

A Comparative Study of Self-Esteem and Hopelessness Among Employed and Unemployed Adults

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the unemployment, self-esteem and hopelessness level of young adults who were employed and those who were not employed. The sample of the study was purposely drawn 60 young adults' male subjects with 30 employed and 30 unemployed individuals from different job sectors, was selected for the study. The data was collected with the help of the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) and the Beck Hopelessness Scale (BHS). While personal information form was created by the researcher was used to obtain socio-demographic variables. The data were analyzed with the help of descriptive statistics and also t-test was used to find out significant difference between two groups. It was found that employed young adults have higher self-esteem and lower hopelessness behaviors compared to unemployed young adults. Percentage calculation showed that employed young adults reported higher self-esteem (52.33%) and lower hopelessness (16.50%) compared to their unemployed counterparts, who had self-esteem at 41.20% and hopelessness at 37.50%. The percentage difference in self-esteem between the two groups was 11.13%, while the difference in hopelessness was 21.00%. These findings suggest that employment positively influences self-esteem and reduces feelings of hopelessness among young adults. The study underscores the importance of employment in enhancing psychological well-being, highlighting the need for policies and programs that support job opportunities to improve mental health outcomes.

Keywords: *Unemployment, Self-Esteem, Hopelessness, Mental Health*

Unemployment is a significant socio-economic issue that affects individuals, families, and communities worldwide. It is defined as the condition where individuals who are actively seeking work are unable to find employment (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2020). The psychological impacts of unemployment can be far-reaching, influencing not only economic well-being but also mental health. Defined as the condition in which individuals actively seeking employment are unable to find work, unemployment affects not only the economy but also individual well-being and societal stability. It has long been recognized as a major stressor that can lead to various psychological challenges, including a decline in self-esteem, increased feelings of hopelessness, and a higher risk of mental health disorders such as depression and anxiety. In particular, unemployment during early adulthood—a stage of life characterized by critical transitions in career, relationships,

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and personal identity—can be particularly damaging. The impact of unemployment during this developmental phase may lead to delayed personal growth, decreased self-worth, and a heightened sense of hopelessness about the future.

This study aims to explore the psychological effects of unemployment on self-esteem and hopelessness, focusing specifically on employed and unemployed adults. By investigating these differences, the research seeks to provide deeper insights into the mental health challenges faced by unemployed individuals and offer recommendations for psychological interventions that can help mitigate these effects.

Unemployment

Unemployment is a significant stressor that can disrupt an individual's mental health, leading to psychological distress, including depression, anxiety, and a general decline in well-being. The loss of work not only leads to economic hardship but also causes a loss of social roles and a sense of identity. Psychological distress often arises from the stigma of being unemployed, financial insecurity, and the social isolation that may accompany it. Böckerman and Ilmakunnas (2009) highlighted the direct link between unemployment and psychological distress, focusing on financial strain as a key factor contributing to mental health deterioration. Similarly, Jahoda (1982) argued that the loss of social roles and the stigmatization of unemployed individuals are key contributors to the mental health challenges they face. García-Gomez et al. (2011) confirmed that long-term unemployment is linked to increased rates of depression, as individuals struggle with the consequences of financial insecurity and the inability to secure stable employment. More recently, Goldsmith et al. (2016) emphasized that the effects of unemployment on mental health are compounded by both financial and social stressors, leading to worse outcomes for those who experience long-term unemployment.

Self-Esteem

Self-esteem refers to the overall sense of self-worth or personal value. It is an essential psychological factor that influences how individuals perceive their own abilities and worth. Unemployment can significantly affect an individual's self-esteem, as individuals may internalize the stigma associated with being jobless and feel inadequate, inferior, or socially marginalized. The loss of a job often leads to a decline in one's perceived social value, especially when society equates work with personal worth. Moreover, prolonged unemployment can lead to learned helplessness, further damaging self-esteem. Research has consistently shown that unemployment leads to a significant decline in self-esteem. Rosas and Rossignotti (2005) found that unemployed individuals often experience a loss of self-worth, primarily due to feelings of economic powerlessness and the social stigma attached to being unemployed. Elliot (1996) further argued that long-term unemployment is particularly detrimental to self-esteem because individuals internalize societal messages that equate employment with social value and self-respect. Jackson and Warr (1984) also reported that unemployment leads to a decrease in self-esteem, especially among young adults, who are more vulnerable to identity issues related to career and success. Furthermore, Tummers and Dulk (2013) suggested that feelings of powerlessness and meaninglessness, often resulting from unemployment, exacerbate the decline in self-esteem, especially when individuals experience work-related alienation.

Hopelessness

Hopelessness is a mental state where people feel negative about the future and believe that their goals are out of reach. One major cause of hopelessness is unemployment, especially when people think they have little chance of finding a job or have been out of work for a long

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time. Being unemployed for an extended period can make people feel like their efforts don't matter, leading to increased stress, anxiety, and depression. Research has shown a clear link between unemployment and hopelessness. For example, Nordenmark (1999) found that young adults without jobs often feel more hopeless, especially since this is a time when they are trying to build their careers and become financially independent. Lane and Timothy (1999) also noted that people without work often feel helpless, particularly when they don't believe they'll be able to return to the workforce. Similarly, Reijntjes et al. (2010) found that unemployed young people tend to feel more hopeless, mainly because they struggle to find steady jobs. This feeling of hopelessness can grow worse over time, especially for those who are unemployed for a long period, as they begin to lose confidence in their ability to succeed and build a stable life.

Mental Health

The relationship between unemployment, self-esteem, hopelessness, and mental health is intricate and interdependent. Research suggests that the decline in self-esteem caused by unemployment can lead to an increase in hopelessness, which in turn exacerbates mental health issues such as depression and anxiety. These psychological outcomes are often mutually reinforcing, creating a cycle of deteriorating mental health that further impedes an individual's ability to regain employment. Understanding the interconnections between these variables is essential for addressing the broader psychological impacts of unemployment and providing effective interventions. Recent studies have explored how these psychological variables interact and create a feedback loop that worsens the mental health outcomes associated with unemployment. Goldsmith et al. (1996) suggested that the decline in self-esteem caused by unemployment leads to increased feelings of hopelessness, which can further aggravate mental health issues. Tummers and Dulk (2013) examined how feelings of alienation and powerlessness related to unemployment contribute to a sense of disconnection from society, which exacerbates mental health problems and reinforces the negative cycle of unemployment. Kaur (2014) highlighted the role of emotional resilience in moderating the impact of unemployment on self-esteem, hopelessness, and mental health. Her findings suggested that individuals with higher emotional maturity are better able to cope with unemployment and the associated psychological challenges.

Aim

To study the impact of unemployment on self-esteem and hopelessness.

Rationale of the study

In the present scenario, unemployment is a growing global concern, particularly affecting young adults, leading to numerous psychological challenges such as anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and hopelessness. Joblessness serves as a significant stressor, especially for individuals bearing financial or familial responsibilities, and it extends its impact beyond individuals to their relationships. This study focuses on exploring the specific effects of unemployment on self-esteem and hopelessness, areas where limited research exists. Addressing these gaps can provide valuable insights and contribute to developing cost-effective and targeted mental health interventions for unemployed individuals, especially young adults. It aims to provide strategies to manage the psychological distress associated with unemployment effectively.

Objectives

1. To compare the self-esteem of employed and unemployed adults.
2. To compare the hopelessness of employed and unemployed adults.

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Hypotheses

1. There will be a significant difference between self-esteem of employed and unemployed adults.
2. There will be significant difference between hopelessness of employed and unemployed adults.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Variables

The study utilizes a Cross-Comparative Research Design which involves the use of quantitative data. This study compares Self-esteem and hopelessness (Dependent Variables) of employed and unemployed adults (independent variable). Two questionnaires were administered to collect the data from sample groups of respondents (adults) in order to compare the self-esteem and hopelessness of employed and unemployed adults.

Sample

The present study involved a sample of 60 early adults, including both males and females, within the age range of 24 to 35 years. The data collection was carried out through offline administration of questionnaires.

Test and Tools

The data was collected by using two questionnaires- The Rosenberg self-esteem scale (RSES) developed by the Sociologist Morris Rosenberg (1979) and Beck Hopelessness Scale (BHS) is a self-report inventory developed by Dr. Aaron T (1988).

- **The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES):** The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) was developed by sociologist Morris Rosenberg in 1979. It is a widely used self-report measure designed to assess an individual's overall self-worth and self-acceptance. The scale consists of 10 items rated on a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree." Five of the items are positively worded and five are negatively worded to reduce response bias. Higher scores indicate higher self-esteem. The RSES is simple, reliable, and commonly used in both research and clinical settings to evaluate global self-esteem.
- **Beck Hopelessness Scale (BHS):** The Beck Hopelessness Scale (BHS) is a self-report inventory developed by Dr. Aaron T. Beck in 1988. It is designed to measure negative attitudes about the future and feelings of hopelessness. The scale consists of 20 true-false statements that assess an individual's expectations and outlook on life. The BHS is particularly useful in identifying individuals at risk of depression or suicidal ideation. Higher scores on the scale indicate a greater level of hopelessness. It is frequently used in clinical and research contexts to assess mental health status, especially in relation to mood disorders.

Procedure

Data collection was carried out through offline administration. Printed copies of the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) and the Beck Hopelessness Scale (BHS) were distributed to the participants. We established good rapport with the participants and took them into confidence and make them sure about the confidentiality of their responses. We took their informed consent before distribution of all the questionnaires among them. We gave them instructions as printed on questionnaires and present during the administration to clarify any doubts and ensure proper understanding of the questions. After completion, the questionnaires were collected for scoring and statistical analysis.

RESULTS

Statistical Analysis

The statistical technique used depends upon the type of data, the nature of variables, and research design used in the research investigation. Therefore, the results were analyzed with the help of descriptive statistics and t test (Two tailed).

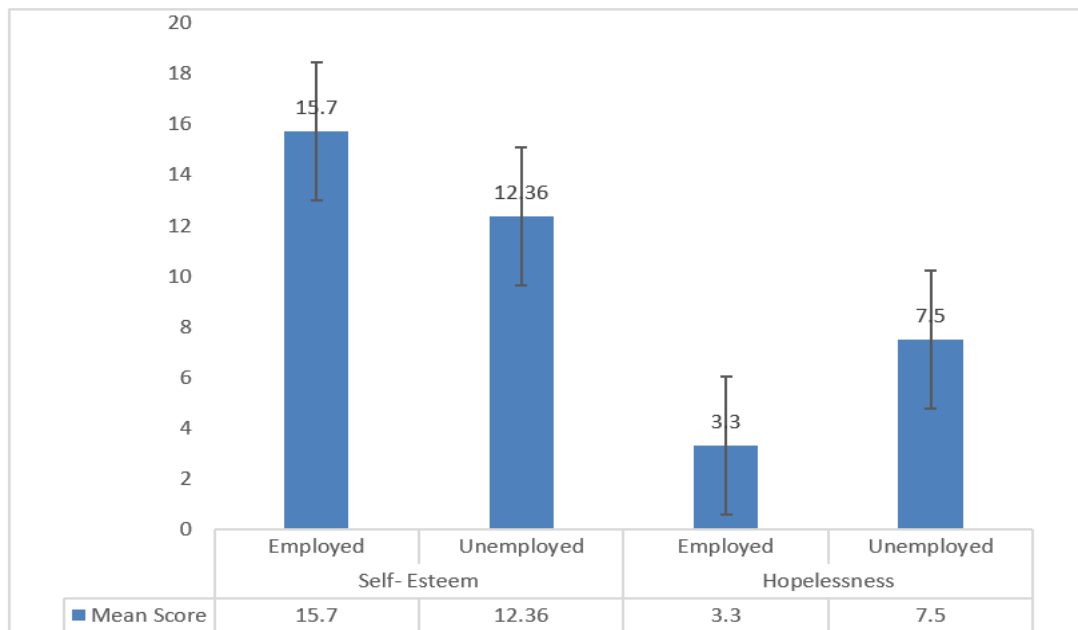
Table 1- Mean, Standard Deviation and Standard Error Deviation and t-test among Employed (N=30) and Unemployed (N = 30)

Measures	Groups	N	Mean	Std	St. Error	df	t-value	Sig
Self-Esteem	Employed	30	15.70	1.74	.318	58	6.896	0.001
	Unemployed	30	12.36	1.99	.363			
Hopelessness	Employed	30	3.30	1.53	.280	58	-7.76	0.001
	Unemployed	30	7.50	2.55	.466			

Table 2- is showing percentage calculation of self- esteem and hopelessness among employed and unemployed group.

Measures	Groups	Mean Score	Max. Score	Percentage	Diff. in Percentage
Self- Esteem	Employed	15.70	30	52.33 %	11.13 % higher in Employed
	Unemployed	12.36	30	41.20 %	
Hopelessness	Employed	3.30	20	16.50 %	21.00 % higher in Unemployed
	Unemployed	7.50	20	37.50 %	

Figure-1 is showing mean scores and error bar of self- esteem and hopelessness among employed and unemployed group.



Self-Esteem: The results reveal a significant difference in self-esteem between employed and unemployed individuals. The employed group has a mean self-esteem score of 15.70 (SD = 1.74), while the unemployed group has a mean score of 12.36 (SD = 1.99). The t-value of

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6.896 is highly significant ($p < 0.01$), indicating that employment positively influences self-esteem. Employed individuals generally report higher self-esteem, likely due to the sense of purpose, financial independence, and social roles that employment provides. In contrast, unemployed individuals experience lower self-esteem, possibly stemming from economic insecurity and societal stigma.

Hopelessness: There is a highly significant difference in hopelessness between employed and unemployed individuals. The unemployed group has a mean hopelessness score of 7.50 (SD = 2.55), significantly higher than the employed group, which has a mean score of 3.30 (SD = 1.53). The t -value of -7.76 ($p < 0.01$) indicates that unemployment is strongly associated with feelings of hopelessness. The unemployed individuals report much higher levels of hopelessness, which may reflect the frustration, financial strain, and uncertainty they face in the job market, contributing to a bleak outlook on their future.

The study revealed that employed individuals had significantly higher self-esteem (52.33%) compared to unemployed individuals (41.20%), with an 11.13% difference. Employment boosts self-esteem through a sense of purpose, financial independence, and social validation, while unemployment often leads to lower self-worth due to economic insecurity and social stigma.

In terms of hopelessness, unemployed individuals reported significantly higher levels (37.50%) compared to employed individuals (16.50%), showing a 21.00% difference. Unemployment is associated with greater hopelessness due to financial strain, uncertainty, and a lack of control over future prospects, while employment fosters stability and optimism.

DISCUSSION

The results of the study revealed significant differences between employed and unemployed individuals, particularly with regard to self-esteem and hopelessness. The employed group scored higher in self-esteem and reported lower levels of hopelessness compared to the unemployed group. These findings are consistent with the broader body of research showing that employment plays a crucial role in shaping an individual's psychological and emotional well-being. Employment not only provides economic stability but also serves as a critical source of social identity, which, in turn, positively influences mental health.

Specifically, self-esteem was significantly higher among employed individuals compared to unemployed individuals. These results support the hypothesis that work provides individuals with a sense of purpose and value, reinforcing positive self-regard. Unemployment, conversely, often leads to feelings of social exclusion and powerlessness, which can erode an individual's self-worth. Research by Bettie and Finkel (2020) found that individuals who are employed report significantly higher levels of self-esteem, partly because work is viewed as a primary source of identity and personal accomplishment. In contrast, those who are unemployed often internalize societal stigmas that associate unemployment with incompetence or failure, leading to diminished self-esteem. Similarly, the significantly higher levels of hopelessness found among unemployed participants compared to their employed counterparts are consistent with research suggesting that unemployment contributes to a sense of hopelessness about the future. This indicates that the psychological impact of unemployment is substantial. Roca et al. (2020) conducted a study on youth unemployment in Spain and found that unemployment leads to significantly higher levels of hopelessness and lower mental well-being, especially in the absence of social support systems. The present study's findings align with these results, suggesting that unemployment can significantly

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diminish an individual's sense of agency and future prospects, leading to a pervasive sense of hopelessness.

The relationship between unemployment and mental health is particularly striking in young adults, who are still in the process of forming their identities and establishing career trajectories. Tönnies et al. (2021) observed that unemployment during early adulthood can exacerbate psychological distress, particularly feelings of hopelessness, and can increase vulnerability to mental health disorders such as depression and anxiety. The impact of unemployment on self-esteem and hopelessness is thus not only a reflection of financial hardship but also an emotional and social crisis that can reverberate throughout an individual's life.

Furthermore, the present study also supports the idea that unemployment's effects are compounded by financial insecurity, which leads to increased stress and deteriorating mental health. Financial strain is a significant predictor of psychological distress, as individuals experience stress from not only the lack of income but also the inability to meet basic life demands. Choi et al. (2020) found that financial insecurity during unemployment was associated with elevated levels of anxiety, depression, and overall psychological distress. This financial strain also exacerbates feelings of hopelessness, reinforcing the cycle of negative mental health outcomes seen in the unemployed group. The findings of this study underscore the profound psychological toll of unemployment, particularly in terms of self-esteem and hopelessness. The employed group, with their higher self-esteem and lower levels of hopelessness, demonstrates the positive psychological effects of employment. In contrast, the unemployed group experiences a diminished sense of self-worth and a heightened sense of hopelessness, which are well-documented psychological outcomes of unemployment. Future interventions should address both the economic and psychological aspects of unemployment, offering not just financial support but also mental health resources to help individuals maintain self-esteem and hope during difficult periods of unemployment. The findings of this study indicate that unemployment has a significant negative impact on self-esteem, increases feelings of hopelessness, and adversely affects mental health.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The present study aimed to compare levels of self-esteem and hopelessness between employed and unemployed adults. The findings clearly indicate that employment status significantly influences psychological well-being. Employed individuals reported higher self-esteem and lower levels of hopelessness, reflecting the positive impact of stable work on one's self-worth and outlook on the future. In contrast, unemployed adults showed significantly lower self-esteem and higher hopelessness, suggesting that joblessness negatively affects personal identity, emotional health, and perceived control over life circumstances. These results align with previous research and support psychological theories such as Jahoda's latent deprivation theory, the self-esteem theory, and the learned helplessness theory, all of which explain the detrimental effects of unemployment on mental health. Unemployment not only affects financial stability but also disrupts social roles, purpose, and emotional resilience. Overall, the study highlights the urgent need to address the emotional and psychological challenges faced by unemployed individuals. It underscores the importance of designing interventions that provide both economic assistance and mental health support, especially during early adulthood when identity and career formation are most vulnerable to disruption.

- 1. Longitudinal Studies to Track Psychological Impact Over Time:** One of the most crucial directions for future research is to conduct longitudinal studies that monitor

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individuals over extended periods of unemployment and re-employment. While cross-sectional studies offer valuable snapshots, they cannot capture the dynamic nature of psychological variables such as self-esteem and hopelessness. Longitudinal research would provide insights into how these variables fluctuate, when psychological deterioration is most likely to occur, and how re-entering the workforce may reverse or mitigate mental health challenges. This approach can help identify critical time frames where interventions would be most effective.

- 2. Role of Social Support as a Moderating Variable:** Future research should explore the role of social support systems including family, friends, community, and institutional aid—as potential buffers against the negative psychological effects of unemployment. Understanding how different types of support impact self-esteem and hopelessness could inform the development of targeted interventions. Studies could compare individuals with strong support networks to those who are more socially isolated, to better understand how social resources contribute to resilience during unemployment.
- 3. Comparative Studies Across Cultural and Socioeconomic Contexts:** The psychological experience of unemployment can vary significantly depending on cultural values, societal expectations, and economic conditions. Conducting cross-cultural studies or comparisons between urban and rural populations can shed light on how different environments influence the mental health impact of joblessness. This can help in developing culturally sensitive interventions and policies that are tailored to specific population needs.
- 4. Impact of Duration and Nature of Unemployment:** Future studies should differentiate between short-term and long-term unemployment, as well as between voluntary and involuntary unemployment. Each scenario can carry different psychological implications. Long-term and involuntary unemployment are likely to be more detrimental to self-esteem and hope. Understanding these distinctions can help in designing more precise and responsive mental health programs.
- 5. Evaluation of Intervention Programs:** There is a need for research that evaluates the effectiveness of intervention programs—such as skill training, counseling, career guidance, and mental health support—in improving psychological outcomes among the unemployed. Experimental or quasi-experimental designs can determine which strategies are most beneficial in enhancing self-esteem and reducing hopelessness, thereby guiding policy and program development.

LIMITATIONS

1. Small sample size (60 participants).
2. Cross-sectional design limits causal conclusions.
3. Self-reported data may be biased.
4. Lack of control variables (e.g., pre-existing conditions).

IMPLICATIONS

1. Policymakers should integrate mental health support with unemployment programs.
2. Employment programs should focus on both job placement and psychological support.
3. Raise public awareness about the mental health impact of unemployment.
4. Provide mental health resources alongside economic support for the unemployed.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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