

# The structure agency debate: unemployment essay sample

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## **The Structure/Agency debate: Unemployment Essay Sample**

The 'structure/agency' debate is the sociological analysis of the extent to which human behaviour is influenced by social structural processes or individual experiences. The issue of unemployment in Australia illustrates this debate, as many consider unemployment a result of individual lack of motivation or habit. However, it can arguably be ascribed to a lack of social structural support, gradually shaped by government decisions and welfare policies. Patterns of unemployment also depend on social mobility, class and the socio-economic status of individuals and groups. Similarly, cultural factors tend to impact unemployment rates, as seen with the Australian Aboriginal community. There is clearly a link between lack of education and opportunities and unemployment in disadvantaged communities. These structural and cultural processes shape individual experiences of unemployment in an age of increasing individualism and inherent social isolation, where the ideology of individualism facilitates victim blaming, rather than considering the dual influences of both structure and agency.

Government decisions and welfare policy are key social structural factors that have led to an increase in unemployment in Australia. Youth unemployment is currently at a twelve-year high and the general participation rate is beginning to decline, possibly as those from the Baby Boomer generation retire (McGrath 2014). Victim blaming is a major societal issue currently imbedded in government policy that has fuelled these problems. Willis (1995: 85) argues that addressing the problem of

increasingly limited job opportunities cannot be adequately solved by focusing on the individual and their skills and employability.

Victim blaming ideology is closely linked to the idea that individual agency has the greatest influence over whether or not a person may find employment, and is not a productive attitude to adopt. As Stolley (2005) argues that unemployment may be merely an issue with the individual's lack of work ethic, for example, if unemployment rates are very low; however, when they peak, as is currently the case, there must be a structural problem.

An individual might be accused of laziness or lacking in skills because they cannot find employment, when actually such jobs might not exist or might be offered instead to better educated candidates, many of whom belong to a more affluent socio-economic background with more opportunities. This reveals a great deal about the need for societal sensibility and the sociological imagination, as " what may appear irrational at the level of the individual ... may appear quite different when the wider social structural context is taken into account" (Willis 1995: 72). The "recent decline in participation also indicates the societal patterns of unemployment, as the unemployment rate is consistently higher amongst disadvantaged groups.

Dualisation of the labour market is a key social structural problem, particularly in the United States, that perpetuates and worsens income inequalities. During times of economic downturn, businesses' primary concern is to contain costs, which can entail replacing full-time positions with part-time and casual positions in order to reduce wage costs. Bessant and Watts (1999) assert that this is a structural process that leads to

unemployment and is thus largely unavoidable in terms of individual agency. This in turn gradually isolates certain groups as being those with the highest unemployment rates. An increase in unemployment of middle income earners is especially problematic because they are the economy's major consumers, without which economic growth slows and the divide between extreme wealth and extreme poverty deepens.

Such patterns of unemployment arise through both social structural and cultural processes, most significantly social mobility and class. One significant trend, identified by Grint (2005), is that the 'working class', particularly the young working class, is more affected by the financial consequences of unemployment than the 'middle class'. Grint suggests that, for typical working class communities during times of high unemployment, "the experience of unemployment is tempered by the knowledge that perhaps as many as 50 per cent of their immediate neighbours are also unemployed" (2005: 38). Thus the causes and solutions of unemployment cannot be solely influenced by agency, as a culture of unemployment emerges through the social structure in place. Such communities gradually degrade as morale weakens, becoming reliant on government welfare, and disintegrating into what Furedi calls 'zombie communities' (2011).

Giddens further argues that "this group forms part of a dependency culture of people who rely on government welfare provision rather than entering the labour market" (2013: 543). He argues that this subculture has emerged due to the welfare state and "undermines personal ambition and people's

capacity for self-help” (2013: 543). People living in these communities come to accept their way of life and their dependency on the government, to the point where welfare could corrode people’s impetus to work, rather than simply providing them with a safety net. With the existence of such communities and cultures, Grint (2005) argues that employers naturally tend to stereotype applicants and effectively discriminate against individuals from a certain socioeconomic background. There is an ingrained, socially inherent belief that this group of people are not meant for employment, particularly if the individual in question has been unemployed for an extended period of time.

The individual experience of unemployment tends to be shaped by social class, insofar as class can be measured in modern society. Giddens (2013) suggests that defining social class has become largely dependent on occupation, as a person’s type of employment tends to indicate their standard of living, level of education and the opportunities they most likely received. Although occupational distinctions do not always reflect an individual’s level of wealth, it typically follows that that individual’s parents were also educated and were able to provide their children with privileged opportunities.

This trend is reflected in unemployment as, “ the highest rates of unemployment tend to be found among those with no qualifications, from the working class” (Grint 2005: 37). Morris argues that “ unemployment and social exclusion are linked with a distinctive cultural predisposition and value framework” (1995: 131). Clearly unemployed people tend to form

connections with other unemployed people, often because whole areas are pervaded with high unemployment. The structure/agency debate can be seen in such situations, as individuals may be unemployed technically due to their own lack of motivation; however, they are evidently victims of a social cycle and culture from which it is difficult to escape.

Clearly, one of the most significant cultural factors of unemployment is education and the opportunities it yields. For this reason, unemployment rates are consistently high in disadvantaged communities, which often includes certain communities with certain cultural traditions. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (2013), there is a considerable discrepancy between the labour force statistics of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and those of non-Indigenous people, with around one in six Indigenous people unemployed in 2011. However, it has also been found that 89 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who completed Year 12 or Certificate level II or above actively participate in the labour force.

Henry et al (2001) offers further comment that the education available to Indigenous children is somewhat skewed in favour of Anglo-Australian history and tends to explain an individual's success in terms of 'ability', rather than noting social factors. Henry et al suggests that another key structural factor to Indigenous unemployment rates is that "a hierarchical [capitalist] society structures different experiences for different social classes" (2001: 177-178), meaning certain social groups will find it difficult to succeed. High levels of Indigenous unemployment may also be partly attributed to the fact that one

in four Aboriginal Australians live in remote areas (Furze et al 2011), and thus have limited access to education and opportunities.

As Germov and Poole argue, the sociological imagination can be used to understand how “ we are influenced by our cultural values and traditions ... individuals both “shape and are concurrently shaped by society” (2011: 6). Indigenous communities are one of the more ‘ exaggerated’ examples of the struggle between structure and agency, but it is nonetheless clear that agency is often overshadowed by the ingrained structural limitations that are placed on certain cultures.

As mentioned above, holding the agent solely accountable for their misfortune is a major issue facing modern society when analysing unemployment. Grint argues that “ such individualising of what are, at heart, social problems runs against what Wright Mills (1970: 14-15) called ‘ the sociological imagination’” (2005: 38). However, in our increasingly individualistic society, victim blaming tends to be reflected in government policy, culminating in an immense shame and stigma surrounding unemployment, despite its many and varied factors. The ideology of individualism has clearly evolved between the Great Depression of the 1930s and the Recession of the 1980s, for example. Whereas in the Great Depression, unemployment was experienced as a group social occurrence that had the power to unite people in protest, it is increasingly seen as a shameful individual issue that stems from a lack of personal work ethic.

This places the onus on agency, failing to see the structural roots of the issue and typically, “ after a period of six months individuals become fatalistic

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about their prospects, eventually treating unemployment as a way of life rather than a transient experience between jobs” (Grint 2005: 41). It is worth noting, however, that government welfare benefits did not effectively exist during the Great Depression, so there was a greater need for the unemployed to rely on community spirit (Lawson and Garrod 2001). Seabrook (1982) observed that, contrary to the ‘prideful struggle’ experienced by the unemployed in the ‘30s, unemployment in the ‘80s was experienced much more as a personal trouble to be overcome through individual agency. This attitude has an incredibly negative effect on morale, to the point of being debilitating, particularly for men who, in typical households, serve as the ‘breadwinner’ and feel that their family is dependant on them.

Clearly unemployment is a major social problem that must be approached in terms of both structure and agency. The structure/agency debate is essential to consider when using the sociological imagination, as it explains how society shapes the individual who then in turn influences society. Unemployment in Australia cannot be attributed solely to cultural and social structural processes or to individual agency, as these factors engage in a complex interplay. While on a minor scale, an individual may be unemployed because they have not sought employment, it is likely that their social and economic environment is a contributing factor, particularly in disadvantaged "communities where government welfare has partly dulled community spirit and connectivity.



Education undoubtedly plays a vital role in employment, which informs the high unemployment rates in Aboriginal communities where cultural isolation and lack of understanding have led to the highest unemployment rates in Australia. The ideology of individualism is problematic because it discounts the significance of cultural and social structural processes, leaving little possibility for substantial solutions to unemployment. It also facilitates victim blaming, which condemns the individual as lazy and unmotivated, without considering not only their socio-economic background, but also the stigma and negative attitudes our society has towards the unemployed, making it even more difficult for them to join the workforce. In conclusion, structure and agency are not mutually exclusive as both play a significant role in shaping the individual's experience of unemployment.