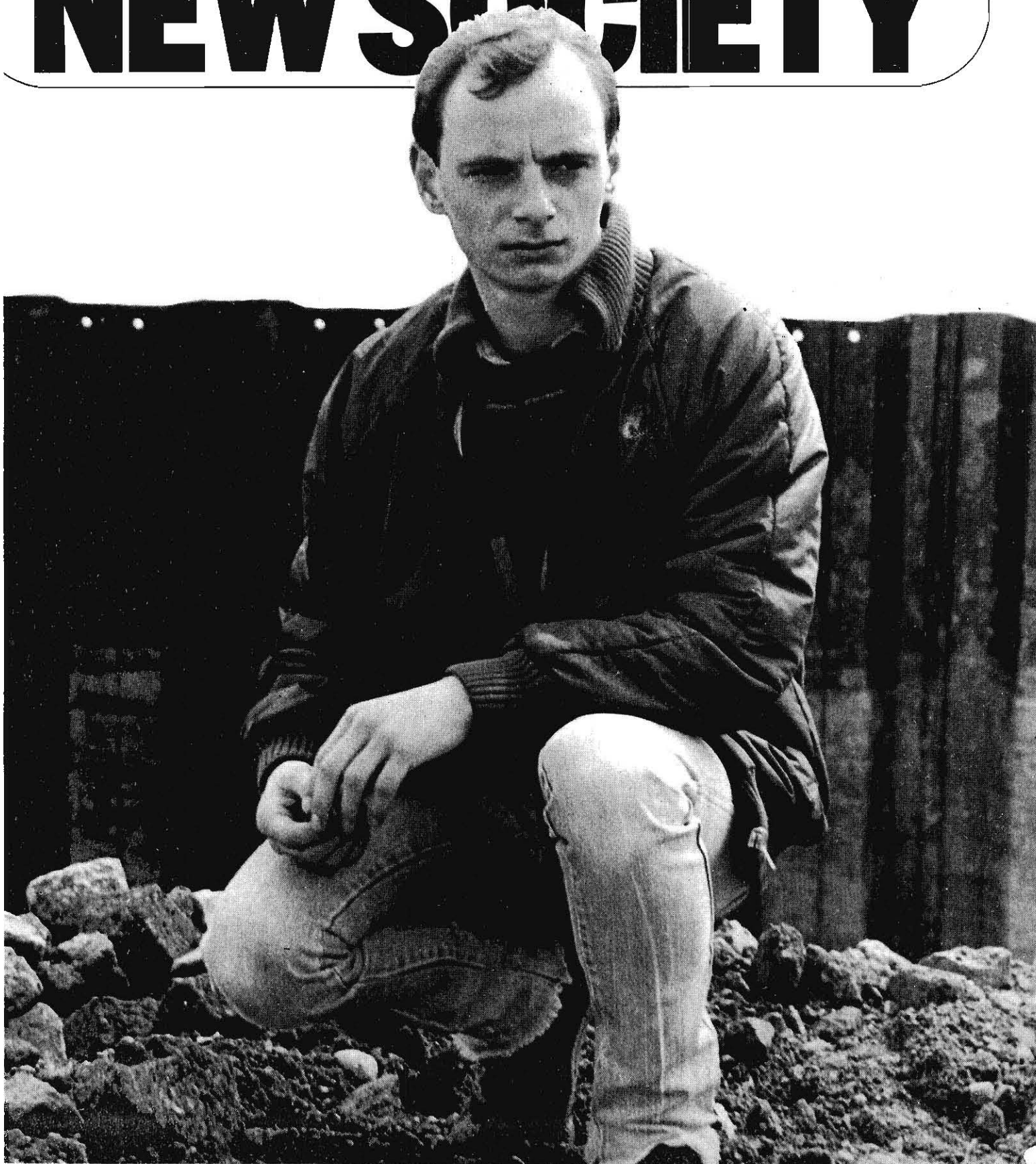


10 January 1986 75p weekly

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## Norman Stone: The English disease OUT OF THE UNEMPLOYMENT TRAP

# NEW SOCIETY



**MARK McDERMOTT**

# The story of Daniel

**How hard does unemployment hit young people? Here we publish two contrasting psychological studies. First, how one Welsh 16 year old feels about his wasted life.**

Daniel is a 16 year old school leaver. He is one of 20 young people I interviewed during my research work at University College, Cardiff, into the social psychology of leaving school and looking for work. He lives on the outskirts of a large, semi-industrial city in Wales, an area with the third-highest unemployment rate in Britain. What follows is based on interviews I carried out over twelve months which spanned the time of his leaving school. From then on Daniel returned to school only during June to sit his CSEs and O levels.

At the time of my last interview with him, he was still unemployed after seven months. He had not had a job since leaving school. These extracts from our conversations illustrate the meaning Daniel attaches to the experience of leaving school and his attempts to uphold his self-respect. Similar characteristics are recognisable in many of his contemporaries. This is not an isolated case-study.

## 'What am I doing here?'

Leaning forward on his chair, cradling a cigarette in his hands, head hung low, Daniel said:

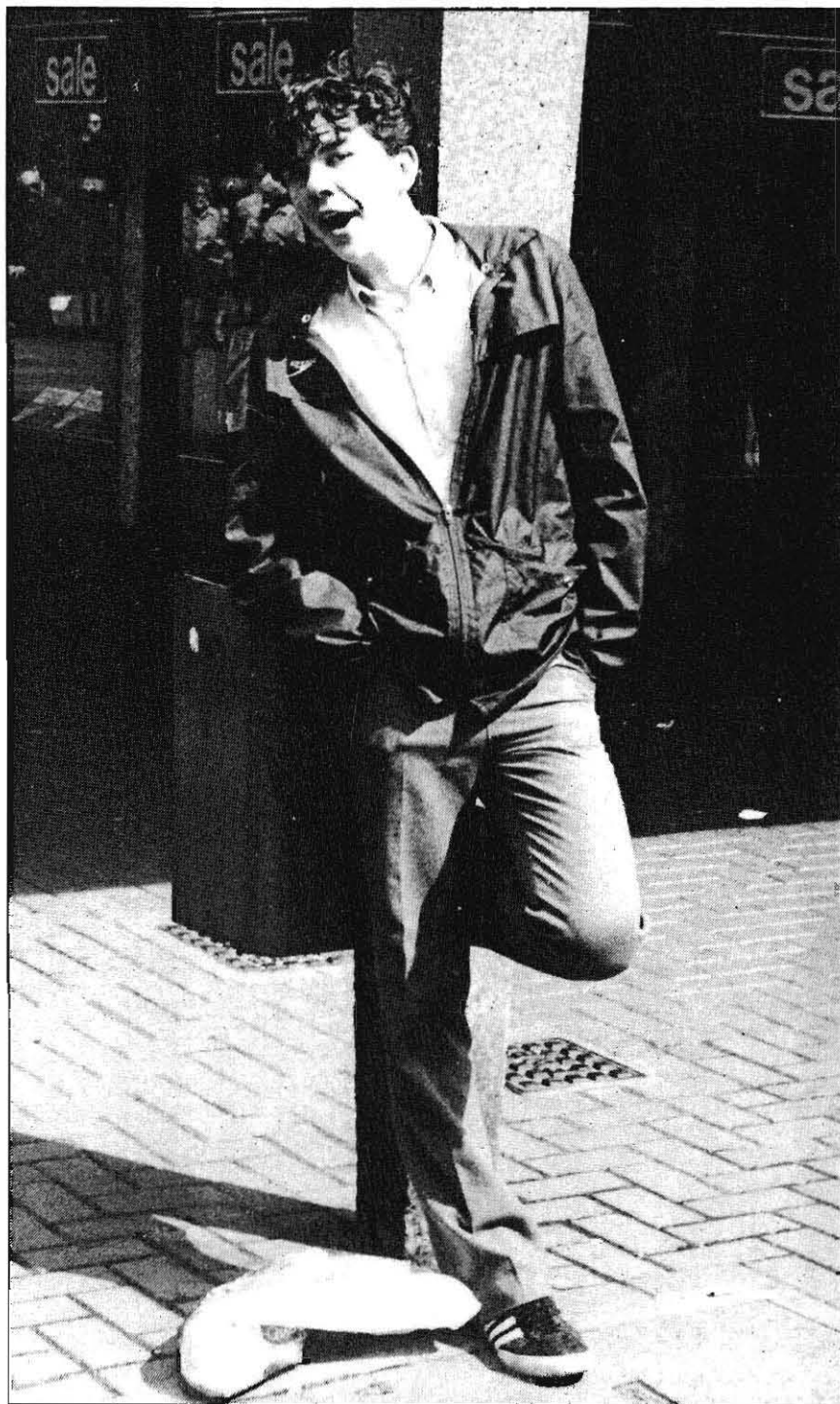
"I don't think the dole is any way out. It's just a way into a rut. I get so bored. Sometimes, on the dole now, I've never been so bored, even when I was in school, like. But now I realise what boring is."

He stared at the floor. He shook his head from side to side, seeming to signal incredulity at where his life had led him. What was it like being unemployed?

"Oh, pathetic. It is pathetic, the dole, 'cos you are wasting yourself. You know, I haven't done nothing for months. I haven't been nowhere, nowhere really. I just does the same thing every day. And you get used to it, like. I just thinks to myself, 'What am I doing here?'"

Despondency and helplessness trailed through his words. He was restless, bitter and angry. His only source of income was his social security cheque. He was not going to accept a Youth Training Scheme and earn only £25 for a 40 hour week. Research has shown that there is a significantly higher chance of getting a permanent job after similar training to YTS; but Daniel thought it wouldn't make much difference.

"I couldn't be bothered working for the 25 when you are working eight hours, like, a day. I wouldn't have had much more money. I would have had—if I'd given my mother £10, bought a bus pass (that's £4)—that would leave me with £11 a week, and I was getting £9 on the dole for not working, for just hanging around. They didn't have any real jobs. I just wasn't interested. Even in school I wasn't interested in a Youth Training Scheme. I don't want one. I was going down the Job Centre like, but there was







nothing in there for me, nothing at all."

A training scheme might have increased Daniel's self-respect. But, to him, this intangible prospect is obscured by the negligible financial incentive. He thinks he is worth a "permanent" job. YTS is no substitute for a "real" job. In his eyes 40 hours of his time and effort have to be worth more than £25 a week.

Daniel says that the Christmas after leaving school was the worst one he could remember. "Christmas came like, but it was nothing, Christmas." He was completely "skint." It made him realise just how constrained his life had become.

Daniel gives the impression of someone who is very "solid," composed and self-assured. He is a leader figure in his way. When I talked to him in a group of his friends, he didn't mess around. He would sit there, slightly removed, with the trace of a wry smile on his face. This may be a pose but it seems more like an indication of someone who is taking his life more seriously than the others are. He prefers to go his own way and make his own mistakes.

A sense of alienation and disaffection surround Daniel. It is conveyed in his style of dress and general appearance, as well as in his manner. While he was still at school, his ritualistic apartness was like a mute protest against society and its authority figures. He was thoughtful and he gave you the sense of having a wider perspective on his life than the one his teachers were trying to convey to him. He knew already that jobs were scarce and that a handful of O levels was not going to do much to increase his chances of work.

"They say in school, 'Work for your O levels and you'll get a good job'. And there was me, and I had three, and there's others like who had jobs who haven't got any, I thought, 'Why did I work?'"

Daniel lives in a detached council house, on the edge of a housing estate three miles from the city

centre. Daniel's mother tries both to encourage him to find work and to control him:

"One minute she trying to help me, and the next minute she is on my back, bugging me. I think it is her, though, trying to help me."

He had his head shaved for the second time after she had expressly asked him not to. She flew at him and started to beat him, which made Daniel stay at home as little as possible:

"She just says something and, if I don't do it, it's just blows, like. She starts hitting me, so I've just got to do it. That's why I'm only in just for my food, like, or just to go to bed."

His attempts to find work other than YTS follow long periods of boredom with his existence. He always feels his efforts are futile. His father is unemployed and sets no example to Daniel in finding a job; he is too concerned with his own problems.

There isn't much nearby for young people to do in the evenings. Sometimes Daniel and his friends congregate in the middle of the estate. They talk, smoke cigarettes, or Daniel may go to the youth club affiliated to his comprehensive school. The club opens at 6.30pm and closes at 9pm. It offers soft drinks, a pool table, table tennis and TV. But he finds the repetition and predictability of his evenings there hard:

"It's always the same people that goes down there. Hardly anyone from anywhere else, like, just the people around here and only a few of them. There's not much social life. You know, down the club is nothing really."

Daniel doesn't like feeling the club is the only place he can go. If he goes, it is because there is nowhere better. He dislikes going out drinking. His big hobby is ferreting. He keeps two ferrets in an enclosure in his back garden. He goes out with a friend of his, "rabbiting" on local farms. This amounts to poach-

**The experience of unemployment.**

**Above, on the previous page and overleaf, Mike Abrahams gives his photographic interpretation. These are all pictures of unemployed young men in Blackburn**

ing. One farmer caught Daniel and his friend, put them into his van, and took them to the local police station, where they were charged.

"I'm waiting for the summons now. I went home and told my old man, like. I didn't tell my mother, because she would have freaked out on me. I didn't think I'd go to court for poaching 'cos I was doing it all the time and only got caught a few times."

Poaching is something to do. It is different from just going to the club. He says he intends to mend his ways if he can get a job—but only partly: "You know, if I'm working in the days, I won't be poaching or anything—only in the weekends, if I do go."

Boredom and lack of money mean that small-time crime of a different kind is an increasing temptation. He says he hasn't yet given in to invitations from friends to "do a few houses" with them. But it is becoming a real possibility that he may:

**"He hasn't yet given in to invitations from friends to 'do a few houses' with them. But this is becoming a real possibility."**

"Like they said to me yesterday, 'Do you want to come?' But I wasn't interested. I can survive at the moment, but a few more months maybe, yeah, it's something to do, like, going there and getting a bit of money."

For the moment, the dole Giro-cheque is a safety net. But he is finding it hard to make it last more than three or four days a week, even though he collects two weeks' entitlement (£50) at a time. He finds he seldom has money left over for the task of getting a job. Alleviating the stresses of being unemployed calls to him more loudly than looking for work:

He ends up with no money for over a week. When he does get some, he uses it to compensate for the depressing effect that being on the dole has on him. Even if he does manage to put some money by, he feels he can't really afford bus fares into town to look in at the local Job Centre regularly. His salvation, as he sees it, would be a job on full pay:

"I just wants to get a job and get away, so I don't need to even think of robbing anyone. I just want to get a job and get some money, and I think I will be all right then. I don't want to be robbing people all the time, like these kids I'm with."

He treated the first few months after leaving school as a time to find his feet and recover from the exams. But he became entrenched in these patterns of action and inaction. He found it hard to escape from the world he had unwittingly slipped into. Only when the summer was over did he realise that not going back to school in September might mean this way of existing could continue indefinitely. At this point his unemployment made its first major psychological impact.

Being unemployed is, he says, a "waste of my life." Daniel says this with disgust at himself, and with contempt for the world which made his predicament worse. He repeated his assertion a number of times. What advice would he now give to school leavers?

"I'd tell them to go for a job, you know, straight away. I reckon, straight away for a job and keep on trying, just to keep on going. Just keep on trying going for different interviews, for different jobs all the time, instead of saying, 'Yeah, I'll have a couple of weeks off,' before they start going for them. But not going on saying, 'Oh, the dole, I'm going to survive on that; 'cos I don't think you can. Maybe they could, like, and they'd be all right, but I doubt it. I'd just tell them to get a job as soon as they could. I think that is the best bet."

Background reading: E. M. Stafford, 'The impact of the Youth Opportunities Programme on young people's employment prospects and psychological well-being' (*British Journal of Guidance and Counselling*, vol 10, No. 1, 1982)

P. R. Jackson, E. M. Stafford, M. H. Banks and P. B. Warr, 'Unemployment and psychological distress in young people: the moderating role of employment commitment' (*Journal of Applied Psychology*, vol 68, No 3, 1983)

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**STEPHEN EVANS**

# Out of the trap

**Not all young people sink into listlessness through unemployment. Another psychological study shows how some motivate themselves into action.**

Stephanie left college at the age of 22. Over the six years since then, she has had a variety of temporary jobs, interspersed with stretches of unemployment. Recollecting one of these periods without work, she vividly describes how unpleasant the experience was:

"I just deteriorated into a vegetable. It was awful. I couldn't string two words together. I couldn't hold a conversation with anybody. I didn't bother about what I looked like, where I went, or what time I got up in the morning. I was very, very unhappy with the way things were. I stopped reading, I stopped writing, I stopped being interested in anything. I didn't want to go anywhere. I just went downhill rapidly and got to the stage where I wasn't applying for jobs either—I didn't have that motivation there."

Stephanie's experience highlights the demoralising effect unemployment can have on psychological well-being (which Mark McDermott's article also underlines). The process of deterioration can lead to social withdrawal, difficulties with cognition, and a low opinion of oneself. An air of apathy pervades the daily routine. Boredom prevails and, all too easily, severe states of depression can occur. The crushing

de-motivational effect of unemployment can even restrict attempts to take on the difficult task of finding a job.

The psychologically debilitating effects of unemployment have been widely reported through various channels, both academic journals and the popular press. However, newer research questions this widespread "conventional wisdom," which leads commentators to make generalised assumptions about the ways people respond to being unemployed.

It is often assumed, for example, that people pass through a fixed series of stages as they remain unemployed. On this model, a period of shock after job loss is quickly followed by feelings of being on holiday and optimism about one's employment prospects. This leads into a pessimistic stage during which morale plummets and desperation sets in. Given time, adjustment takes place and people enter a fatalistic stage during which they come to terms with unemployment and lower their future expectations. This standard model follows the lines of Marie Jahoda's classic prewar study of the unemployed in the small German town of Marienthal.

If we return to Stephanie's story, the traditional explanation might lead us to expect that she eventually became resigned to her state, and fatalistic in her outlook. But not at all:

"I used to lie in bed till 12 o'clock or 1 o'clock. So I thought, 'Right! Up at eight to half past every morning. Even if you've got nothing planned for the day, get up! Get yourself washed, dressed, put your face on, do this and at least you feel better and it makes you more inclined to go out then.' Because if you're wandering around in your dressing gown, your hair's all over the place; you don't want to do anything anyway. So the minute I started doing that, it worked immediately . . . [I thought to myself] 'I'll go somewhere, I'll do something'."

And from that moment on she hasn't looked back, even though she is still one of the statistics of unemployment. Through friends, she got a casual (and undeclared) job working on a market stall. Over the last 18 months, she has spent about three days a week there. The rest of her time is spent on a busy social circuit, and she also maintains a serious interest in photography which she plans to eventually turn into a career.

She recognises that this change was made somewhat easier by the fact that, during her later stretches of unemployment, she became aware of a "huge community of unemployed people." This made it easier for her to become more socially active. All the same, whatever help she got this way, it was through her

**"I ended up at the point where I was so pathetic I wouldn't go and see anybody. That was when I decided—I'm not doing this any more—I'll go out and do something."**

own initial deliberate decision to impose structure on her life that Stephanie now keeps herself busy.

Stephanie is one of 36 young unemployed men and women who have taken part in my detailed study of the effects of unemployment on psychological well-being. Based at Manchester University, my research involved interviewing and assessment of this sample of predominantly single people between the ages of 18 and 30. I made contact with them, first of all, outside unemployment benefit offices in Greater Manchester.

As with Stephanie, I found that some of the people I interviewed describe responses to unemployment which do not conform to expectations. They have certainly experienced the psychological problems which can be associated with unemployment. But they have also adapted their way of life and made it less demoralising. This has often taken them into the grey area of undeclared work while continuing to draw benefit.

Like Stephanie, Kate (who is 25) told me how dissatisfaction with unemployment led to self-directed change. Again this took the form of a conscious effort to change her routine:

"I wasn't getting anything out of anything. I just used to sit there and get extremely depressed. I ended up at the point where I was so pathetic I wouldn't go and see anybody. I didn't even want to out and walk down the road in case I met somebody. There wasn't any point in going to the shops because I didn't have any money to spend. That was when I decided—I'm not doing this any more—I'll go out and do something."

What Kate did was to use her skills as an artist. She turned her hand to sign-painting on the basis of infor-

mal commissions (again undeclared). She also works for friends in a restaurant, and collects books in the hope of ultimately opening her own bookshop. She enjoys her new life. She says that she alone is responsible for what emerges.

"I have the day to do what I want to do, and it is my fault if I don't. If I don't discipline myself and go out and do things—well, okay, that's my fault for getting pissed off."

The examples of Stephanie and Kate suggest that self-generated decisions to change one's daily routine can initiate a process of re-vitalisation. The changes made can be great. Once they have re-exerted control over their routine, these people then appear ready to seek out, and capitalise on, opportunities which eventually provided some purpose to their lives.

A similar change happened to Jim. Like Stephanie and Kate, Jim (who is 27) remembers only too well how bored and miserable he was for the first two years of his current spell of unemployment:

"I found at one point I couldn't handle people at all. I just walked away from people all the time. I got really sort of low . . . really depressed."

Two years later, and still on the unemployment register and drawing benefit, Jim is now a changed person. He keeps himself very busy by doing odd mechanical jobs for people, and he hopes he may be





able to set himself up in business. Jim's skills as a mechanic have given him the opportunity for positive change. He is happy, sees a future for himself, and enjoys life to the full.

Unlike Stephanie and Kate, however, Jim feels that he is not directly responsible for bringing about the change in his outlook: "I met a really nice woman and she sorted me out. She was a very strong-willed, strong-minded woman who pulled me up really short."

Paul, too, escaped from the apathy trap thanks to the intervention of someone else. This time it was an acquaintance who offered him a small part in a fringe theatre production. Paul (who is 24) had never before had anything to do with drama, but he accepted and was taken aback by the outcome:

"It was awful. I didn't do anything. I just watched *Young Doctors* and got out of bed at the wrong time . . . You have no control over where you're going . . . no control over what you're going to do beyond the next two hours, when you're left in limbo as it were. Nobody really cares about you. It was just aimless and boring."

Paul has now been on the unemployment register for two years. But since he was given that first part, he has steadily become more and more involved with fringe theatre. He is now a founding member of a

company which puts on shows in schools and old people's homes.

And take Terry. His abilities as a builder gave him the chance to re-structure his life on the dole. In his six years since leaving school at the age of 16, he has spent three of them signing-on. The other three were spent working off and on in the building trade. Terry told me how, in the past, a typical day without a job meant that he would "stay in bed till three o'clock in the afternoon. Get up, pick your book up, fall asleep again, and that's it!" Inherent in such a passive lifestyle is a crushing sense of aimlessness:

"The days just drift past and you're not actually achieving anything with your life. Your life's flown by and nothing's gone on. You've nothing to show."

He is on the unemployed register again now, but this time it is different. Having established a good reputation as a builder, he has enough custom to be psychologically, if not financially, self-sufficient. So if you ask him how he spends his time, he can now say:

"I built a stone archway. I've done this roof here. See that roof there? I've done that. I've got something that I can be proud of . . . [which] gives me an immense amount of satisfaction."

Of course, not everyone is like Stephanie, Kate, Jim, Paul and Terry. These were only five out of the 36 I interviewed. Others conformed more to the expected pattern. All the same, their experiences should not be lightly dismissed. Unemployment can undoubtedly be a devastating experience. Yet it is apparent from my research that some young unemployed adults—both men and women, both working class and middle class—do successfully avoid the hopelessness and apathy which is normally thought of as the outcome of remaining jobless. For older people it is harder. But if you are young, you can—through either your own efforts or the influence of someone else—re-exert control over your life. Once you have initiated this change, what happens next turns on the opportunities which exist—your own abilities or your immediate social environment.

Establishing a purpose in life appears to be the key. This usually takes the form of some type of meaningful activity which often resembles work. This is hardly surprising as work is an obvious way of doing something useful, keeping busy and maybe making life that little bit more pleasant—whether it is in terms of acquiring extra money or new friends. And, of course, even though work is usually done *within* the context of formal employment, this need not be so.

What these resourceful and independent individuals do, in order to survive unemployment, is to construct personally meaningful alternatives to formal employment. The sad part is that these alternatives are not necessarily socially acceptable, and may put them on the wrong side of the law. Some are, no doubt, drawing unemployment benefit in breach of the rules. But this is the inevitable consequence of denying young people access to decent jobs. (This is a point that Leslie Gofton made in his *NEW SOCIETY* article on "Drink and the city," 20 December 1985.) Even temporary jobs, which research suggests can help young people cope with unemployment, are now harder to find, especially outside London and the south east. Young people have an overriding desire to do something worthwhile. If society does not provide them with the necessary means, they may understandably find their own ways of leading fulfilling lives.

And people need money. State benefits no longer buy what they used to, and nobody likes being broke. As Stephanie puts it: "I need to work on the side. If I didn't, I couldn't afford to pay for anything. I think I'm basically an honest person, but I will not live in abject poverty just for the fact that I can't get a job."

Background material:  
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Mark McDermott is at the Department of Psychology, University College, Cardiff, and Stephen Evans at the Department of Psychology, University of Manchester

Mark McDermott would like to thank 'Daniel' for sharing his thoughts, and Dr Terry Honess, of the Department of Psychology, University College, Cardiff, and Dr Norman Denzin, of the Department of Sociology, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, for their support

Stephen Evans's research was funded by the ESRC

The names in these two articles are pseudonyms