Reviewer’s report

Title: Factors explaining differences in perceived health among German long-term unemployed

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Reviewer: Mattias Strandh

Reviewer’s report:

The effect of unemployment on perceived health, the level of perceived health and factors impacting perceived health among the unemployed are issues that sadly are of critical relevance for our time, this as an important public health issue, but also as an issue for individual and macro labour market performance. This paper aims to investigate factors correlating with perceived health among long term unemployed, which rightly is identified as somewhat under researched as well as as a critical issue for interventions. In order to do this the article uses a cross-sectional sample of long term unemployed persons recruited for a settings based health promotion programme from secondary labour market non-profit organizations.

The paper does however suffer from several problems, some are redeemable through reworking but the data restrictions make me conclude that the article does not contribute to the research field with its present approach. I will below outline first the fundamental problems of the paper, and then some minor issues that issues that could be worked through and finally make a suggestion as to an approach how this data could be used to make a contribution in line with the wishes of the authors.

• The main problem of this paper is the data used. In order to investigate the impact of unemployment one does need longitudinal data. Given the selection processes involved into unemployment and further into long term unemployment we need to be able to look at individual change in health, otherwise we do not know if what we are studying is unemployment related at all. To compare with findings in other studies of the general population is of course better than nothing (but substantially poorer than even a crosssectional study including both the employed and unemployed with known sampling probabilities), but does not remedy the problem.

• A longitudinal approach is standard procedure within the unemployment field for investigating the impact of unemployment. It is however also necessary for studying the topic of interest in this paper, factors correlating with perceived health among the long term unemployed. For this to be truly interesting both in a general population and the unemployed population we must be able to look at the processes involved. We thus need to know if BMI, mental health, physical activity etc. cause bad perceived health, are caused by it or if they co-develop. With the current data none of this is empirically possible to investigate.

• The article does compare the levels of perceived health extensively with the
findings in other studies in the discussion. The data does however not hold for conclusions about long term unemployed in general (selected into long term unemployment or not). The sample was recruited for a settings based health promotion programme from secondary labour market non-profit organizations. This means that beside the normal selection into unemployment, long term unemployment there is the selection process into these two programmes, and then the selection into a health promotion programme. This means that the sample in no way is representative of long term unemployed, and that it is possible that it is even a health based selection into participation from the two programmes that it is representative of. Given this the only function of the extensive comparison with findings in other studies is to establish that this is a different sample with different qualities.

A couple of less central comments:
• There needs to be more clarity of what the study actually investigates, and what kinds of conclusions that can be drawn (and about what group) given data limitations
• As it is the study says it studies correlations, but continually use terms as explanatory and impact in relation to the relationship between factors and perceived health. The paper neither provides a theoretical reason for assuming a direction nor does it provide an empirical ground for these assumptions.
• There is a lot of previous studies cited in the introduction and particularly in the discussion. These all have their strengths and weaknesses. Given the space allocated to this and the deficiencies in the data a minimum would be to clearly systematise the conclusions in relation to factors impacting perceived health among unemployed, and build a theoretical model of how causal relations from previous findings can be assumed to look like. In order to make a contribution to this topic a minimum would be to build a theoretical model of causal relations related to previous findings, where the data could be used to test key assumptions.

My guess is that the data used in this paper is to become longitudinal, and when it does the authors will be less constrained by the problems associated with the data. Until then I would however, given their interest in the possibility for intervention, like to propose an alternative approach that would deal with the same issues but be a contribution to public health and policy despite the problems of the data. This would be to make it more qualitative in the sense that if causal relations cannot be established empirically given data, it might instead be of interest to look at how these factors coexist in a population of long term unemployed. One way could be to use for instance Latent Class Analysis to find groups who share similar health traits and then use these groups as dependent variables for socioeconomic and other factors. Through this procedure we would for instance gain an insight into what configurations of problems that do exist in the long term unemployed population, and what characteristics are related to these configurations. This could potentially be important for designing and targeting of interventions for a heterogeneous population of long term unemployed.
Level of interest: An article of limited interest

Quality of written English: Needs some language corrections before being published

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.