

UNEMPLOYED WOMEN AND THEIR ROLES – REVISITING OLD DEBATES AND GERMAN EXAMPLES

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Abstract The increase in women's participation in the labour market over recent decades allows us to consider implications of changed situations not only within work but also on the margins of the labour market and when unemployed. This paper considers women's coping strategies when unemployed in light of other roles that they might hold. By utilising the example of the formerly socialist, eastern part of Germany, where women's involvement in the labour market was encouraged and even enforced, underlying assumptions about how women cope with unemployment are analysed. The centrality of employment in East German unemployed women's biographies results in responses to redundancy that differ from those in the West. It is suggested that the social construction of gender via work identities and the individual and social importance attached to employment are central when determining the responses and coping strategies of the unemployed. Moreover, there are indications that alternatives to employment can include work based and non-gendered roles.

Keywords unemployment, women, work, alternative roles, East Germany

Resumo

Mulheres desempregadas e seus papéis – Revisitando debates e exemplos alemães

A crescente participação das mulheres no mercado de trabalho ao longo das décadas mais recentes leva-nos a analisar as implicações das mudanças não somente ao nível do trabalho remunerado, mas igualmente as que ocorrem nas margens do mercado de trabalho e do desemprego. Este artigo centra-se nas estratégias empreendidas pelas mulheres desempregadas, considerando a articulação com outros papéis que também desempenham. A partir do exemplo da Alemanha de Leste, ex-socialista, onde o envolvimento das mulheres na esfera laboral foi encorajado ou até mesmo imposto, analisam-se as suposições subjacentes ao modo como as mulheres devem enfrentar a situação de desemprego. A centralidade do emprego, patente nas biografias das mulheres desempregadas da Alemanha de Leste, produz respostas ao despedimento diferentes daquelas da Alemanha Ocidental. Sugere-se que a construção social do género, através das identidades do trabalho, e a importância individual e social atribuída ao emprego são elementos centrais na determinação de respostas e estratégias para enfrentar o desemprego. Além disso, indica-se que há alternativas ao emprego que podem assentar no trabalho e não no género.

Palavras-chave desemprego, mulheres, trabalho, papéis alternativos, Alemanha de Leste

Résumé

Femmes au chômage et leurs rôles – revisitant vieux débats et exemples allemands

L'accroissement, dans les dernières années, du nombre de femmes dans le marché du travail permet de considérer les implications des changements non seulement dans le travail mais également dans les marges du marché du travail et du chômage. Cet article s'occupe des stratégies des femmes chômeuses, à la lumière d'autres rôles qu'elles jouent aussi. L'exemple de l'Allemagne de l'Est, ex-socialiste, qui a encouragée et même imposée la participation des femmes dans le marché du travail, sert à analyser des suppositions sous-jacentes à la façon dont les femmes font face au chômage. Le rôle central de l'emploi dans les biographies des femmes chômeuses de l'Allemagne de l'Est provoque des réponses différentes au licenciement que celles dans l'ouest. Nous proposons que la construction sociale du genre à travers les identités au travail, de même que l'importance individuelle et sociale attachées à l'emploi sont des clés qui déterminent les réponses et les stratégies pour faire face au chômage. D'ailleurs, nous indiquons qu'il y a des alternatives à l'emploi qui peuvent se baser sur le travail, pas sur le genre.

Mots-clés le chômage, femmes, travail, rôles alternatifs, Allemagne de l'Est

Introduction

There is extensive variety in the importance of employment in individuals' lives, especially when looking at men and women (Padavic and Reskin, 2002). Gendered work identities have been widely discussed (see Rees and Garnsey, 2003, Guerrier and Adib, 2004) but employment issues for women may become more precarious when dealing with groups on the margins or outside of the labour market as both status and livelihood can be at stake (Leitner *et al.*, 2004). With persistently high unemployment in a country such as Germany, responses to unemployment and possible employability and re-employment opportunities need consideration (Beck, 2003). Somewhat outdated arguments consider women to suffer less from losing a job because of alternative roles that are more readily available to them in the household and family (see *inter alia* Heinemann *et al.*, 1983). Shamir (1985) found that the differing financial implications of unemployment for married men and women but also the difference in commitment to work and in performing family roles to substitute employment, explained gender differences in psychological well-being among the unemployed (see also Rudd, 2006). Russell's (1999) research into social networks complements these findings as she finds women's caring and domestic responsibilities to allow for the establishment of networks in the community that are resilient to unemployment. The existence of what in the past were called «alternative roles» is also reflected in discussions on work-life balance:

...multiple burdens women have to bear with reconciling family, housework and gainful employment are not only disadvantageous for their health, but may be evaluated as advantageous at the same time: the multiplicity of tasks also provides some autonomy for women to create solutions and to organise their daily life (Müller, 2000: 19).

This is not to say that dual or triple burdens should be seen as an advantage, on the contrary, but they tell us something about the gendered approach society has to individuals' varied roles. In Marie Jahoda's (1982) terminology a multiplicity of tasks would provide substitutes for being needed, having a time frame, regular activities and human interaction that employment would normally provide and that the unemployed are deprived of. Nowadays, a generally increased diversity in lifestyles, living and working arrangements (see Leitner *et al.*, 2004) has blurred the dichotomy between the employed with access to manifest and latent functions of employment and the unemployed who generally had less access to life-structuring and – enhancing mechanisms. An increase in both advantageous and disadvantageous roles and tasks justifies a renewed look at the coping strategies of the unemployed.

For East German women potential roles and labour market opportunities have changed considerably. Although there are now more possibilities to withdraw from the labour market and start a family than used to be the case (Dienel *et al.*, 2004, Rudd, 2006) the East German example enables a comparison with a society in which women's involvement in the labour market was enforced and almost taken for granted. Career breaks may offer new possibilities for mothers but these may be in conflict with continuing social expectations to remain in employment. In addition to the socialist heritage the East German situation is interesting and distinct for a variety of reasons. Comparisons show that a socialist political system alone is not sufficient to have resulted in women's strong association with employment (compare Heinen, 1990 on Poland). Yet GDR (German Democratic Republic) history created a separate German state with gender relations that allowed women to establish distinct employment biographies. In the long-term, these influenced the way in which responses to unemployment are constructed. With unification East Germany was integrated into an established western system. This enables an analysis not only of the necessary, fast and extensive adjustment processes but, more importantly, of Eastern women's reaction to a sudden confrontation with the legacies of a male breadwinner model (Leitner *et al.*, 2004). The unification of two countries and the research possibilities this brings with it were unique. Analysis of attachment to the labour market and full time employment is timely because – independent of how realistic or desirable it may be to aim for such employment – the social insurance system in Germany is still linked to (previous) employment. Social policies are therefore a determinant in women's labour market choices. Within the context of the economic problems Germany has been experiencing, this paper addresses the importance of employment in East Germany, in particular to the unemployed, and the implications of a loss of employment. As will be shown later, in the aftermath of unification, (the experience of) high unemployment rates have become part of the collective experience and might therefore be expected to affect identities.

This paper is structured into six sections. Following this introduction, the methods of this research are outlined. The paper will then consider the current

extent of unemployment and the historical development of employment in East and West Germany as the impact of different regimes needs to be taken into account. In the fourth section the importance of employment to women and the diversity and complexity of activities and roles that German women undertake will be explored. In doing so, implications for these women's position vis-à-vis the labour market are considered. The paper then turns to the relationship between the individual importance of employment, unemployment and identity and sets this in the context of changing definitions and perceptions of unemployment. Finally, some conclusions are drawn. This paper explores women's understandings of employment and sets these in relation to their coping strategies within unemployment. It will be argued that gender is constructed in distinct ways in East and West Germany, leading to different coping strategies of the unemployed. Consequently, alternative roles take on very different meanings and structure.

Methodology

This paper is based on qualitative research into the coping strategies of unemployed women in East and West Germany that was started in 2000. The main focus was on the individual and social responses to unemployment consisting of a whole range of activities, including but not limited to searching for re-employment, participating in the second labour market, in voluntary work, in the black market economy, in education and training schemes, care and house work, and in social networks. Interviews questioned how these activities might be related to the attachment to employment and ability to cope with unemployment.

The study was conducted in two German regions: Saxony-Anhalt in the East and the Saarland in the West. The regions were chosen on the grounds of aggregate statistical data that shows both to have undergone structural economic change, especially in the industrial structure. They are contending with the ensuing difficulties and have – and in part still are – experiencing mass unemployment. The two regions provide strong variation in their gender relations that represented East and West German stereotypes: the development towards a dual earner model is considered to have happened earlier and more comprehensively during GDR times (Klammer and Klenner, 2004). In the words of some interviewees, the Saarland is particularly «backward» in this respect: women, especially mothers, are not necessarily expected to remain in the labour market or seek (re-) employment and the role of housewife and mother is socially accepted. The two regions thus present an extreme but interesting comparison.

Information was collected from unemployed women and professionals. A total of 57 interviews were conducted with unemployed women, of which 34 took place in Saxony-Anhalt and 23 in the Saarland. In addition to the inter-

views, three focus groups (two in the East, one in the West) were utilised with between three and six participants. These helped in understanding social interactions on the theme of unemployment. Self-help groups and re-training schemes for the unemployed were observed to similar effect. One example of a self-help group was a weekly meeting point for unemployed women that had organised a telephone list to keep check on each other. The sample is likely to be biased because interviewees were contacted via training providers, self-help groups for the unemployed and other (informal) networks, thus consisting of pro-active individuals. In selecting interviewees it was ensured that an age-range from 18 to 60+ was covered and that women with and without children were included. This resulted in a mixed sample that included a broad range of qualifications, previous incomes and socio-economic situations. The interview guidelines and themes for discussion in the focus groups were based on Marie Jahoda's (1982) Deprivation Theory. This is the idea that the negative effects of unemployment are caused by deprivation of the latent functions of employment, namely: the experience of time, reduction of social contacts, lack of participation in collective purposes, absence of an acceptable status and its consequences for personal identity, and absence of regular activity (*ibid*, 1982: 39). Initially, background information was collected and women were asked to give an overview of their employment biography. The general attitude to employment; the situation when the individual became unemployed; current perceptions on unemployment; financial implications; the family and social contacts; as well as future outlook were covered. All interviews were semi-structured, in-depth, one-to-one and took between one and three hours. They were taped and transcribed for analysis.

The group of professionals interviewed consisted of job centre employees, careers advisors and trainers. The professionals were from diverse backgrounds but were all practitioners or service providers in fields with direct relevance to, and contact with, the unemployed. Professional interviews provided overviews and contextualised the information provided by unemployed women. In total, 25 professional interviews were conducted: 13 in the Saarland and 12 in Saxony-Anhalt. Professional interviews were also semi-structured – covering similar areas to those discussed with the unemployed – and in-depth and were taped and transcribed for analysis. All interviews were anonymised. To provide context for any quotes utilised in this paper, basic characteristics (occupation, age and length of unemployment) are provided. The interviews were conducted in German. Whilst the material from these interviews may now be considered dated, the argument developed in this paper relates more generally to the transformation process within Germany and the influence of socially determined views of women and their roles.

The historical importance of employment and current unemployment levels

Unemployment and the effects it has on people is closely related to the importance attached to employment by the individual and within the societal context. On this basis, two distinct stereotypes of women in East and West Germany emerged following unification. Both German states traditionally reinforced the centrality of employment. In West Germany women slowly but constantly increased their presence in the labour market, e.g. from 60 to 63.6 percent between 1994 and 2002 (Besenthal and Lang, 2004). Reasons for this increase are to be found in improved educational and qualificational levels of women as well as in increased possibilities and requests for part-time work (Statistisches Bundesamt *et al.*, 2004). The male breadwinner, female housewife or additional earner model is being eroded but remnants such as the pay gap and glass ceiling still exist. The German labour market remains segregated and German women's lifestyles a mixture of «traditional» and «modern» roles (Trappe and Rosenfeld, 2004).

GDR policies were supportive of mothers in particular but the encouragement and, to some extent, enforcement of employment was not paralleled by an actual decline in women's share of housework or family work (Dannebeck, 1992). In 1989 91.2 percent of the whole female population of working age were workers, apprentices or students (Andruschow *et al.*, 1995). Although this rate sunk to around 73 percent in 2002 (Besenthal and Lang, 2004) research identified East German women's continued will (and/or necessity) to participate in the labour market (Fuchs and Weber, 2004). With unification pillars of the West German welfare state previously based on the male-breadwinner model, e.g. the tax system, were transferred to the East (see Leitner *et al.*, 2004). East German women have found it difficult to fit into the model that formerly dominated the Federal Republic (Beck *et al.*, 2005) and a two-way relationship seems to have developed whereby East German women are affected by but in turn contributed to the development towards a dual earner model (Leitner *et al.*, 2004). Despite modernisation in West Germany due to women's increased participation in the labour market, there are considerable differences in the centrality of employment experienced and planned for as a result of socialisation in the GDR. This is reflected in the range of roles and activities of unemployed women.

The extent of unemployment that emerged as a major issue following German unification has been well documented (Ludwig-Mayerhofer, 2002; Statistisches Bundesamt *et al.*, 2004; Beck *et al.*, 2005). A range of characteristics of German unemployment are particularly noteworthy in the current context: persistently high levels of unemployment, and differences in dynamics in East and West as well as for women and for men. Unemployment rates increased dramatically in the early 1990s and peaked at 13.8 percent in March 2005 (Destatis, 2005), in part due to labour market reforms under the Agenda 2010 and the Hartz Reform (see

Hartz *et al.*, 2002). More recently, the national rate has decreased (from 11.5% in January 2007 to 8.6% in July 2008). This effect is felt, albeit at different levels, in the East (from 18.6% to 14.3%) and the West (from 9.5% to 7.1%)¹. Regional differences are considerable and range from 6.2 percent in Baden-Württemberg and 13.3 percent in Bremen for the West to 16.7 percent for Thuringia and 20.5 percent in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern in the East (Destatis, 2005). Unemployment is persistently higher in the East. Unemployment is also more likely to affect those without a completed vocational training, especially in the West (42.8% compared to 23.4 % East), workers more than employees, those with health problems and those aged 55 years or more. 13 percent of the unemployed in the West are looking for part-time work whereas this is the case for 4 percent in the East (Statistisches Bundesamt *et al.*, 2004). In the 1990s, female unemployment was generally higher than men's (*ibid*) but, following a phase when men were more affected in the early 2000s, the rates are now similar with 8.3% for men and 8.9% for women in July 2008 (West: 6.8% and 7.5% and East: 14.1% and 14.5% respectively)¹.

The centrality of employment and variety of activities within unemployment

The importance of employment and related activities that emerged from the interviews conducted in East Germany can be characterised with a statement by a 37-year old textile worker who had repeatedly experienced unemployment: «Most people, if you take away their work, they will fall into a deep hole because they do not have anything of their own». Work is here considered to be the central part of all individuals' identity. Similar sentiments were voiced by the Saarland sample: «Why I want to work? I have to have *something* (laughs), how else can I explain it?» However, in the main, interviews revealed considerably different attitudes to work and unemployment that seem to be influenced by the individual situation as well as the social context. Responses thus need to be contextualised and differentiated.

The majority of the East German sample reported being full time and permanent members of the labour market until they were made redundant. Ideologically, work in the GDR was considered a means to contribute to society, whereas having a family, despite various support mechanisms, was considered «private enjoyment». The latter in particular contradicts more recent attempts to value house and family work as equal to employment.

For me, employment was important because I feel re-affirmed through achievements and for us achievements were, above all, that is how we saw ourselves, vocational work. [...] we were

¹ See www.destatis.de (accessed 6 August 2008).

taught values that stated that the most important thing is to contribute to society and to acquire as much knowledge, as many skills and abilities and so on, that one could serve society. I don't think that's a bad thing. We could do with little bit of that today but these other things, the family and that, that was private, that was – when I was still young, it was considered to be private enjoyment. It had to be done somehow, on the side, everybody managed it somehow, but what was important was what one contributed to professional life. (Economist, 57 years, intermittent spells of unemployment)

In contrast, the majority of women in the Saarland experienced the first entry into the labour market, that is the end of their education and/or training, as problematic. It was common to have worked in semi- or unqualified jobs and to have taken time out for child- and other care responsibilities. Problems in establishing a smooth transition into employment thus resulted in a weaker link to the labour market and, unsurprisingly, less interest in its content and in seeking fulfilment via employment (see Doorewaard *et al.*, 2004).

Somehow work didn't really, hm, I didn't really enjoy it, you know. (...) I couldn't learn any occupation. I always wanted to be a hairdresser. And I was released from school six months early. I got married at 18 and I said, I can't do anything other than cleaning and, yes, I didn't think I was capable of doing anything else. (No occupation, 44 years, only just registered as unemployed)

Other women in the Saarland had much stronger attachment to the labour market and derived part of their identity from work. Within the samples, differences are therefore partially explained by the ability to successfully enter the labour market in the first place and develop an occupational or vocational identity. Asked what it is about work that is important one respondent in the Saarland stated:

For the self-confidence definitively, for myself. Of course there is also a financial aspect, you want to earn a bit of money if you go to work, that is clear. But really more for me, for my ego and my self-confidence, because I like doing it. (Assistant nurse, 27 years, 1 year unemployed).

Despite increasing (West) or continued (East) «employment orientation» there were indications that more stereotypical gender relations could be a potential outcome of high unemployment rates amongst women. This would equate to indications in support of the «alternative roles» hypothesis. In the East, unemployed women themselves were reluctant to comment on this aspect, although a minority indicated that they did a greater share of the housework and caring responsibilities now that they were unemployed. It might be speculated that respondents were concerned that any such admission to more traditional, gendered roles might be perceived as agreement with or participation in such roles. Professional interviewees reflected on these developments:

It is more likely to be resignation, that one withdraws somehow, possibly to sit in front of the television, but so to speak into the women's role. I mean that perhaps they do relieve their men of some of the work but everybody who I know has then been very engaged in looking for work.

There are, thus, indications that unemployment can (re)inforce stereotypically gendered roles and, as previously mentioned, East German women without labour market opportunities are now more likely to withdraw from the labour market and start a family at an early age (Dienel *et al.*, 2004). However, the range of activities unemployed women undertook suggests that these developments are peripheral. There are various other forms of work that women use in times of unemployment. The most important pillar of such substitutions is the second labour market, which is all schemes and employment that are fully or partly funded by the state. These «official» routes can include work creation schemes and re-training measures although in the East of Germany these are increasingly hard to come by and can lead to a revolving door syndrome rather than into the labour market (Beck, 2003). This may be due to reforms as part of the Hartz recommendations to move away from passive second labour market measures to a stronger emphasis on activation (see van Berkel and Møller, 2002). In addition, there are individualised solutions such as voluntary work, the black economy and self help groups. These substitutes are now briefly discussed.

A high proportion of the sample had marginal, time-restricted employment or jobs in the illicit economy. In Saxony-Anhalt 55 percent and in the Saarland 40 percent of respondents stated that they had an additional or illicit job. This is a very sensitive subject and such honest responses were surprising considering other research has shown that only a third of respondents relied on undeclared employment (Clasen *et al.*, 1998). Interviewees in Saxony-Anhalt indicated that the main reason for taking on such jobs was because it proved impossible to find full employment or second labour market schemes. Not all women in the Saarland seemed to be aware that they had to hold socially secured employment to be entitled to future employment-related benefits or even a pension. One East German respondent outlined the difficulties of earning whilst at the same time improving her chances of being taken on in a company that runs a project to help senior citizens become IT literate.

I can only do a few hours to help but I don't get paid because I have registered it as my future work placement because they promised this to me but I don't know whether they will keep their promise. Whether they will use me officially for certain tasks once I have my advanced training. (Economist, 57 years, intermittent spells of unemployment)

Some women in the sample also found that doing community or voluntary work can be a substitute for employment as it makes them feel that they «earn» unemployment (or other) benefits. Moreover, as the following quote indicates,

there is considerable overlap between voluntary work and second labour market schemes but neither necessarily lead to full employment.

And I kept trying and by accident I came to this association. And got stuck here. I then contributed a bit on a voluntary basis because it did interest me, the creative work and what else is done here, I've always had an interest in that. And then I made a bit of a – you can't say career but a bit of a job out of it. That was a work creation scheme and ran for two years, it was extended once but now the job centre won't play ball anymore. Now I would have to stay at home for half a year, that is the minimum [for eligibility to funded schemes]. Only then – and whether it will work again, I don't know. (Chemical laboratory worker, 50 years, 4 years intermittent unemployment)

In some institutions voluntary work is thus required before an individual will be considered for a second labour market measure. This means that the unemployed have to become acquainted with the work and procedures of an institution before they will be considered for a scheme, potentially a development towards the establishment of a third labour market. The importance of employment in the East is reflected in the fact that voluntary activity in the East is more concentrated on occupational and private areas than in the West (Gensicke, 2001). At 30 percent, women are less active than men (38%) although this has to be seen in the context of other unpaid work women do, such as childcare and family work (BMFSFJ, 2001). Voluntary activities can be fulfilling and provide acknowledgement outside of the family and for some unemployed women it is the only way to gain status in their community.

Overall, respondents undertook a broad range of activities whilst unemployed. The nature of these activities and therefore the roles that women might adopt were linked to the characteristics of their previous employment biographies, such as the extent to which women had been qualified and been able to participate in the labour market. In addition to social policy influences, the centrality of employment in their lives determines activities and coping strategies of the unemployed.

Changing definitions and identity

To further contextualise women's responses to unemployment, changes in what is expected of the unemployed should be considered. According to GDR rhetoric, there was no unemployment, though this might have been at the cost of an under-use of economic capacity. A standard Western definition would expect an unemployed person to be economically inactive, therefore not working nor receiving payment, whilst actively seeking employment. In the past the unemployed were considered to have an overabundance of time available to them that they struggled to utilise constructively (Fryer and McKenna, 1987; Winefield *et al.*, 1992; Wanberg *et al.*, 1997). «Redundancy» was experienced quite literally.

Now unemployment is a more complex construction as individuals may receive sickness or disability benefits (see Webster, 2001) rather than unemployment benefits, retire early or be in the process of being re-educated or retrained. Mass unemployment, one argument goes, has increased the predictability of unemployment in individual employment biographies, thus at the same time increasing chances to prepare and control such phases by developing potential alternatives (see Morgenroth, 2003). «The unemployed» are expected to pro-actively update their skills depending on what is required in the labour market and be able to prove that they have been looking for employment. In effect, the unemployed are asked to devise multiple roles and responsibilities that could improve their employability. As the above quotes indicate, training, second labour market schemes and other activities to maintain employability are closely entwined and have become part of being unemployed.

One assumption of the «alternative role» hypothesis was that employment and related activities and activities in the home are interchangeable and of equal value (see Jahoda *et al.*, 1972). The argument is undermined by the low esteem the role of the housewife and mother has traditionally been held in. Of the unemployed women interviewed in East Germany 85 percent stated that they could not imagine a life as a housewife. In the Saarland respondents were evenly split between being (or having been) a housewife and not being able to imagine such a life. Many women defined their identity through being a mother and consider motherhood to be their work. Assumptions on the existence of alternative roles thus seem to take as a given stereotypically gendered distributions of housework and caring work and neglect the slow but consistent move towards a stronger inclusion of men into these duties (see Ludwig *et al.*, 2002). 40 percent of the interviewed East German women, compared to 60 percent of the West German sample, stated that they did the majority of the housework in the their household. The East German case is thus a useful tool in revisiting the «alternative roles» debate in that there are suggestions that individuals who display strong attachment to the labour market do not necessarily have or accept «alternative roles», though this would depend on what these roles consisted of. Elizabeth Rudd (2006, 206) states that «different stances on market values shaped the meanings of women's family work and men's breadwinning, had practical consequences for the division of labour within marriage, and shaped lived experiences of gender». The locus, control and/or ability to self-determine such alternative roles become important. Whilst women might reject what they consider to be housewives' roles located in the home, they may choose to establish alternative roles in various locations, that are acceptable to them and that can be work based in the broadest sense of the term.

Employment and lifestyle as outlined above, as well as various other aspects such as gender, culture, region, etc. are important aspects of identity formation (compare Colombo and Senatore, 2005). The term «identity» is used in various dimensions and analytical frameworks dealing with consciousness, feel-

ings of belonging and emotional ties. The idea of identity formation as a dialectical process embedded in social constructions (see Tennant, 1997) is drawn on as it enables the necessary concentration on social developments, social identities and different social contexts. Based on research with unemployed British working class men, Sara Willott and Christine Griffin (2004) have argued that a sense of identity, in their case as a breadwinner, is not based on their current situation but on an understanding and expectation of what «should» be. For the unemployed, past employment experiences can be more influential on their identity than their current state of redundancy. Moreover, there seems to be «a crucial interrelationship between masculine and feminine identities in the perpetuation of the *status quo*» of gender relations (*ibid*, 2004: 64). While the *status quo* for Sara Willott and Christine Griffin's sample was based on a male breadwinner model, this would not necessarily be the case for younger generations or indeed for individuals who have not experienced such a gender regime.

Considered to be omnipresent yet elusive (Woderich, 2000), the existence and specificities of an East German identity has been ascribed to socialisation in the GDR as well as a result of unification and transformation (Pollack and Pickel, 1998). Characteristics of the East German identity include a mix of the stereotypical, for example less acceptance of a free enterprise economy, but also more unexpected views such as a higher degree of optimism concerning technical advances, a higher evaluation of economic growth, of work and performance or efficiency (Woderich, 2000). Many (stereotypical) East German characteristics are associated with the workplace or with personal networks and include warm-heartedness, solidarity, honesty and the lack of defined status differences (Woderich, 2000). These are typical of a community identity which is often accompanied by notions of in-group/out-group opposition (see Colombo and Senatore, 2005). Current values reflect core GDR rhetorical tools of a «socialist state of workers» and their importance in building a collective identity (Gibas, 1999). Constantly threatening unemployment and reductions in possibilities for social security or any return into the labour market when out of work make unemployment seemingly all-encompassing. Implications for the identity and self-esteem of individuals seem inevitable (Blancke and Schmid, 2000). For the interviewed women their particular relationship with work means that the effects of unemployment on their lives are severe. One interviewee explained this in direct comparison to her views of West German women.

I mean, when the Wende came we were all younger than 40, the best age really, where in the western Länder or in the old Bundesländer women only start to work [again]. For us our life just went to pieces, we were discarded. (Chemical engineer, 48 years, currently 1 year unemployed)

As indicated with the maintenance of the *status quo* (Willott and Griffin, 2004), the unemployed rely on the idea or ideal of employment for the develop-

ment or continuation of their identity, often the more intensely so the less actual chances of real employment they encounter (Morgenroth, 2003). Asked what she perceived the main function of employment to be, one responded commented:

On the one hand it is to earn money and on the other hand, and this is probably more important for me, I need self-confirmation, a sense of self-worth. I have always been fixated on employment. And now that is missing. (Chemical laboratory worker, 44 years, 1 year unemployed)

Such responses to unemployment are typical in that they are comparable to those displayed in other studies (see Jahoda *et al.*, 1972; Jahoda, 1982, Waters, 2007). Of the sample interviewed in the present study, 30 percent of East German women stated that their current feeling towards unemployment was one of pressure and of being emotionally «down» (none in the West), with an additional 15 percent feeling depressed or angry (none in the West). 30 percent of the Western sample (10% East) stated that they did not have problems with their current situation and felt reasonably relaxed. These results suggest precariousness in the situation of unemployed women in the East that does not exist to the same degree in the Western sample. It could be speculated that employment is a more important aspect of an Eastern identity and therefore harder to replace. In this situation, the organisation of household work does not seem to mediate the psychological impact of unemployment (Gallie *et al.*, 1994), especially if employment is a central aspect of women's life plans.

Conclusions

In looking at women's responses to unemployment this paper has used the example of East Germany to revisit the debate on «alternative roles». It has been shown that the combination of socialisation in the GDR, where the full inclusion of women into the labour market was expected, and the unequal situation in unified Germany have left East German women in a difficult position. Unemployment in post-unification Germany is a major concern, individually and socially, and is a central part of the situation that undermines interviewees' individual and social identity. A 40-year existence of two German states, which developed into fundamentally different societies and populations, has revealed the long-term impact of state-driven policies on individual lives and expectations. This has resulted in attitudes and identification with work that differs considerably from the way in which academic (or other) debates theoretically conceptualise gender and employment.

Comparing East and West German examples provides new evidence on the debate on «alternative roles» for women in that it questions the viability of alternatives. Without taking into consideration the gendered assumptions that women work less, have career brakes and can struggle to achieve equal status in

the labour market, it was assumed in the past that women would suffer less on being made redundant because they had «alternative roles» such as motherhood and housewife to fall back on. East German women's employment biographies indicate that this is not the case where women built their lives and ambitions around employment. Gender is thus constructed in a way that may not fit with understandings of «women's work» as having equal value or being equivalent to stereotypical, male and full-time employment.

East German women do not necessarily reject traditional «alternatives» such as motherhood and the household, but reveal that there are additional roles associated directly or indirectly with the labour market and which are therefore considered to be work-based. They can contribute significantly to individuals' identity and self esteem. The examples mentioned in this paper referred to voluntary activities and the illicit economy in particular. It is therefore important to differentiate what alternative roles refer to: are they work-based? Do they tend to be gendered choices? And to what extent are they linked to the educational and vocational choices made when (attempting) to enter or advance in the labour market? Further research should be conducted on the work-based alternatives that are used and could be used by women and men. Whilst the East Germany case has proven useful to raise some of these questions, enquiries elsewhere could investigate to what extent alternative roles in a range of public and private settings could contribute to a reduction in the negative, social and psychological consequences of unemployment.

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