences in psychological distress scores between the unskilled manual class and the service class for women*

	Single	*Married*
Employed	-.26	.57
Unemployed	.71	1.54

Table 5: *Impact of Husband's Unemployment by Husband's Social Class*

	(i)	(ii)
Husband's social class	.22***	.00
Husband's unemployment		.13
Primary deprivation		.48***
Secondary deprivation		.16***
Physical health status		.89***
Constant	.33	.59
R²	.023	.143
F	22.5	21.6
N	972	972

   * p<.00
  ** p<.01
*** p<.1