

## Article

# An Approach that Facilitates a Connection between the Psychology of the Unemployed and the Social System: What We Can Learn from a Book Entitled “The Psychology of Unemployment”

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## I. Introduction

In March 2025, the author published a book in the research series entitled “The psychology of unemployment: Transitioning from job loss to re-employment.” This book presents a systematic examination of the psychological challenges faced by the unemployed and their path to re-employment. The objective of this article is to elucidate the issues identified and the key concepts that are woven throughout the book, thereby offering the readers a comprehensive overview of the entire subject matter.

The aforementioned challenges can be characterized as falling into two categories. The initial challenge pertains to the restoration of workers’ self-reliance, which has been undermined by job loss. Subsequently, addressing power imbalance in the employment relationship as a social systemic challenge is imperative, as it is a fundamental issue that underlies the problem.

In this book, the term “self-reliance” is based on a concept of “personal control” used in psychology, and it encompasses a broader concept. A sense of personal control is defined as an individual’s belief that they can change their life through their own abilities. Self-reliance refers to a mindset in which workers do not evade challenges, such as job loss, but rather proactively seek solutions to these challenges. The behavioral consequence of this attitude is economic self-support, defined as “working and earning one’s own income to provide for living expenses” (p. 55). In a capitalist economy based on wage labor, the realization of economic self-support strengthens workers’ sense of personal

control, which leads to a virtuous cycle that enhances self-reliance further.

According to psychologists, job loss is defined as “a life event that removes paid employment from an individual involuntarily” (Latack et al. 1995, p. 313). In this context, the term “involuntarily” is defined as “in a way that is not willing, intentional, or by choice.”<sup>1</sup> Alternatively stated, the emphasis of psychological research has been on the ways in which job loss deprives workers of their sense of personal control, or the belief that individuals have the ability to control their employment situation. In the field of psychology, involuntary termination of employment is referred to as “job loss,” while the subsequent state of being unemployed is distinguished as “unemployment” (See Introduction, “The psychology of unemployment: An overview of research areas.”)

The final chapter of the book, “A psychological approach to the issues of unemployment: 16 recommendations and a vision for the future” presents 16 specific recommendations. Among these, No. 15 and No. 16 are of particular significance, as they represent the principal arguments that the authors place the utmost emphasis on.

In Recommendation No. 15, it is suggested that “re-employment” is an effective measure of mitigating the psychological impact of job loss to a certain extent, as evidenced by meta-analyses conducted by McKee-Ryan et al. (2005); and Paul and Moser (2009). It also underscores that, in order to realize such re-employment, a consideration of the structural assumption of asymmetric power<sup>2</sup> relationships between employers (as “the hiring

side”) and employees (as “those being hired”) is imperative. Unemployment and re-employment can be regarded as phases in a continuous cycle of “construction, deconstruction (dissolution), and reconstruction” of the employment relationship. The judgments and decisions made at each phase are thereby invariably influenced by the power dynamics between the two sides.

In accordance with the aforementioned structural assumption, Recommendation No. 16 suggests that workers adopt a “mindset of job search” (JILPT 2019) guided by a “cyclical self-regulatory model of job search process quality” (Van Hooft et al. 2013) as a strategy for proactively building employment relationships while maintaining and restoring self-reliance. The foundation of this model is rooted in the concept of “self-regulation,” which is defined as the process of consciously adjusting one’s emotions, thoughts, and behaviors to achieve objectives through flexible choices and modifications according to the situation.

The mindset of job search focuses on workers to repeat a GPDR cycle, i.e., (1) setting a goal (**G**oal), (2) making a plan (**P**lan), (3) doing it (**D**o), and (4) reflecting on the results (**R**election) while prioritizing their own desires and needs.

Through this iterative practice, workers are expected to proactively seek the equilibrium point between their willingness to supply labor and employers’ demand for labor through trial and error, flexibly adjusting their work styles as needed in order to increase their ability to respond to employers’ demand for labor.

## II. Standpoint from labor psychology

An examination of labor issues necessitates the consideration of the inherent structural factors in the social system, which include markets, organizations, and institutions, even if a situation initially appears to be a psychological problem of an individual worker (Genda 2017).

Psychologists, in general, tend to focus more on psychological problems, including experiences of subjective distress or helplessness, that are brought

on by job loss. It is evident that these aspects are more likely to manifest in the behaviors of the unemployed and are easier for them to verbalize. In contrast, structural factors including markets, organizations, and institutions are less visible and less likely to be recognized by individuals themselves when compared to psychological problems. For this reason, considering labor issues from a psychological standpoint—that is a *raison d’être* of labor psychology—is even more significant when examining psychological problems in relation to these structural factors. This is because it is possible to show a roadmap that leads to solving workers’ psychological problems from the social system side as well.

During the Great Depression of the 1930s, psychologists began to view unemployment not merely as an economic hardship, but also as a social phenomenon that undermines workers’ identities and social connections. Consequently, they initiated an exploration of its social-psychological aspects. Chapter 1, “Progress and contemporary viewpoints in research on the psychology of unemployment” outlines the process of succession and development from the initial formation of problem awareness to the modern psychology of unemployment, employing research from these nascent periods as a point of departure.

Given the assumption that the high rate of unemployment resulted from the irresistible circumstances of the Great Depression, which was a period of severe economic downturn, these studies focused on descriptively tracking the psychological and behavioral responses exhibited by workers and their families. Behind this is the fact that a standpoint viewing unemployment as a consequence of macro-economic factors, such as changes in industrial structure and business cycles, rather than as problems of individual workers, such as laziness or lack of ability, had already emerged at the beginning of the 20th century.

In his book, *Unemployment: A Problem of Industry*, economist Beveridge systematically organized this standpoint, identifying macro-economic factors as the cause of the reserve of labor

(Beveridge 1909). He argued that since these factors determine employment, it would be erroneous to attribute unemployment solely to the responsibility of the individual workers. This position has had a significant influence on subsequent social science research and government unemployment policies, thereby establishing a more comprehensive, structural approach to addressing the issues of unemployment (Garraty 1978).

During the Great Depression of the 1930s, the standpoint from economics became the theoretical foundation for psychologists to view unemployment as a social system problem. In addition to the immediate psychological distress of depression or anxiety that occurs after becoming unemployed, psychologists identified a sense of helplessness associated with long-term unemployment—the feeling that “one cannot change the situation on one’s own”—as particularly problematic (Eisenberg and Lazarsfeld 1938). The state of helplessness can be considered the antithesis of self-reliance. The more helpless a worker feels, the less self-reliant he or she becomes, and thus their willingness to seek a job is severely impaired. Consequently, their chances of finding re-employment become more remote. These findings provided the theoretical foundation for the promotion of policy approaches, including the

government’s job creation measures and the expansion of unemployment insurance programs.

In particular, psychologist Jahoda and sociologist Bakke were groundbreaking in their view that the sense of helplessness experienced by the unemployed is not merely an individual psychological problem, but rather a manifestation of structural factors inherent to the capitalist economy. Their standpoint asserts that the efforts of individual workers alone are insufficient to overcome a sense of helplessness, and that it can only be fundamentally resolved if accompanied by a redesign of the institutional and social environment surrounding employment.

The psychology of unemployment has evolved from a field that studied psychological mechanisms in the individual to one that links the subjective experiences of the unemployed to problems in the social system, thus establishing itself as an academic field that addresses labor issues. This book also adopts this standpoint.

### III. Contrasted viewpoints of Jahoda and Bakke on unemployment issues

Jahoda and Bakke held a similar viewpoint on the issue of unemployment, regarding it as a social system problem. As demonstrated in Table 1, they

Table 1. Contrasting viewpoints of Jahoda and Bakke in terms of the issues of unemployment

Viewpoints	Jahoda	Bakke
Attitude toward the economic system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Critical viewpoint on the capitalist economy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Unemployment issues can be solved within the framework of a capitalist economy</li> </ul>
Main subject of the research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sense of helplessness due to unemployment, social isolation, and changes in life circumstances</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Effects of unemployment insurance programs on workers’ economic self-support</li> </ul>
Root of the issues of unemployment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Structural problems of the capitalist economy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Difficulties faced by workers to be economically self-supporting</li> </ul>
Basic policy for the solutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Providing comprehensive government support, not only for economic problems but also for social-psychological issues</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Providing a sense of psychological security through unemployment insurance benefits and encourage them to continue their re-employment efforts</li> </ul>
Influence on the modern psychology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Research on the negative psychological impacts of job loss and approaches to mitigate them</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Research on job search activities and its support measures</li> </ul>

Source: Prepared by the authors based on Jahoda, Lazarsfeld, Zeisel and Fleck (2017); Jahoda (1982); and Bakke (1933).

exhibited contrasting approaches to the maintenance and restoration of self-reliance.

According to Jahoda, the sense of helplessness experienced by workers due to the structural problems of the capitalist economy was a serious issue. Consequently, she advocated for comprehensive government support, encompassing not only economic challenges but also social-psychological issues. In contrast, Bakke underscored the significance of helping workers maintain their willingness to be economically self-supporting through the unemployment insurance programs, founded on the premise of the sustainability of the capitalist economy.

### **(1) Viewpoint of Jahoda**

Following the closure of the sole factory in the Austrian village of Marienthal in 1929, Jahoda, along with her colleagues, organized a research team to conduct a thorough meticulous study on the social-psychological impacts of job loss (Jahoda et al. 2017).

The vast majority of families in the village were affected by unemployment, which resulted in severe economic hardship due to the loss of their primary industry. The team conducted a multifaceted field study, which included the analysis of household financial records, the collection of data through a time-of-day survey (which incorporated the measurement of walking speed), and home visits. The study indicated the process by which unemployment leads to a deprivation of activities and a sense of time, resulting in apathy and a loss of hope among residents.

Jahoda et al. emphasized that these changes were not due to individual workers' laziness or lack of effort, but rather due to a structural factor, namely the loss of employment opportunities across entire regions. They posited that the factory closure caused by the Great Depression could not be overcome through individual willpower or effort alone, and this resulted in a sense of helplessness among workers that "one cannot change the situation on one's own."

In this survey, Jahoda and her colleagues characterized workers' sense of helplessness, that is,

the process of declining self-reliance. They argued that the root of the issues lies not with individual workers, but rather with the capitalist economic system, which creates instability in employment opportunities.

In the aftermath of the war, Jahoda advanced this finding and proposed the "latent deprivation model" (Jahoda 1979). She argued that employment possesses latent functions, such as (1) structuring habitual time, (2) expanding social contacts, (3) sharing common goals and efforts, (4) constructing personal identity or status, and (5) enforcing regular activities, in addition to its manifest function of earning wage income. (See Chapter 2, "The theories of the psychology of unemployment.")

According to her, these functions are in response to fundamental human needs, and the experience of job loss deprives people of these functions simultaneously, causing significant psychological and social harm. Consequently, she contended that in order to mitigate the impact of job loss, it is imperative to provide comprehensive government support that addresses not only the economic aspects but also the social-psychological aspects.

### **(2) Viewpoint of Bakke**

During the same period as Jahoda et al., Bakke studied the psychology of the unemployed and conducted field studies in Greenwich, UK (Bakke 1933), and New Haven, USA (Bakke 1940).

His research in Greenwich focused on the effects of the unemployment insurance programs on workers' economic self-support. By taking up residence in the homes of working-class families and observing their daily lives, Bakke sought to reveal the economic hardship and psychological pressure faced by the unemployed.

Bakke emphasized a decline in self-reliance, that is, the perception that one cannot rebuild their life through their own abilities, as a hindering factor of re-employment. Although there is some overlap with Jahoda's findings, he believed that even if self-reliance is temporarily impaired by job loss, workers inherently possess the willingness for economic self-support. He further posited that this self-reliance is

shaped by the culture and values of the society to which the individual belongs.

Bakke’s viewpoint on unemployment insurance programs, which are funded by contributions from labor and management, encompasses more than mere relief measures. He characterized it as an institutional framework that furnishes workers with a psychological foundation to maintain their economic self-support and encourage them to be proactive toward re-employment.

He identified unemployment as a structural limitation inherent to the capitalist economy, yet he proposed that the system could be sustained through institutional means, such as unemployment insurance, which would complement its inherent limitations.

Jahoda and Bakke held a similar perspective on unemployment, regarding it as a problem stemming from structural factors within the capitalist economic system. There was, however, a significant discrepancy in the direction of their responses. In a capitalist economy, employment instability is a persistent structural risk. One of the serious consequences is unemployment. In this regard, Jahoda emphasized the negative impacts of job loss on workers’ self-reliance, specifically their sense of helplessness from “not being able to change the situation on one’s own.”

Conversely, Bakke advanced the notion that for a capitalist economy to be sustainable, it is imperative for workers to maintain their self-reliance, particularly their economic self-support. He further argued that institutional support is pivotal in achieving this, as self-reliance is socially shaped by the social system.

In contrast to the approaches of Jahoda and Bakke, modern psychology rarely makes direct reference to the economic system. Notwithstanding, the aforementioned viewpoints continue to exert a substantial influence on research on the psychology of unemployment.

As indicated in Table 2, two psychological stages of unemployment are currently being studied in parallel. One of these stages is “a stage of experiencing negative psychological impacts due to job loss.” This approach aligns with the line of research initiated by Jahoda, which focused on psychological problems such as depression, anxiety, and reduced self-esteem. Presently, there are proactive studies underway to examine measures that could mitigate these impacts.

The other stage is defined as “a stage in the process of realizing re-employment through job search activity.” This approach represents an evolution of Bakke’s concept, with a focus on fostering workers’ self-reliance. Specifically, the

Table 2. Two different psychological stages in research on the psychology of unemployment

Process of transitioning from job loss to re- employment	A stage of experiencing negative psychological impacts due to job loss	A stage in the process of realizing re-employment through job search activity
Components of the research		
Main theory	(latent deprivation model) Coping behavior theory	Self-regulation theory
Motivation	Mitigation of stress	Achieving the goal of getting a job
Viewing job loss as	An involuntary event	Dissolution of the employment relationship
Viewing re-employment as	Problem-focused coping	Reconstruction of a proactive employment relationship
Viewing the behavior as	Coping behavior	Goal-achieving behavior
Image of the unemployed	Passive	Active

incorporation of self-regulation theory has led to the development of studies aimed at assisting job seekers in proactively and voluntarily continuing their job search until they attain re-employment.

In research on the modern psychology of unemployment, these two stages are evolving in a manner that is separate from each other. Moreover, the primary focus of both is on the psychological processes of individual workers. Consequently, the structural factors inherent in the social system that influence these processes have not been adequately considered. The viewpoints on the social system that both Jahoda and Bakke emphasized appear to have been overlooked in research on the modern psychology of unemployment.

#### IV. Why do structural factors matter?

Primary focus of this book is on how employers and employees, through their respective positions, perceive the employment relationship as a framework that links two distinct psychological stages in research on the psychology of unemployment. Referring to the framework delineated in Figure 1, the authors examine the structural factors inherent in the construction, deconstruction (dissolution), and reconstruction of the employment relationships that affect employees' psychology. The crux of the issue lies in a fundamental power asymmetry existing between the two sides, wherein the capital-owning employer maintains a more advantageous position

(JILPT 2024).

Employers utilize capital to develop and operate businesses, thereby creating demand for labor. They are in a position to pay compensation in exchange. In contrast, employees generally possess no capital other than their own labor power and are able to earn compensation by providing labor. Within this structure of the employment relationship, a power imbalance exists as follows.

They conduct business based on their capital and possess broad decision-making authority regarding the setting of working conditions (such as wages and working hours) and employment adjustments (such as hiring and dismissals) based on management judgment. Conversely, employees primarily have the option of whether or not to provide labor, which places them in a relatively weaker position than employers in establishing and maintaining employment relationships as well as negotiating working conditions.

This imbalance in the power relationship becomes particularly evident during the phases of job loss and re-employment. This is due to the fact that the dissolution of the employment relationship and the possibility of re-employment are significantly influenced by the employer's business decisions. Against the backdrop of this structural imbalance, what psychologists identify as "involuntary job loss" arises.

The measure proposed in this book is for employees to strategically manage their willingness



Source: Prepared by the authors based on Fryer and Payne (1986).

Figure 1. Perception of the employment relationship

to supply labor through self-regulation. In this context, the term “self-regulation” does not merely denote the maintenance of motivation or the promotion of continuous effort.

As demonstrated in Figure 1, employers exert control over labor demand through compensation and other systems of treatment, thereby possessing institutional mechanisms to influence employees’ willingness to supply labor. Conversely, individual employees possess limited means to directly influence employers’ labor demand or treatment systems. Therefore, adjusting their own willingness to supply labor becomes the only effective means to counteract this asymmetry of power.

In summary, it is imperative for employees to continuously monitor their own willingness to supply labor, read changes in employers’ labor demand and treatment, and strategically manage their labor based on the framework of the employment relationship. The GPDR cycle of “Goal, Plan, Do, and Reflection,” which is introduced at the beginning of this article, is one method of achieving such self-regulation. By repeatedly undergoing this process, employees can assess employers’ labor demand and proactively adjust their own willingness to supply labor.

The details of the approach centering on self-regulation are explained in Chapter 3, “Research on job search” and Chapter 4, “Research on job search interventions” for the theoretical aspect, and in Chapter 5, “Development of a training program for job search with perseverance and resilience,” which summarizes the development of an online re-employment support program and its effectiveness evaluation, for the practical aspect. In addition, Chapter 6, “Technology and job search activities,” explores the potential for self-regulation support in job search activities through the utilization of ICT from a psychological perspective.

## V. The behavior derived from the social system: The case of the “47 ronin”

Finally, we will explore the necessity for psychologists to focus on structural factors, i.e., social system, when considering the psychology of

the unemployed, using the historical incident of the revenge of the 47 ronin (masterless samurai) of Ako<sup>3</sup> as a relevant example.

The revenge of the 47 ronin of Ako is frequently interpreted in terms of individual psychological motivations such as “loyalty” and a “desire for vengeance.” It is evident that the strong emotion of avenging the dishonor of their lord served as the primary catalyst for their behaviors. It is imperative to note that this emotion was subsequently transformed into behaviors that were justified and praised by the social system, namely, the principles of loyalty and honor within Bushido, the status hierarchy between lords and retainers, and the Confucian values that shaped public opinion (Fujita 1990).

From this incident, it can be deduced that comprehending the psychological mechanisms underlying emotions is inadequate for a comprehensive elucidation of human behavior. While the desire for revenge is encouraged if it is perceived by societal norms as a “righteous behavior with *taigi-meibun*, that is, the great principle of duties and loyalty entails the fulfillment of obligations intrinsic to an individual’s designated role or status, it is suppressed if regarded as an “unforgivable act of vengeance driven by personal grudges.” Consequently, psychological support must encompass not only direct assistance with emotional issues but also a critical perspective that examines the institutions and norms that assign social meaning to those emotions.

As previously mentioned, two viewpoints exist in the field of labor psychology regarding this issue. Firstly, Jahoda identified an incompatibility between a sense of helplessness stemming from long-term unfulfillment of basic human needs and the social system, which she deemed as problematic. She posited that a modification in the social structure itself is imperative to address this problem. This position identifies flaws in the societal framework based on the fundamental nature of human psychology.

Secondly, according to Bakke, workers’ sense of self-reliance is shaped by institutions and codes of

conduct. He posited that overcoming the sense of helplessness stemming from the loss of self-reliance requires improving the institutions and practices within the existing social system. This viewpoint accentuates the reciprocal interaction between human psychology and social systems, thereby emphasizing the necessity of adjusting a balance between the two. The two positions are contrasted: the former aims for structural transformation, while the latter is oriented toward gradual improvement.

To elucidate the distinction between these two viewpoints, an examination of the case of the “47 *ronin*” would be beneficial. According to Jahoda’s point of view, the social system should be modified to align with the principles of human psychology. This is a human-centered approach. From this viewpoint, the “desire for vengeance” exhibited by the 47 *ronin* is regarded as a natural human emotion; therefore, the social system that suppresses it needs to be reformed.

In contrast, from Bakke’s viewpoint, the “desire for vengeance” could be regarded as shaped by societal institutions and values. Thus, the incident could be interpreted as a consequence of shortcomings in the social system. Therefore, this viewpoint emphasizes the importance of implementing incremental improvements to the existing social system to transform the desire for vengeance and channel its expression into socially acceptable behavior.

## VI. Mutual complementation of psychological support and institutional reform

When exploring the psychological dimensions of the unemployed, it is insufficient to focus solely on psychological phenomena such as a sense of helplessness or psychological distress. A comprehensive examination of the underlying structural factors inherent in employment systems, labor practices, and social norms reveals practical support measures. In view of these factors, it is imperative that two fundamental pillars function in a complementary manner: firstly, the provision of

psychological care and job search interventions by support-providing bodies, and secondly, the undertaking of institutional reorganization and restructuring by policymakers.

By promoting psychological support and social system reform as complementary strategies concurrently, the unemployed are enabled to proactively address the current challenges and maintain or restore their self-reliance. This approach would also facilitate essential and strategic responses to correct structural power imbalances with employers. The validation of these hypotheses necessitates empirical research and social experiments in real-world settings. If the maintenance and restoration of self-reliance among the unemployed and the reorganization and restructuring of social systems could function in a manner that is mutually complementary, it is likely that this will result in the sound development of the social system as a whole, including employment relationships.

This article is a translation of the author’s article that was previously posted on the website of the JILPT: [https://www.jil.go.jp/researcheye/bn/087\\_250604.html](https://www.jil.go.jp/researcheye/bn/087_250604.html).

### Notes

1. *Cambridge Dictionary*, under “involuntary.” <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/involuntarily> (last accessed on Dec. 12, 2024).
2. The term “power” in this context refers to the concept of “social power” as defined in the field of psychology. This is the ability to influence the behaviors and thoughts of others, even in circumstances where those individuals are exhibiting resistance, caused by multiple factors (*APA Dictionary of Psychology* 2007). These factors are as follows: (1) reward power, (2) coercive power, (3) legitimate power, (4) referent power, (5) expert power, and (6) informational power.
3. The incident began in March 1701, during the Edo period. Asano Takuminokami, the lord of the Ako Domain, drew his sword in an attempt to kill Kira Kozukenosuke at Edo Castle. Asano was compelled to commit *seppuku*, or ritual suicide, on the same day. Consequently, his fiefdom was forfeited, and the Ako Domain of the Asano family was dissolved. In the aftermath of the lord’s death, the vassals dispersed. In 1702, however, the group underwent a reorganization under the leadership of Oishi Kuranosuke. Late at night on December 14 of that year, the 47 *ronin* of Ako initiated a raid on Kira’s mansion and successfully beheaded him. The following day, they voluntarily presented themselves to the authorities. In February 1703, the 46 *ronin* committed *seppuku* by order of the Tokugawa shogunate. Their behaviors were later passed down

as “Chushingura,” or “Treasury of the 47 Loyal Retainers,” which became a symbol of loyalty.

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