




Contextual factors and the experience of unemployment: A review of qualitative studies



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This study aimed to review qualitative studies on the contextual factors affecting the experience of unemployed individuals. From the analysis of the findings of 13 qualitative studies, the conclusion was reached that the contextual factors, namely the broader society, the surrounding community, and the individual as actor or agent, had a direct impact on the unemployment experience of individuals. It was recommended that unemployed individuals be organised into community subgroups, constructed to participate in projects aimed at empowering the community to improve cohesion, equality among members, and a collaborative attitude. Social scientists ought to make an effort to advocate a marked improvement in society's tolerance for, and understanding of, the realities faced by the unemployed person. One such reality was that a well-paying job that would take an individual out of financial hardship could be well out of reach of some individuals, which would mean a life of surviving without any regular income.

Introduction

Unemployment is a sociopolitical challenge worldwide. It is also a major challenge in South Africa, with its national unemployment rate of 26.7%. Unemployment has to be addressed to ensure economic growth in the country (National Planning Commission 2011; Statistics South Africa 2017). Furthermore, unemployment is mostly a negative experience for the majority of unemployed persons because it has a negative impact on individuals' psychological well-being (De Witte, Rothmann & Jackson 2012; Diette et al. 2012; Nell et al. 2015; Sage 2017).

In a bid to understand this crippling socio-economic phenomenon faced by 5.88 million South Africans (Statistics South Africa 2017), it may be necessary to thoroughly investigate all the contextual components that play a role in unemployment. In South Africa, unemployment has steadily increased on a year-on-year basis over the past 9 years (Yu 2012). Kingdon and Knight (2003:391) describe the widespread unemployment in South Africa as a 'beast', with an 'effect on economic welfare, production, erosion of human capital, social exclusion, crime and social instability'. Existing research done in the South African context recognises the critical role played by contextual factors in experiences of unemployment (Burger & Fourie 2013; De Witte et al. 2012; Dieltiens 2015; Griep et al. 2014; Nell et al. 2015). Nell et al. (2015), for instance, argue that factors such as community safety, educational support, and support networks of religious organisations can have an impact on the well-being of unemployed and poor individuals. De Witte et al. (2012) suggest that contextual aspects such as quality education, adequate social security cover, sufficient government investment in unemployment well-being advancement programmes, and skills-training can influence the experience of unemployment. Dieltiens (2015) agrees with the argument made by Nell et al. and De Witte et al. that various aspects that can be viewed as contextual factors can influence the experience of unemployment. Contextual factors identified by Dieltiens as barriers to employment are, among others, a limited functional network, lack of information channels or opportunities to access information channels, adverse structural conditions of the economy, as well as unfairness and injustice in state employment practices. According to Fourie (2011), unemployment in South Africa cannot be understood without considering factors such as mobility barriers, marginalisation, and the characteristics of labour market facets. The individual's experience of unemployment may, furthermore, be affected by social and interpersonal contextual factors, such as stigmatisation, ignorance of authorities, and society's unwillingness to understand unemployment and its effects (Aldrich & Dickie 2013; Fowler & Etchegary 2008; Mckenzie 2013; Patrick 2014; Sherman 2013; Strier 2014).

Some studies focused on contextual factors that could have an impact on experiences of unemployment. Information is needed, however, regarding contextual factors influencing the

experience of unemployment in different contexts. No study could be found that explored the qualitative findings from different countries to ascertain the experience of unemployment. Such an exploration offers the possibility to 'hear' the voices of the unemployed interviewees from different countries and in different contexts. The aim of this study, therefore, was to investigate contextual factors associated with experiences of unemployment.

Defining context and contextual factors

The word 'context' comes from Latin, meaning 'to knit together' or 'to make a connection'. A disentanglement of the individual, the phenomenon, and the context is impossible. Individuals play an active role in shaping the context in which they live (Shogren, Luckasson & Schalock 2014). For Shogren et al. context is 'the totality of circumstances comprising the milieu of human life and human functioning' (2014:110).

De Souza (2014:12) describes context from a critical realist perspective. He defines context as 'a micro-scaled version of society'. A person enters the world and encounters pre-existing conditions in the context that restrict or enable reaction possibilities. The first aspect of context is the social structure or the relationships in which the individual finds themselves. The individual has not created this social system or relationship; it is inherited. However, actions taken or conduct in response to these social structures can change or reinforce them. The social system can have an impact on the individual, but the individual also affects the social system or relational factors of context. The social structure is based on the individual's relations with others. For this study, this part of the context is applied to refer to the community or subgroup to which the individual relates. The second aspect identified by De Souza is structure, comprised of material, physical, and human resources. This functions on the level of culture and, for this study, it is postulated to refer to the broader society and culture. The third and last component of context is the person as agent. The individual is a separate figure posed against the backdrop of context, but is also an integral part of it. De Souza points out that an individual enters reality with an inherited predisposition regarding aspects such as demographics, accessibility to resources, life, and chances that dictate the limits or possibilities of different life trajectories or roles. Based on the description provided by De Souza (2014), 'contextual factors' refer to a dynamic interplay between: (1) the structure and culture of the society, (2) relationships, community behaviour, and the environment surrounding the unemployed individual; and (3) the individual's agency in the existing social structure.

Aim of the study

This study aimed to analyse interpretively the results of qualitative studies that focused on the contextual factors relevant to the experience of unemployment and to determine how these factors affected experiences of unemployment.

Research design

Research approach

To reach a broad and nuanced understanding of the lived reality and ascribed meaning of the experience of unemployment within the context of various countries, it was deemed necessary to source qualitative interview studies published in peer-reviewed articles. These documents are valuable resources to supply information on how interviewees experience unemployment in their context (Prior 2011). Furthermore, it was considered essential to review the findings of selected qualitative studies and to access direct quotes of interviewees. This design enabled the researchers to include unemployed individuals from different countries to 'hear the voices' of these marginalised, vulnerable, and often voiceless people across the globe. The philosophical assumption of the researchers was that sense-making and a deep understanding ('Verstehen') in the context of a phenomenon had to rely on the participants' views. Therefore, this phenomenological document analysis study was executed in the framework of social constructivism (Creswell & Poth 2018; Tracy 2013).

Research method

Given the goal of this systematic literature review, the authors performed a meta-synthesis: an integration of interpretive data sourced from qualitative research (Onwuegbuzie & Frels 2016). A review of qualitative studies was needed because qualitative studies are most suitable for 'studying contexts which [...] can uncover salient issues and [...] provide insight into marginalised, stereotyped or unknown populations' (Tracy 2013:5). The search for relevant studies was done through Web of Science and EBSCOhost. For the search using Web of Science, three sets of keywords were used. The first set was as follows: TS = ('qualitativ* research' OR 'qualitativ* study' OR 'ethnographic* research' OR 'ethnographic* study' OR 'narrativ* research' OR 'narrativ* study'). The second set was TS = ('job los*' OR 'unemploy*' OR 'out of work'), with the third being TS = (culture*). The search was tailored to limit the results by choosing the disciplines of psychology, sociology, criminology, public and occupational health, social work, social sciences and behavioural sciences, family studies, religious studies, ethnic studies, anthropology, and urban studies. This process resulted in 123 studies. For the search through EBSCOhost, academic journal articles in English from EconLit, PsycARTICLES, PsycINFO, and SocINDEX were used. The *subject terms* search option was used, and the two subjects were 'unemployed' OR 'unemployment' AND 'qualitative study'. The search results were made more focused on the aim of this study by choosing the age (young adulthood – 18–29; thirties – 30–39; and middle-aged – 40–64) and the method (interview; longitudinal; qualitative study; focus groups; and field studies). A total of 376 studies were identified through this process. The 123 studies from the Web of Science search and the 376 studies from the EBSCOhost search were compared, and the 116 duplicates, as well as 42 studies that employed mixed methods, were discarded.

This resulted in 341 studies. Subsequently, a selection process ensued on the grounds of inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Criteria for including articles were as follows:

- Articles had to be published in English in peer-reviewed journals between January 2005 and December 2015.
- Only qualitative research articles reporting results from data gathered by using qualitative interviews were used, so that the direct experiences of the interviewees could be tapped.
- Participants in the studies had to be unemployed people.
- One of the study objectives had to include a focus on one or more contextual factors.
- The full-text article had to be accessible through the library services of either the North-West University or KU Leuven.

We applied one exclusion criterion, which was to disregard those articles with a strong focus on the relationship between physical health and unemployment. The second author reviewed the selection process, the selected studies, and the articles tentatively included, excluded or not yet decided on. A total of 12 studies met all the inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Because the original search did not produce a qualitative unemployment study in the South African context that met the above inclusion criteria, an additional search was conducted. For this search through the Web of Science, the first set of keywords was 'unemploy*' OR 'jobless'; the second search term was 'South Africa*', and the third was 'township youth'. The search resulted in three articles, of which one adhered to all the inclusion criteria stipulated above. Finally, 13 articles were used for this review.

Table 1 depicts the context of each of the studies included in this review, the qualitative data collection method, and the sample size.

Research procedure

Attention was given to the more than 120 direct citations in the research articles as well as to each article's discussions and findings (Silverman 2011). To fully grasp the different contextual factors that have an impact on the experience of unemployment, the perspectives of the participants in these studies, as well as the interpretation and findings of the researchers, were considered. The first author mainly did the analysis. The first step of the analysis process involved a thorough synopsis of each article according to the research goal, the method used, findings, concepts or theories applied, and a list of the direct quotes. In the second step, flip-chart pages were put up on a wall to sort quotes under the three identified contextual factors. The third step was to take each contextual factor and identify themes for each of them. This was done by reading and rereading and then manually coding the direct quotes. This iterative exploration of the direct quotes resulted in themes (Tracy 2013). The fourth step was to go through the findings of each of the 13 studies and add them

TABLE 1: Country, qualitative data collection method, and sample size.

Number	Author(s)	Community in focus	Qualitative data collection method and sample size
1	Mckenzie (2013)	UK. A council estate with low-cost housing.	Ethnographic study (8 years), with field notes. Participants: undisclosed.
2	Fowler and Etchegary (2008)	Canada. Two fishing communities faced with the closing down of the fisheries, resulting in job losses and unemployment.	In-depth interviews; field notes. Participants = 40.
3	Aldrich and Dickie (2013)	USA. A rural town with discouraged unemployed individuals.	Ethnographic study (10 months) – semi-structured and unstructured interviews; occupational questionnaire. Participants = 5.
4	Sherman (2013)	USA. Families living in clusters of low-cost and subsidised housing or trailer parks situated among more upper-income housing.	Ethnographic fieldwork (6 months), with open-ended, in-depth interviews. Participants = 55.
5	Zeng (2012)	China. Social networks and relationships were explored in a time of increased youth unemployment.	In-depth individual interviews. Participants = 19 (age 16 to 25).
6	Dawson (2014)	South Africa. Informal settlements in an urban area near Johannesburg.	In-depth, qualitative interviews; informal conversations; group discussions; participant observation. Participants = undisclosed (age 17 to 35).
7	Teti et al. (2012)	USA. Urban Philadelphia, with a population of at least 50% black persons.	Individual semi-structured interviews. Participants = 30 (age 18 to 44; black men).
8	Nayak (2006)	UK. A post-industrial city where unemployment rose because of industry closures.	Multi-site ethnographic research; interviews; participant observation; additional data gathered through web discussions. Participants = undisclosed.
9	Strier (2014)	Israel. Cities in the north. Fathers (with children under the age of 12) attended job search and skills-training programmes for the unemployed.	Individual, semi-structured interviews. Participants = 24 (Palestinian Arab men).
10	Giazizoglu (2014)	UK. The closing down of the mines due to the economic downturn of the 1980s led to mass unemployment.	Semi-structured qualitative interviews; participant observation. Participants = 42 (white men).
11	Sung-Chan and Yuen-Tsang (2008)	China. A women's community-based social work programme to strengthen the women's psychosocial well-being.	Action research, including interviews and participant observation. Participants = undisclosed (women).
12	Patrick (2014)	UK. Welfare recipients from charity services and welfare organisations in the city took part in this research.	A longitudinal study employing three waves of interviews. Participants = 15.
13	Björklund et al. (2015)	Finland. Men visited the unemployment support centre on a regular basis for help and information on available job openings.	Qualitative interviews. Participants = 15 (age 18 to 27).

to the relevant identified contextual factor themes. The fifth step was to have a panel discussion with the co-authors to corroborate the themes identified and to verify that nothing was missed. In the sixth step, the themes identified were cross-checked against each of the articles, and a structural description of the experience of the unemployed in their context was constructed. The use of such a systematic, iterative process ensured a rigorous analysis process and improved the credibility of the findings (Silverman 2011).

Results

Next, the three identified parts of the context, namely the structure or culture of the broader society, the relationships, community, and environment, and, lastly, the individual agency, will be discussed.

Structure and culture of the broader society

Three predominant themes can be identified under this contextual factor. These are (1) unwritten rules or laws of society dictating the 'normal' and 'right' ways to live, (2) social stratification and socio-economic changes and realities, and (3) society's ignorance and lack of understanding of the potential value of unemployed individuals as community care-contributing citizens.

Unwritten rules or laws of society

To earn respect in society and to be seen as a contributing citizen, individuals should be employed; this is the national culture of countries such as the UK, the USA, China, Canada, and South Africa (Björklund et al. 2015; Fowler & Etchegary 2008; Giazitzoglu 2014; Patrick 2014; Sherman 2013). For a person to be a respectable and responsible citizen, they should be financially independent and should contribute to society through taxes and economic participation. This belief is so entrenched in the rhetoric of these countries that the unemployed themselves subscribe to this belief, causing them to become ashamed of, and disappointed in, themselves. Governments, policymakers, institutions, the popular press, and the public perceive the unemployed as a liability and a threat to a country's stability, progress, and image.

Unemployed people often experience a lack of care from broader society and political leaders (Aldrich & Dickie 2013; Dawson 2014; Mckenzie 2013; Patrick 2014). Senior politicians and respected media brand the unemployed as 'morally bankrupt' and 'feral' (Mckenzie 2013:23). Furthermore, they perceive the unemployed as lazy dependants who need to find formal employment as quickly as possible. Consequently, the unemployed cannot rely on social sympathy and political support (Mckenzie 2013; Sherman 2013; Sung-Chan & Yuen-Tsang 2008). Should a person be unemployed, it is expected of them to show definite and thorough job search actions or real efforts to upskill to become more employable. A strong work ethic is regarded as admirable and is rewarded (Björklund et al. 2015; Fowler & Etchegary 2008; Giazitzoglu 2014; Patrick 2014; Sherman 2013).

In most cultures, masculinity and fatherhood are associated with the image of the provider of the family by way of an earned salary. Unemployed fathers are, therefore, deemed to fall short of dominant sociocultural standards (Dawson 2014; Mckenzie 2013; Nayak 2006; Sherman 2013; Strier 2014). There seems to be a convention in some societies that dictates that one shall be employed. Therefore, a conceptual non-work stance is frowned on, and unemployed people are ostracised, shamed, stigmatised, and socially excluded.

Social stratification and socio-economic realities and changes

Change in the economic approach of a country may require new competencies and conduct from individuals. For example, research in the UK showed that change from a manufacturing-based to a service-based economy required new competencies of people. Traditional work suited to tough and robust men during the industrial era has changed to service-sector and technology-based work, which requires individuals to be presentable, proficient in language usage, and client-oriented. This means that less sophisticated individuals who lack good social skills will battle to find a job in the more service-oriented economy (Giazitzoglu 2014; Nayak 2006).

Research from China provides an example of a change in economic approach that had a substantial effect on unemployment rates. Change from a socialist economy, as reflected in systems such as the 'danwei' system (where a person was employed by a socialist state in a work unit for life, with limited choice), to a capitalist, free-market economy, was associated with challenges for unemployed people (Sung-Chan & Yuen-Tsang 2008; Zeng 2012). People who would automatically have been employed in work units were now forced to compete for jobs in an open market. Not used to this system, and not equipped or skilled, many people – women, in particular – became unemployed. Unemployed women's efforts to become self-reliant through entrepreneurship were viewed as a threat to community stability because such efforts were perceived as being against prevailing ways. These women were expected to improve their skills and enter formal employment (Sung-Chan & Yuen-Tsang 2008). Officials in local government were, however, reluctant to support women to start businesses.

Some studies also shine a light on social-structural factors such as race, class, and gender (Dawson 2014; Giazitzoglu 2014; Mckenzie 2013; Nayak 2006; Strier 2014; Teti et al. 2012). Classism has an impact on experiences of unemployment (Dawson 2014; Mckenzie 2013; Nayak 2006). Mckenzie (2013) illustrates how being unemployed and dependent on welfare benefits results in being classified as 'underclass' – that is, compared to the working-class. Nayak (2006) states that unemployed young men trapped in generations of poverty, powerlessness, and unemployment are kept in place from one generation to the next through the class hierarchy. Because of stigmatisation, disenfranchisement, and social exclusion over generations, opportunities to improve their situations are difficult to access (Nayak 2006).

Black participants in the Teti et al. (2012) study reported that they experienced daily struggles with racial microaggression. Their perception was that society did not accept them, and that some people – white people, in particular – perceived them as being useless. In addition to classism and racism, gender discrimination is also prevalent in some societies. Sung-Chan and Yuen-Tsang (2008) report the effects of discrimination on unemployed women who had to fight a

paternalistic sociocultural discourse to generate income and realise their abilities.

Society's ignorance and lack of understanding

Society expects unemployed people to 'do' something with their time – to work towards greater employability (for example, to do volunteer work) or to actively apply for jobs. This expectation is unreasonable for two reasons. Firstly, reality dictates that there are unemployed individuals who will never be able to obtain secure, stable employment that can take them out of poverty. Secondly, many unemployed individuals are, in fact, 'doing' something with their time. They use their time to be creative in finding ways to survive and to render specific services in the community, which sometimes go unnoticed.

There seems to be a lack of understanding in society of the fact that it is virtually inconceivable for many unemployed people to follow the so-called 'normal' route of school to formal employment (Nayak 2006; Giazitzoglu 2014; Patrick 2014). Both Giazitzoglu (2014) and Dawson (2014) found that the respondents in their studies chose to be unemployed rather than take demeaning jobs that would keep them in poverty. Society tends to see these unemployed individuals as either too selective or too lazy to work. As a result, they feel misjudged, misunderstood, and frustrated because the inevitability of their situation is misconstrued and belittled. Ignorance and a lack of understanding of unemployment keep society from realising that, for some individuals, it is virtually impossible to obtain employment due to a lack of social capital, a lack of opportunities, or a lack of skills (Aldrich & Dickie 2013; Mckenzie 2013; Patrick 2014; Sherman 2013; Strier 2014; Zeng 2012).

Unemployed people stated that those in leadership positions were physically removed from them and did not acknowledge their lived experiences. Patrick (2014), as well as Aldrich and Dickie (2013), describes surviving unemployment as a difficult task, requiring agency, ingenuity, and management skills. Surviving unemployment can be time-consuming and typically includes activities such as collecting and selling scrap to get money and going to several shops to make sure that you pay the lowest price possible for day-to-day essentials. Contributions such as caring for children, the sick, and the elderly and maintaining and forging social ties among neighbours and the community go mostly unnoticed (Patrick 2014).

Relations, community behaviour, and environment

Communities, the spaces they occupy, and how they function in their unique sets of circumstances constitute another contextual factor with a direct impact on the unemployed individual (Dawson 2014; Fowler & Etchegary 2008; Mckenzie 2013; Sherman 2013). Three themes can be identified here: (1) disconnected places of exclusion, (2) non-cohesive communities, and (3) unwritten rules and laws of the community.

Disconnected places of exclusion

Unemployed individuals reported that they felt judged by others because they lived in areas associated with poverty, unemployment, and dependence on the government's welfare benefits (Dawson 2014; Mckenzie 2013; Nayak 2006; Teti et al. 2012). Dawson (2014) reports how participants described township space as a dead end where unemployed individuals desperately waited for change, which they hoped would bring an end to their confinement to township life. These spaces constitute disconnected places of exclusion far removed from 'normal' spaces where there is a more desirable life filled with options and facilities to access chances of developing (Teti et al. 2012).

Non-cohesive communities and 'othering'

In communities where the unemployment rate is high, where economic conditions are precarious, and resources are limited, competition sets in, and the community loses its unifying focus and strength. This often leads to a loss of cohesion in the community (Dawson 2014; Fowler & Etchegary 2008; Giazitzoglu 2014; Nayak 2006; Sherman 2013; Teti et al. 2012). In a high-crisis community characterised by financial hardship, stigmatisation, and ostracism, groups turn on one another. Two powerful dividing forces seem to be involved here: differences in *ethics*, *social value judgements*, and *demographics* (such as race, country of origin or ethnicity, or class).

Communities appear to be divided on grounds of differences in how they perceive and subscribe to specific *ethical social values*. One group of unemployed or precariously employed may try to make ends meet through informal and irregular income rather than claiming welfare funds. This group would rather face deprivation than apply for welfare aid. They look down on those unemployed individuals who are dependent and who are passively waiting for welfare benefits to survive without an income (Aldrich & Dickie 2013; Björklund et al. 2015; Dawson 2014; Giazitzoglu 2014; Mckenzie 2013; Nayak 2006; Patrick 2014; Teti et al. 2012). Then there is a group of unemployed people who do choose to claim social grants or welfare benefits. This group has negative experiences of a community that, to their mind, shows no compassion for people who may be incapable of survival without welfare benefits. These welfare-claimant unemployed people are 'socially excluded', 'economically disenfranchised', and 'culturally despised' (Nayak 2006).

In addition to the divide between groups not claiming welfare aid and those who do claim it, a divide exists within the group claiming financial aid. Although individuals will themselves struggle with poverty and unemployment, it seems as if a type of social value judgement is applied according to which the self is viewed as of purer integrity than the 'other'. Nayak (2006) refers to this as a use of moral distinction to create symbolic borders between different groups of financially dependent people. Personally burdened by a stigmatised label, many unemployed welfare recipients

then discriminate between themselves and the 'others' who claim state aid – the 'others' being those deemed (by them) not deserving of this aid from state funds because they misuse the funds or they are cheating the system (Fowler & Etchegary 2008; Giazitzoglu 2014; Nayak 2006; Patrick 2014; Sherman 2013).

Groups classified by many in society as unscrupulously claiming welfare while not seizing all opportunities to work for an income are depicted in studies done by Giazitzoglu (2014) and Dawson (2014). Unemployed men interviewed in these studies subscribed to a different value system from that of the groups discussed above. Contrary to the values subscribed to by the group above (a strong work ethic), these men saw a low-paying, insecure, temporary job doing demeaning work as humiliating. Therefore, they viewed 'hustling' (creatively securing income through illegal or underhanded dealings) as a better option. Dawson (2014) illustrates how unemployed South African men would see many low-paying jobs as associated with social shame and how the men would rather remain unemployed than take up such jobs.

Communities sometimes become divided along *racial and ethnic lines*. For example, in the USA, African American unemployed people reported that society excluded and ostracised them (Teti et al. 2012). Sherman (2013) found that there was a common belief that specific groups, including Hispanics, Arabs, and Eastern European immigrants, were dishonest and undeserving of the aid they were receiving. Distrust among different groups comprised of different ethnic or racial groups can divide a community further (Patrick 2014; Sherman 2013; Strier 2014; Sung-Chan & Yuen-Tsang 2008; Teti et al. 2012).

Unwritten rules and laws of the community

Being unemployed can restrict and socially sanction social behaviour. One area where this is apparent is in the unemployed individual's lack of the means and opportunities to reciprocate or repay financial assistance or sponsorship of social events. The principle of 'you scratch my back, and I will scratch yours' may be problematic for the unemployed individual (Aldrich & Dickie 2013; Dawson 2014; Zeng 2012). In times of financial need, it may be difficult to ask for, or receive, help from the community because of the expectation of repaying this 'good deed' when it may be the least affordable.

Dawson (2014) reports how relationships between men in a South African township are based on a set of social practices, of which the principle of reciprocity is one. Even community activists know how to make use of this system by using unemployed youth to accelerate action through protest. In return, the leaders will give them opportunities to earn some extra money or promise preferential treatment if development were ever to occur in the township – termed 'political entrepreneurialism'. In a group of friends, there is the unspoken agreement that those who are employed should

help those who do not earn anything. The understanding is that every person will share what he or she has, even if it is just a small amount of money or a little food. Wages should, thus, be enough to sustain more than one person (Dawson 2014).

In the Chinese culture, there is strict adherence to the value of 'guanxi', which means 'to reciprocate favour' (Zeng 2012). The unemployed will avoid social contact because of the social expectation of investing monetary funds to strengthen social ties and networks. Because of an inability to do so due to lack of income, unemployed youth will not engage in social interaction. Divisions in a community could also result from perceived imbalances in relationships between those with and those without resources. Unemployed individuals do not feel comfortable around people who perceive them as needy and who may not understand their situation. This isolates them from a network of potential sources of information about opportunities to find work and alienates them from well-connected people (Zeng 2012). Unemployed individuals are cautious of owing anything to others because they lack the resources to reciprocate (Aldrich & Dickie 2013).

Another apparently accepted role with sanctioned social principles and values is the understanding that when people do not contribute to their community, they cannot earn the right to speak and voice an opinion on community matters. In the study done by Fowler and Etchegary (2008), being unemployed made men in a high-crisis community act passively, sit back, and let others speak for them; they seemed voiceless because they perceived themselves as not having the right to an opinion. This shows how being unemployed can render a person almost invisible in the community, without any voice or power. A further example is how unemployed women in China were rendered voiceless (Sung-Chan & Yuen-Tsang 2008).

Individual agency within an existing social structure

The individual actively involved in, and in interaction with, the surroundings as a social agent and social actor constitutes the third part of the context (De Souza 2014:148). Confronted by unemployment, individuals react differently to available opportunities or constraints in their contextual reality. Three themes can be distinguished: (1) making a choice, (2) constructing or joining subgroups to satisfy the need for social belonging, and (3) cultivating or constructing an own value system.

Making a choice

Two distinct views regarding choices in securing employment are evident. One view is that work is 'normal' and that a job offers more than financial gain (Aldrich & Dickie 2013; Patrick 2014; Sherman 2013; Strier 2014; Zeng 2012). According to Sherman (2013), the aspiration of unemployed individuals receiving welfare aid was to be off welfare benefits one day because they saw their dependence on welfare as 'not normal' and undesirable. The unemployed

weigh up the monetary gains of a job and compare these gains to what they earn through welfare benefits. Participants also indicated that they would rather spend money they had earned through hard work than to have to spend money received from welfare funds.

Contrary to the previous view, Dawson (2014) found that unemployed people would not accept just any job. Low-paying jobs were regarded as socially undesirable because such jobs would not take them to where they aspired to be. Promised rescue from a lower-class existence under a previous oppressing government, they were waiting to be given the opportunity to enter the perceived world of comfort and ownership of valuable consumer goods that the middle class enjoyed. From townships, they could see high-class urban residential areas and convenient amenities and services, underlining the fact that there were people with more comfortable lives. They placed a high value on consumerism to signify class and standing.

Constructing or joining subgroups to satisfy the need for social belonging

It seems that unemployed individuals need a like-minded group; otherwise, they will become 'weak nobody loners' in society (Dawson 2014; Giazitzoglu 2014; Mckenzie 2013; Nayak 2006; Strier 2014; Sung-Chan & Yuen-Tsang 2008; Zeng 2012). Because of their isolation from society, individuals value the 'own' group with its system of values, perceptions, and behaviour. Shared experiences tend to bind individuals together: 'we understand each other ... she is unemployed like me' (Zeng 2012:90). Being part of a subculture grouping gave the young men in Nayak's (2006) study meaning and a sense of belonging.

The harshness and negative implications of the insecurity in the labour market and unemployment are mitigated by being part of a subculture. Women in the study done by Sung-Chan and Yuen-Tsang (2008) could stand up against authoritative powers as a collective. On the street corners in the townships of South Africa, the unemployed come together to be with those sharing the same troubles and challenges; they see this '*ikasi*' (township) street corner social group as a type of 'surrogate kin'. For some, these are the only people they feel understand the situation; they share in a collective struggle (Dawson 2014).

Strier (2014) shows how unemployed people long for social belonging, especially in times of uncertainty and tension brought about by their situation of unemployment. Individuals in the same position are experienced as being almost closer than family. Although society has ostracised them, they find comfort in a like-minded group. Giazitzoglu (2014) reports that, in their daily living in a community where the members despised them, the group of unemployed men in his study found kinship in the group (known in the UK as the 'drifters'). The group, with their subculture in which different sets of values and norms applied, found validation for the logic behind their choice of the rejection of work, their anti-work ethic, and the 'working' of the welfare system.

Cultivating or constructing an own value system

Three examples can be identified of unemployed individuals cultivating their value system to cope with, or react to, their unemployment experience. Firstly, 'othering' occurs to demonstrate welfare recipients' discrimination against immigrants who are also recipients of state benefits (Patrick 2014). Participants in Patrick's (2014) study felt that immigrants took 'their' jobs and cheated the welfare system by claiming while working. Sherman (2013) highlights how some unemployed individuals use 'othering' to see themselves as more deserving and of higher morality than those others who are in the same situation. It seems that, in reflecting the social stigmatisation they endure onto others whom they judge and criticise, they find some way of coping with their situation.

A second example of an own value system constructed by the unemployed is the description of instances where people argue that all is fair when in survival mode – the end justifies the means (Giazitzoglu 2014; Mckenzie 2013; Nayak, 2006). In the struggle to survive unemployment, one option is to turn to crime to make a living. The unemployed men in Giazitzoglu's (2014) study followed the already familiar path of the survival strategies of their unemployed fathers and went the route of making a living through so-called 'streetwise labour' – that is, a career in illegal business and crime. Mckenzie (2013) also reports that a thriving underground criminal economy existed within the boundaries of the community she studied. Success in making a living through illegal means gave one a particular value and standing in this community.

A third example of how unemployed people deal with their situation by cultivating an own value system is to have a steadfast belief in a divine higher power. When overwhelmed by the challenges of poverty, strained family relationships, discrimination, and unemployment, unemployed individuals find solace in the belief that there is a God with a plan and that the situation in which they find themselves is part of God's plan (Teti et al. 2012).

Discussion

This study aimed to explore the experiences of unemployed individuals from various contexts in different countries. Through the integration and combination of these findings, three distinct fundamental aspects stand out that can aid in improving our understanding of the experiences of unemployment. Irrespective of the country in which they are, unemployed individuals share three experiences. Firstly, they experience the dominant perception of society and their communities as being that work-for-income constitutes a crucial and central part of healthy, responsible adult life. Undeniably linked to this experience is the consequence of not complying with this 'rule' of society to earn an income through paid work, namely stigmatisation, resulting in emotional pain and shame. The second shared aspect is that the negative experience of unemployment is buffered when unemployed individuals are taken up in some kind of

subgroup of individuals who share the same unemployment situation. The third conclusion has two sides. The first is that all the studies in this review found that unemployed individuals devised some strategy to deal with, or react to, their situation of unemployment. A surprising second side of this finding, however, is that individuals seemed to develop either constructive or destructive strategies to deal with the negative unemployment situation. These three principle conclusions will now be discussed and collated with the relevant literature.

Firstly, the results of this study indicate that unemployed individuals in all studies experienced pressure from broader society, as well as their communities, to conform to an acceptable code of conduct. This code of conduct dictates that unemployed people should never accept their situation and rely on welfare funds to assist them to survive unemployment because not to work is unacceptable. This observation reflects what Ezzy (2001) has reported about the existence of a dominating perception that work equals life. In their study, Shirani, Henwood and Coltart (2012) support this point of view by showing that a salaried occupation is seen as the predominant way to demonstrate adequate citizenship. Rules governing so-called socially desirable behaviour, role expectations, and hierarchical class-structured societies result in a constructed world where a person without a job and few socio-economical means will find it almost impossible to fulfil their expected obligations as a member of such a society. As was emphasised by Giazitzoglu (2014), Nayak (2006), Plattner and Gonzo (2010), as well as Spyridakis (2013), for individuals in precarious situations of inadequate education, low social capital, and long-term unemployment, it can be almost impossible to secure formal, well-paid employment. Lifelong unemployment is highly likely for these individuals. Therefore, it is crucial for our understanding of the experience of unemployment to realise that unemployed people need to negotiate constrained opportunities, while experiencing the reality that they will only be accepted by society and the community once they are employed. This scarring adds to the negative impact of the lack of financial independence with which the unemployed individual must already cope. In the face of this assumption that every person should work and contribute financially to the community, an inability to meet this expectation causes embarrassment and a feeling of worthlessness. The word 'shame' is quoted directly from the transcribed interviews with the unemployed in eight of the studies (Björklund et al. 2015; Dawson 2014; Giazitzoglu 2014; Patrick 2014; Sherman 2013; Strier 2014; Sung-Chan & Yuen-Tsang 2008; Zeng 2012).

A second finding was that unemployed individuals in almost all the included studies are positioned in relation to a specific subgroup. Thus, although they experience their immediate environment and social ties to the community as mostly negative, they experience their self-constructed or organised subgroup as a type of psychological safeguard against the negative consequences of unemployment.

This has a bearing on the relational, contextual aspect. The participants in the research done by Strier (2014), for instance, described the men in the skills-training group as almost closer than family. Various studies show how unemployed individuals desire some social belonging (Björklund et al. 2015; Dawson 2014; Giazitzoglu 2014; Mckenzie 2013; Nayak 2006; Strier 2014; Sung-Chan & Yuen-Tsang 2008; Teti et al. 2012; Zeng 2012).

The third finding of this study concerns how the individual as a contextual factor exhibits their agency and actor status. Individuals as actors and agents can make choices and cultivate an own value system in reaction to the impact of the influences of the other contextual factors, which are mainly experienced as negative. The actor or agent as a contextual factor is portrayed as a struggling, embattled individual, but with survivalist agency, who continuously tries to cope with their challenging situation without giving up. What is most thought-provoking is that certain individuals handle their situation of unemployment in a seemingly healthier, more positive way than others, who seem to engage in an almost destructive downward spiral. Unemployed individuals who reported coping with their situation in a positive manner were all involved in an intervention programme of some kind (for example, the group of fathers in the studies done by Björklund et al. 2015 and Strier 2014; the men in the working-class group in the study by Nayak 2006; and the group of women in the action research project in the study by Sung-Chan & Yuen-Tsang 2008) or were active in a religious church setup (the group of men in the study done by Teti et al. 2012, who managed their precarious situation through religious activities).

Those unemployed individuals who reacted to their situation of unemployment by involving themselves in subgroups whose ostracism, stigmatisation, and segregation from society made them retaliate with deviant and socially unacceptable behaviour were generally without any respectful assistance or dignified aid from the broader society or community (for example, the communities in the studies by Fowler & Etchegary 2008 and Patrick 2014, where the individuals turned on one another and generated conflict and social disconnection; the rioting and socially deviant groups in the studies of Dawson 2014, Giazitzoglu 2014 and Mckenzie 2013; Nayak's under-class group 2006; the cultivation of a culture of crime in the study by Teti et al. 2012; and the social withdrawal of the unemployed in the study of Zeng 2012). The necessity of understanding the experience of unemployment to address the challenging situation in a respectful and dignified way, in consultation with the unemployed, is emphasised by this finding. Communication of care and a thorough appreciation of the complex nature of the obstacles faced by the unemployed are crucial. It is essential to spread the notion in communities and society that the unemployment phenomenon is more complicated than simply expecting unemployed individuals to face this situation by themselves and to 'just find a job'. Spyridakis (2013) aptly describes the unemployed as:

... living an indefinite downward spiral of material deprivation, trying to make ends meet in ... off the books non-standard jobs, struggling to serve their status in social and cultural terms ... attempting to survive by manipulating the cracks created by the state's indifference and capital's arbitrariness. (p. 241)

A deep and nuanced understanding of the experiences of unemployment cannot be obtained without studying the impact of the various contextual factors. It is also necessary to consider the nature of the interaction or interrelationship among the different identified contextual factors and its consequences for experiences of unemployment. From the literature consulted, a graphical presentation has been designed to illustrate such interrelationships or interaction (see Figure 1).

From the findings, the interrelationships among the three overarching contextual factors become apparent. As illustrated in Figure 1, there seems to be a reciprocal relationship between the community or direct environment of the individual, on the one hand, and the individual as agent or actor on the other. The individual agent or actor has an impact on the community, and vice versa. How the individual copes with, or reacts to, their unemployment situation has a bearing on the community, and how the members in the community cope with, and react to, the unemployed person influences the individual and their experience of unemployment. A case in point is how the unemployed men in the studies of Giazitzoglu (2014) and Nayak (2006) experienced the disgust and contempt of the community surrounding them (community impact on the individual),

but the unemployed men then retaliated by almost reinforcing what the community believed about them and destabilised the community through their non-conformist, perverse, and criminal behaviour (individual impact on the community). In contrast to such a reciprocal relationship between agent or actor and community stands the one-way relationship between the broader society and the other two main contextual factors. This was clearly illustrated by the fact that proof did not exist in any of the included studies that the broader society really understood the extremely complex nature of the experience of being unemployed. The influence and impact came from the broader society with its stratified groups, policies, culture, ethics, and ignorant attitudes that affect the community as well as the individual. There seems to be a barrier or a break in communication between the individual as well as the community on the one side and the broader society on the other side (see Figure 1 where the arrows could not get through; communication is blocked). In the studies of both Sung-Chan and Yuen-Tsang (2008) and Björklund et al. (2015), the unemployed are described as voiceless. It seems that if social scientists, researchers, and intervention programmes do not strengthen the collective voices of these people, broader society will not hear them. Even from the community side, there is little evidence that this contextual factor has any real impact on the broader society. The broader society seems to have little to no understanding of the daily lived experience, struggles, or accomplishments of the unemployed person. Social scientists should focus on breaking down the barrier to the broader society.

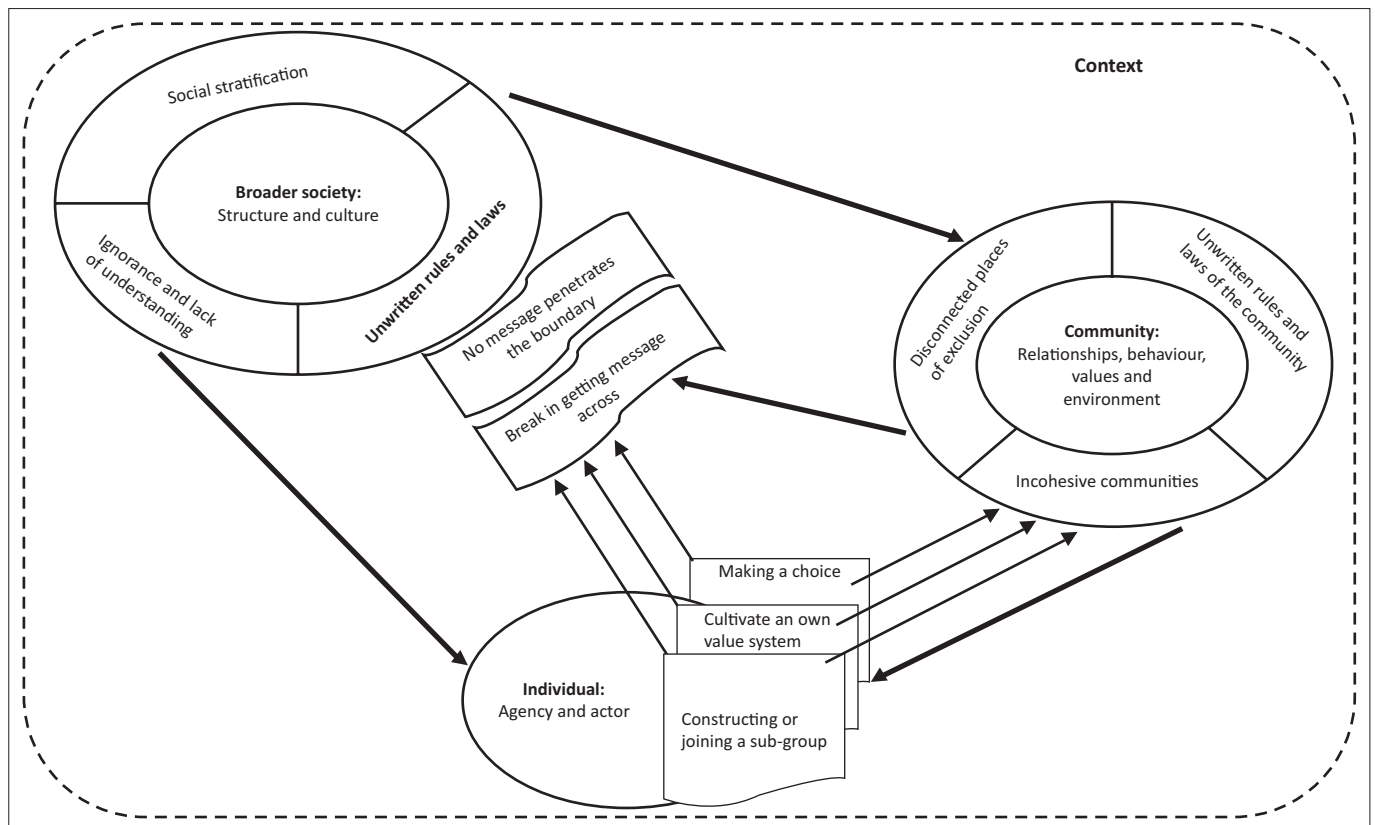


FIGURE 1: Visual presentation of the contextual factors and the relationships among the factors.

The consulted literature highlights the critical role that contextual factors play in the impact on the unemployed individual (Burger & Fourie 2013; De Witte et al. 2012; Dieltiens 2015; Griep et al. 2014; Nell et al. 2015). This study raises intriguing questions about the nature and extent of the pressure on the unemployed to look for a paid job in formal employment, as well as the scarring effect of the lack of a nuanced understanding of the lived world of the unemployed person.

Limitations of the current study

Although studies from seven countries were included in this review, it could be seen as too limited. Expanding the study to include more countries, especially developing countries, would be valuable. The 'refutability principle' (Silverman 2011) was employed in this study; that is, the researcher went back to the consulted studies after the conclusions had been written down to see whether any study could refute the findings. It is recommended that quantitative studies be included in this 'refutability' process. The findings should be tested against quantitative studies from different countries, with a focus on the experience of unemployment.

Implications and recommendations for research

Future research should focus on the impact of the three main contextual factors, namely the broader society, the immediate surrounding community, and the individual as agent or actor, as well as their interrelationship and interaction. Quantitative studies should be conducted to broaden the scope and to reach a more comprehensive conclusion on the role that contextual factors play in the experience of unemployment. Research could specifically focus on how to assist government and policymakers to address challenges such as how to integrate the unemployed and poor in the centres of society, rather than in peripheral areas. Also, intolerance towards, and misunderstanding of, the unemployed by the society should be studied. Research should focus on how to strengthen cohesion, trust, and equality in communities.

Future research could also focus on best practices concerning welfare benefits – in terms of allocation, amounts, and recipients. Most of the positive experiences involved close social ties with like-minded people in similar circumstances. When a specific meaningful goal or action was combined with this grouping, it transformed the experiences of unemployed people in a positive way (Björklund et al. 2015; Strier 2014; Sung-Chan & Yuen-Tsang 2008; Teti et al. 2012). A suggestion would be to steer future research on the experience of unemployment in the direction of action research with groups of unemployed people assisted by professional social scientists. Together, these groups and professionals could mobilise constant interaction with, among others, policymakers and leaders in the financial and media fields.

Implications and recommendations for practice

Professionals should focus on ways to guide unemployed individuals to find sustainable methods of occupying

themselves outside the conventional job market. This process should be designed in a way that acknowledges the specific needs and capabilities of the unemployed. The importance of instrumental relationships would have to be acknowledged (Zeng 2012). Unemployed individuals should be empowered to build relationships with powerful people and forge linkages with individuals in the broader society.

Societies should promote a strong care ethic, as opposed to a work ethic (Patrick 2014). Such a mind shift would benefit South African communities and make them realise that there is space for people to do voluntary and caregiving work in communities. Tolerance, empathy, and a greater understanding must be promoted (Giazitzoglu 2014).

Creating and developing subgroups of unemployed individuals in a community could provide a support base for such individuals. Efforts to address unemployment could start by empowering individuals in these groups to create community programmes in collaboration with powerful members of society in leadership positions. Care and attention from 'outside' high-crisis communities would generate hope, expectation, and energy to positively influence others in these communities (Fowler & Etchegary 2008).

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Authors' contributions

M.d.T. gathered and analysed the data and wrote the article. H.d.W., S.R. and A.v.d.B. assisted with the interpretation of the data and the writing of the article.

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