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Editorial

Contemporary health and social challenges increasingly demonstrate that human well-being cannot be understood independently of the social, institutional and environmental conditions in which individuals and communities' function. Vulnerability may emerge at different stages of life and in different contexts – through adverse childhood experiences, health risks, unemployment, caregiving responsibilities, extraordinary events or new forms of threat associated with technological development. At the same time, these challenges reveal the importance of prevention, preparedness, accessible support systems and effective institutional responses.

The present issue of *Health & Humanity* reflects this multidimensional perspective by bringing together contributions situated at the intersection of health, social sciences, law and helping professions. Despite their thematic diversity, the studies share an interest in factors that influence the capacity of individuals and communities to respond to risk, maintain quality of life and mobilise available resources.

Several contributions draw attention to vulnerability across the life course. The relationship between adverse childhood experiences and quality of life in young adulthood highlights the possible long-term relevance of early experiences for psychological and social well-being. Questions of responsibility and preparedness also emerge in the context of population ageing, where willingness to provide family care does not necessarily correspond with sufficient practical, financial or emotional preparedness. Similarly, the transition from unemployment to employment demonstrates that formal labour-market integration does not automatically eliminate social vulnerability, particularly during the period before financial stability is achieved.

Prevention and preparedness constitute another connecting dimension of this issue. The contribution addressing human papillomavirus vaccination points to the significance of health literacy, credible information and accessible preventive interventions. The analysis of emergencies in the Komárno district broadens this perspective from the individual to the community level and underlines the relevance of communication, institutional trust, social cohesion and psychosocial preparedness in crisis situations.

The changing nature of contemporary risks is further reflected in the analysis of cybercrime and its legal regulation. Digitalisation creates new forms of vulnerability and simultaneously places increasing demands on the adaptability of legal frameworks, international cooperation and mechanisms for securing and exchanging electronic evidence.

Taken together, the contributions illustrate that vulnerability is rarely determined by a single factor. Rather, it develops through the interaction of individual experience, social relationships, material resources, information, institutional arrangements and broader societal conditions. The studies presented in this issue therefore reinforce the importance of interdisciplinary approaches that connect prevention, evidence-based intervention, social support and institutional responsibility. Such perspectives are essential for understanding contemporary challenges to health and human well-being and for developing responses that are both professionally grounded and socially sustainable.

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Bridging the Gap to the First Salary: Social Vulnerability During the Transition from Unemployment to Employment

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Abstract

The article focuses on the transition from unemployment to employment from the perspective of unemployed persons in the District of Rožňava. Although obtaining employment is generally considered a successful outcome of labour market integration, less attention has been paid to the challenges associated with the period between entering employment and receiving the first salary. This transition may represent a source of social vulnerability, particularly for individuals with limited financial resources and support networks. The qualitative research, based on Kathy Charmaz's Constructivist Grounded Theory, explores the experiences, challenges and coping strategies of unemployed persons during this transition. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analysed using initial, focused and theoretical coding. The findings indicate that individuals may remain socially vulnerable despite entering employment and that labour market integration extends beyond obtaining a job to include a transitional period of resource mobilisation and employment sustainability until financial stability is achieved. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of employment transitions and provides implications for social work practice and employment support services.

Keywords: unemployment, transition to employment, labour market integration, social vulnerability, constructivist grounded theory, social work

Introduction

“Unemployment represents a complex social phenomenon that affects individuals and societies worldwide. Its impact on human lives can be severe, causing economic instability, social disorientation and psychological stress. Therefore, it is important to understand the concept of unemployment and its various aspects in order to address this problem effectively” (Dirgová, 2024, p. 7).

Employment represents an important component of social integration, economic security and quality of life. In addition to providing financial resources, it enables participation in social life, supports the development of social relationships and contributes to the fulfilment of individual life aspirations.

For people experiencing unemployment, obtaining employment often represents a significant life transition associated with expectations of improved living conditions, greater independence and increased social participation.

The transition from unemployment to employment is generally perceived as a positive outcome of labour market integration. However, the process of entering employment is not always straightforward and may involve a range of challenges influencing an individual's ability to successfully adapt to a new life situation. Professional experience from employment services

suggests that obtaining a job offer does not automatically guarantee successful entry into employment. Individuals may encounter financial, social and organisational difficulties related to transportation, work equipment, accommodation, family responsibilities or adaptation to a new work environment.

Particular attention should be paid to the period immediately following entry into employment, when individuals face new demands and responsibilities while not yet having access to regular employment income. For some unemployed persons, this period may represent a significant burden requiring the mobilisation of personal, family and community resources. Understanding how individuals experience and manage this transition may contribute to a deeper understanding of labour market integration as a social process and provide valuable insights for social work practice.

Although unemployment, employability and labour market participation have received considerable attention in research and professional discourse, less attention has been paid to the subjective experiences of unemployed persons during the transition from unemployment to employment. Exploring these experiences may help identify factors that facilitate or hinder successful labour market integration and reveal aspects of social vulnerability that remain insufficiently recognised within employment support systems.

The main aim of this paper is to explore the transition from unemployment to employment from the perspective of unemployed persons in the District of Rožňava and to develop a theoretical understanding of the processes through which they experience and manage this transition. Particular attention is paid to the challenges, resources and coping strategies associated with entering employment.

The findings of the study may contribute to a better understanding of labour market integration among unemployed persons and support the development of social work interventions and employment services that respond more effectively to the needs of individuals during their transition to employment.

The main research question was formulated as follows:

MRQ: How do unemployed persons experience and manage the transition from unemployment to employment?

To address the main research question, the following sub-questions were established:

RQ1: What challenges emerge during the transition from unemployment to employment?

RQ2: What resources and coping strategies do unemployed persons mobilise during this transition?

RQ3: What meanings do unemployed persons attribute to their transition into employment?

Theoretical Basis

Unemployment represents one of the most significant social and economic challenges affecting contemporary societies. Beyond the loss of income, unemployment may influence multiple dimensions of human life, including social participation, interpersonal relationships, psychological well-being and social functioning. From the perspective of social work, unemployment is associated with increased risks of social vulnerability and may negatively affect an individual's ability to maintain social roles, fulfil obligations and participate fully in community life (Dirgová, 2024).

The consequences of unemployment cannot be understood solely through economic deprivation. Contemporary research suggests that unemployment may affect social identity, social roles and interpersonal relationships, thereby influencing broader processes of social integration. Individuals experiencing unemployment often face challenges related to self-esteem, social recognition and a sense of belonging within society. The disruption of employment may therefore represent not only a loss of income but also a disruption of established social identities and patterns of participation in social life (Giustozzi, 2023a; Giustozzi, 2023b).

At the same time, employment fulfils functions that extend beyond economic security. Employment provides opportunities for social participation, facilitates the development of social networks and contributes to an individual's integration into society. Through employment, individuals gain access to social resources, social recognition and opportunities for personal development. Contemporary studies emphasise that employment remains one of the most important mechanisms through which social integration is generated and maintained in modern societies (Grimm, Hense & Vogel, 2023).

For this reason, the transition from unemployment to employment is generally perceived as a positive outcome of labour market integration. Entering employment is commonly associated with expectations of improved economic circumstances, increased independence and enhanced social participation. However, the transition from unemployment to employment should not be understood as a simple or linear process. Although employment may reduce economic insecurity in the long term, the initial phase of labour market integration may itself create new forms of vulnerability and uncertainty (Gebel & Gundert, 2023).

Research indicates that transitions from unemployment to employment are closely linked to changes in poverty risks and economic security. While obtaining employment generally reduces the likelihood of income poverty, individuals may continue to experience financial strain during the initial period following labour market entry. In particular, persons with limited economic resources may encounter difficulties associated with meeting immediate financial demands before receiving their first salary (Gebel & Gundert, 2023).

Despite its practical importance, the period between entering employment and receiving the first wage remains relatively underexplored within existing literature. Labour market research frequently focuses on employability, unemployment duration or employment outcomes, while less attention has been devoted to the financial and practical demands associated with entering employment. These demands may include transportation costs, accommodation expenses, work equipment, meals or mandatory medical examinations. For individuals with limited financial

resources, such requirements may create a period of increased economic insecurity despite successful labour market entry (Gebel & Gundert, 2023).

The transition from unemployment to employment is not limited to obtaining a job offer or signing an employment contract. For many individuals, it involves a period of adjustment during which new obligations emerge before regular employment income becomes available. The interval between entering employment and receiving the first wage may require individuals to manage transportation costs, accommodation expenses, work-related equipment, meals and other expenditures associated with labour market participation. Although employment is generally regarded as a pathway out of economic insecurity, these initial demands may create a temporary period of financial strain and social vulnerability, particularly among individuals with limited economic resources. From this perspective, successful labour market integration should be understood not only as obtaining employment but also as the ability to sustain employment during the transition period preceding the first salary.

Particular attention should be paid to the subjective experience of entering employment. While labour market statistics typically classify individuals as successfully integrated once employment has been obtained, considerably less attention has been devoted to how individuals themselves experience this transition. The period between accepting employment and receiving the first wage may involve uncertainty, financial pressure and the mobilisation of personal and social resources. Understanding these experiences is particularly important for social work because successful labour market integration cannot be reduced solely to obtaining a job but also involves the ability to sustain employment under changing social and economic conditions. Despite its practical significance, this transition remains insufficiently explored from the perspective of unemployed persons themselves.

Methodology

The main objective of the conducted qualitative research was to explore the transition from unemployment to employment from the perspective of unemployed persons in the District of Rožňava. „The formulation of the research objective represents an important step in narrowing and specifying the research problem, thereby providing direction for the entire research process“. (Hricová, Ondráš, Urban, 2023, p. 16).

The purpose of the research was to develop a theoretical understanding of the transition from unemployment to employment as experienced by unemployed persons. Particular attention was paid to the financial and social demands associated with entering employment, especially during the period between starting work and receiving the first salary. Although obtaining employment is generally perceived as a successful outcome of labour market integration, individuals may simultaneously face transportation costs, accommodation expenses, work-related equipment costs, medical examinations and other expenditures connected with entering employment. For persons with limited financial resources, these demands may create a paradoxical situation in which employment represents both an opportunity for social integration and a source of temporary social vulnerability. The study therefore sought to explore how unemployed persons experienced and managed this transition and how these circumstances influenced their integration into employment.

In line with the main research objective, the following partial objectives were established:

- to identify the challenges experienced by unemployed persons during the transition from unemployment to employment,
- to explore the resources and coping strategies used by unemployed persons when adapting to employment,
- to examine the meanings that unemployed persons attribute to their transition from unemployment to employment.

The research was based on Kathy Charmaz's Constructivist Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2014). This methodological approach enables the exploration of social processes through the perspectives of participants and supports the development of theoretical explanations grounded in empirical data. Constructivist Grounded Theory assumes that meanings emerge through interaction between the researcher and participants and that theoretical concepts are developed through the interpretation of participants' experiences (Charmaz, 2017).

Given the nature of the research objectives, a qualitative research design was selected. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which provided participants with sufficient space to describe their experiences, perceptions and interpretations of the transition from unemployment to employment.

One of the advantages of qualitative research lies in the possibility of direct interaction with participants, allowing the researcher to capture not only verbal content but also communication style, intonation and accompanying behavioural expressions. These aspects may contribute to a deeper understanding and interpretation of the studied phenomenon than would be possible through quantitative research procedures (Selická, 2015).

The research was conducted among unemployed persons residing in the District of Rožňava who had recently entered employment or had previous experience with the transition from unemployment to employment. „Purposive sampling was employed because it enables the deliberate selection of participants who possess key characteristics relevant to the studied phenomenon and who belong to the population of interest“ (Masaryk, 2021, pp. 39–40). Eligibility criteria required experience of unemployment followed by entry into employment. To facilitate access to individuals who met these criteria, purposive sampling was supplemented by snowball sampling, whereby participants recommended other individuals with relevant experiences. As categories began to emerge from the data, theoretical sampling was employed to seek participants who could contribute to the further development of emerging categories, elaborate their properties and relationships, and refine the evolving theoretical explanation (Charmaz, 2014).

The final research sample consisted of 12 participants. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, meaning that no substantially new properties of the emerging categories were identified (Charmaz, 2014).

Theoretical saturation was considered achieved when additional interviews no longer contributed new properties, dimensions or relationships to the emerging categories. The sample consisted of 12 participants aged between 27 and 58 years. Eight participants were women and four were men. With regard to educational attainment, two participants had completed primary education, eight had completed secondary education and two held university degrees. Participants had experienced varying durations of unemployment prior to entering employment,

ranging from short-term unemployment to longer periods of labour market exclusion. The diversity of participants in terms of age, gender and educational background contributed to capturing a range of experiences related to the transition from unemployment to employment and supported the development of emerging categories during theoretical sampling. The interview guide focused on participants' experiences with entering employment, adaptation to a new work environment, perceived challenges, available sources of support and the strategies they used to manage changing life circumstances. The interviews lasted between 35 and 55 minutes and were conducted face-to-face at locations agreed upon with the participants. Particular attention was devoted to the financial demands associated with entering employment, including transportation costs, accommodation expenses, work-related expenditures and the period preceding the receipt of the first salary. With participants' consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data analysis was conducted using initial coding, focused coding and theoretical coding in accordance with the procedures proposed by Charmaz (2014). Throughout the analytical process, the constant comparative method and memo-writing were employed to support theoretical sensitivity, category development and theoretical integration (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014).

The study was guided by a sensitizing concept related to the transition from unemployment to employment and the financial and social challenges associated with entering employment. In accordance with the principles of Constructivist Grounded Theory, the sensitizing concept served as an initial point of orientation rather than a predetermined explanatory framework.

Given the constructivist orientation of the study, the researcher acknowledged that data and meanings were co-constructed through interactions with participants. Reflexive memo-writing was employed throughout the research process to examine emerging interpretations and enhance theoretical sensitivity.

The research was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of qualitative social research. Participation in the study was voluntary and based on written informed consent obtained prior to each interview.

Prior to each interview, participants were informed about the purpose of the research, the procedures of data collection and analysis, the confidentiality of the collected information and their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without any consequences.

Special attention was devoted to the protection of participants' privacy and anonymity. All identifying information was removed from interview transcripts and research records. The collected data were used exclusively for scientific purposes and stored in a secure manner accessible only to the researcher.

Given that the study focused on individuals who may experience economic hardship and social vulnerability, particular emphasis was placed on respecting participants' dignity, autonomy and emotional well-being throughout the research process.

Results

Following the data collection and analysis procedures described in the methodology section, the interview data were analysed using initial coding, focused coding and theoretical coding in accordance with the principles of Constructivist Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2014). The aim

of this stage of the research was to identify the processes through which unemployed persons experienced and managed the transition from unemployment to employment and to develop a theoretical explanation grounded in participants' experiences.

The analysis resulted in the identification of 87 initial codes, which were subsequently condensed into 16 focused codes and four analytical categories. Through theoretical coding, these categories were integrated into a central explanatory process referred to as ***Bridging the Gap to the First Salary***.

The findings suggest that participants did not perceive labour market integration as completed upon obtaining employment. Instead, they described a transitional period characterised by financial pressure, uncertainty and the need to mobilise available resources until regular employment income became available.

1.Initial Coding

During the initial coding phase, 87 initial codes were identified from participants' narratives. These codes reflected various aspects of participants' experiences related to obtaining employment, financial demands associated with entering employment, available sources of support and adaptation to new work-related responsibilities. Through constant comparison, the initial codes were grouped into four preliminary coding clusters representing recurrent patterns across participants' narratives. These coding clusters served as an intermediate analytical step between the initial coding process and the development of focused codes and conceptual categories.

Table 1 Distribution of Initial Codes Across Coding Clusters

Coding Cluster	Number of Codes	Examples of Initial Codes
Meaning of employment	21	feeling useful again, regaining dignity, becoming independent, looking towards the future
Financial demands of employment entry	28	transportation costs, work clothing, accommodation expenses, meals, medical examinations
Sources of support	19	family support, borrowing money, help from friends, practical assistance
Adaptation and persistence	19	enduring difficulties, adjusting to work routines, maintaining motivation, remaining employed

Source: own research

The distribution of initial codes revealed that participants' experiences extended beyond obtaining employment itself. While employment was generally perceived as a positive life event associated with hope, independence and future opportunities, participants simultaneously described a range of financial and practical demands emerging during the initial period of employment. These demands frequently required the mobilisation of support resources and the adoption of coping strategies aimed at maintaining employment until the first salary was

received. The coding clusters therefore suggested that the transition from unemployment to employment was experienced not as a single event, but as a dynamic process involving adaptation, resource mobilisation and the management of temporary financial vulnerability.

2. Focused Coding and Category Development

Through focused coding, the initial codes were compared, refined and grouped according to their conceptual similarities. The analytical process revealed that participants' experiences were organised around four interconnected dimensions: the meaning attributed to employment, the financial demands associated with entering employment, the mobilisation of support resources and the effort to sustain employment despite continuing economic pressure. These categories did not emerge independently but formed interconnected components of the transition process.

Table 2 Focused Codes and Emerging Categories

Focused Codes	Emerging Category
Feeling useful again; Regaining independence; Looking towards the future	Employment as a New Beginning
Paying for transportation; Purchasing work clothing; Medical examinations; Accommodation expenses	Encountering the Costs of Employment Entry
Receiving support from family; Borrowing money; Budgeting; Practical assistance	Mobilising Support and Coping Resources
Enduring financial strain; Remaining employed despite difficulties; Adapting to new responsibilities	Maintaining Employment Despite Financial Pressure

Source: own research

Taken together, the findings indicate that unemployed persons experience the transition from unemployment to employment as a process of confronting employment-entry costs, mobilising available support resources and maintaining employment despite temporary financial pressure. Employment was perceived as a positive life transition; however, successful integration depended on participants' ability to bridge the period between employment entry and receipt of the first salary.

The category *Encountering the Costs of Employment Entry* primarily addressed **RQ1** by identifying the challenges emerging during the transition to employment. The category *Mobilising Support and Coping Resources* provided answers to **RQ2** by illustrating how participants managed these challenges. The category *Employment as a New Beginning* addressed **RQ3** by capturing the meanings participants attributed to employment.

Together, these categories contributed to answering the main research question concerning how unemployed persons experience and manage the transition from unemployment to employment.

▪ Employment as a New Beginning

Participants consistently described employment as a significant turning point in their lives. Obtaining employment represented not only a source of future income but also the restoration of self-worth, social recognition and personal autonomy. Employment was perceived as an

opportunity to regain control over one's life and to move beyond the uncertainty associated with unemployment. As one participant explained: *"When I got the job, I finally felt that things were moving forward."* (P2)

For other participants, employment signified a return to normality after a prolonged period of unemployment. Participants associated employment with responsibility, independence and the possibility of planning for the future. The findings indicate that employment fulfilled not only economic functions but also important psychosocial functions related to identity and social inclusion.

▪ Encountering the Costs of Employment Entry

Although participants viewed employment positively, obtaining employment simultaneously generated a series of financial obligations. Transportation costs emerged as one of the most frequently reported challenges, particularly among participants commuting to neighbouring towns or industrial zones. Additional expenses included work clothing, meals, accommodation and mandatory medical examinations.

Several participants described a discrepancy between the formal achievement of employment and their continued economic insecurity. *"I already had a job, but I still had no money."* (P5) Another participant stated: *"The first month was the hardest. I had to pay for travelling, lunches and work clothes before I received any salary."* (P8)

The findings suggest that the transition into employment may create a temporary period of financial strain during which individuals remain economically vulnerable despite successfully entering the labour market.

▪ Mobilising Support and Coping Resources

Participants rarely managed the transition period entirely on their own. Family members, partners and friends represented important sources of financial, practical and emotional support. Participants frequently described borrowing money, receiving assistance with transportation or relying on temporary accommodation arrangements in order to maintain employment. *"Without my parents helping me with transport costs, I probably would not have managed the first weeks."* (P7)

Participants also described personal coping strategies such as careful budgeting, reducing non-essential expenses and prioritising work-related costs over other household expenditures. These findings indicate that labour market integration is influenced not only by individual motivation but also by the availability of social resources that can be mobilised during periods of temporary economic hardship.

The analysis further revealed that participants rarely relied on a single source of support. Instead, they combined multiple forms of assistance depending on their individual circumstances. Family support emerged as the most significant resource, particularly in relation to transportation costs, temporary financial assistance and accommodation arrangements. Participants also demonstrated active coping strategies aimed at maintaining employment despite limited resources. These strategies included reducing household expenditures, postponing non-essential purchases and prioritising expenses directly related to employment.

“Every euro went towards getting to work. Everything else had to wait.” (P6) “I borrowed money from my brother because I knew that if I missed work, I could lose the job.” (P11)

The findings suggest that labour market integration is not solely an individual process but also a socially embedded one. Access to supportive relationships significantly influenced participants’ ability to overcome challenges during the transition period.

▪ Maintaining Employment Despite Financial Pressure

The final category integrated participants’ efforts to remain employed despite continuing financial pressure and uncertainty. Although employment was associated with positive expectations, participants frequently described the first weeks after entering employment as a period requiring perseverance and adaptation. *“I knew it would get better once the salary arrived, but until then it was about holding on and not giving up.” (P10)*

Participants emphasised determination, patience and responsibility as important factors enabling them to overcome difficulties associated with the transition period. The findings suggest that successful labour market integration involves more than obtaining employment; it also requires the capacity to sustain employment until financial stability is achieved. Participants frequently described the transition period as requiring persistence and resilience. Maintaining employment was often perceived as an investment in future stability rather than an immediate improvement in living conditions. Participants accepted temporary hardship because they anticipated that regular employment income would eventually improve their situation.

“I kept telling myself that the first salary would change everything.” (P1) “It was difficult, but quitting was not an option because I had already come too far.” (P12)

This finding highlights an important distinction between obtaining employment and achieving labour market stability. While employment represented a significant milestone, participants perceived stability as something that would only be achieved after successfully overcoming the transition period.

3.Theoretical Coding

The aim of theoretical coding was to identify relationships among the emerging categories and to develop a theoretical explanation of the studied phenomenon.

Table 3 Development of the Emerging Theory

Category	Condition	Interaction	Consequence
Employment as a New Beginning	Obtaining employment	Developing expectations of change and improvement	Increased motivation and future orientation
Encountering the Costs of Employment Entry	Beginning employment	Facing immediate financial and practical demands	Financial pressure and uncertainty
Mobilising Support and Coping Resources	Insufficient financial resources	Seeking support and implementing coping strategies	Temporary stabilisation of the situation

Category	Condition	Interaction	Consequence
Maintaining Employment Despite Financial Pressure	Continuing economic strain	Persisting in employment and adapting to new conditions	Progress towards financial stability

Source: own research

Theoretical coding demonstrated that the identified categories did not operate independently but formed a coherent social process. Participants first perceived employment as a new beginning and an opportunity to improve their lives. Subsequently, they encountered the financial demands associated with entering employment. In response to these challenges, they mobilised personal and social resources that enabled them to cope with emerging difficulties and maintain employment despite continuing economic pressure.

Core Category: Bridging the Gap to the First Salary

Theoretical coding revealed that all identified categories were interconnected through a central process referred to as **Bridging the Gap to the First Salary**. This core category emerged across all interviews and represented the principal process through which participants experienced the transition from unemployment to employment.

Unlike the other categories, which described specific dimensions of participants' experiences, the core category integrated all categories into a single explanatory framework. It captured the period between obtaining employment and receiving the first salary, during which participants faced financial demands, mobilised available resources and attempted to maintain employment despite ongoing economic pressure.

The category emerged repeatedly regardless of participants' age, gender, educational background or employment history. Although individual circumstances varied, all participants described some form of adjustment period between entering employment and achieving financial stability. This recurring pattern suggested that the transition was not completed by obtaining employment itself but continued until regular income became available.

"Getting the job was only the first step. The real challenge started afterwards." (P4)

Participants initially perceived employment as a new beginning associated with hope, independence and improved life prospects. However, these positive expectations were quickly confronted by the practical realities of entering employment. Transportation expenses, accommodation costs, work clothing, meals and other work-related expenditures created immediate financial demands that had to be addressed before the first salary was received.

In response to these challenges, participants mobilised a variety of resources and coping strategies. Family support, informal financial assistance, borrowing money and careful budgeting enabled many participants to continue working despite limited financial means. The availability of such resources often determined whether participants were able to successfully navigate the transition period. *"Without help from my family, I would not have managed to stay in the job long enough to get paid." (P7)*

The findings indicate that the transition from unemployment to employment represents a process characterised by temporary social vulnerability. Participants formally left

unemployment but had not yet achieved economic security. They occupied an intermediate position in which employment provided future prospects but not immediate financial stability. This intermediate position was reflected in participants' accounts of simultaneously experiencing employment and economic insecurity. As one participant explained: "*I was working every day, but financially I still felt unemployed because I had not received any salary yet.*" (P9)

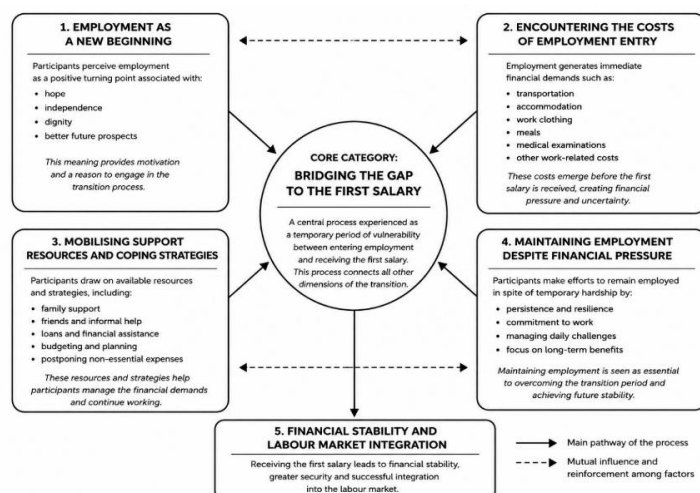
The core category therefore explains how participants navigated this intermediate period. It links the meaning attributed to employment, the financial demands of employment entry, the mobilisation of support resources and the effort to maintain employment into a coherent process. From this perspective, labour market integration should not be understood as a single event but as a gradual process extending beyond the first day of employment.

Building on this finding, the emerging theory further suggests that participants occupied a transitional social position situated between unemployment and financial self-sufficiency.

Although they had formally entered employment, many continued to experience conditions commonly associated with unemployment, including financial insecurity, dependence on family support and uncertainty regarding their ability to meet everyday expenses. The transition was therefore characterised by a discrepancy between formal labour market status and actual economic circumstances. *Bridging the Gap to the First Salary* represented a process through which participants gradually transformed employment from a symbolic achievement into a source of tangible economic stability.

The findings further indicate that employment sustainability during this period was shaped by the availability of personal, family and social resources. Access to financial assistance, practical support and coping resources enabled participants to manage employment-entry costs and remain employed until regular income became available. The ability to mobilise such resources emerged as an important factor facilitating the transition towards financial stability and long-term labour market integration. Figure 1 was developed through theoretical coding and illustrates the relationships among the categories identified during the analysis.

Figure 1 Emerging Theoretical Model of The Transition from Unemployment to Employment



Source: own research

The model illustrates that labour market integration is not completed when employment is obtained. Rather, it develops through a sequence of interconnected processes culminating in financial stability.

The core category, Bridging the Gap to the First Salary, represents the mechanism linking participants' expectations, challenges, resources and adaptation strategies into a coherent process of employment sustainability.

Discussion

The present study suggests that obtaining employment represents only one stage of labour market integration. The findings indicate that the transition continues beyond labour market entry and includes a period during which individuals strive to achieve financial stability and employment sustainability. While employment is commonly viewed as the successful outcome of labour market activation, the findings suggest that formal employment status does not necessarily coincide with immediate economic security. This distinction contributes to current discussions on labour market integration by highlighting the complexity of transitions from unemployment to employment and the challenges that may persist despite successful labour market entry.

The psychosocial significance attributed to employment by participants corresponds with contemporary research demonstrating that employment fulfils functions extending beyond income generation. Employment has been associated with improvements in wellbeing, self-esteem, social participation and identity reconstruction following periods of unemployment (Gedikli et al., 2023; Giustozzi, 2023a). Comparable findings have been reported by Grimm, Hense and Vogel (2023), who emphasise the role of employment as an important mechanism of social integration and societal participation. From this perspective, employment may be understood not only as an economic resource but also as a source of social recognition, personal agency and renewed future orientation.

The present findings extend existing knowledge by drawing attention to a relatively underexplored stage of labour market integration. Existing labour market policies and activation measures predominantly focus on facilitating access to employment, whereas considerably less attention has been devoted to the period immediately following employment entry.

The findings suggest that individuals may remain vulnerable despite successfully leaving unemployment. This interpretation aligns with evidence presented by Gebel and Gundert (2023), who demonstrated that labour market transitions may continue to be accompanied by economic strain even after employment has been secured. The present study contributes to this discussion by highlighting the discrepancy that may emerge between formal labour market participation and actual economic stability during the initial phase of employment.

These findings further suggest that social vulnerability should not be viewed solely as a condition associated with unemployment. Rather, vulnerability may persist during labour market transitions when individuals continue to experience financial insecurity despite holding paid employment. This perspective broadens current understandings of social vulnerability by emphasising its dynamic nature and by recognising that economically precarious situations may also emerge among individuals who have formally entered the labour market.

Another important contribution of the study concerns the role of social relationships in facilitating successful labour market transitions. The findings highlight that labour market integration is influenced not only by individual motivation and employability but also by the availability of supportive social environments. Similar conclusions were reached by Grimm, Hense and Vogel (2023), who emphasised the importance of social participation and social connectedness in processes of labour market integration. The present findings indicate that supportive interpersonal relationships may function as important protective resources that help individuals navigate periods of economic uncertainty and maintain employment during the transition process.

The study also contributes to broader discussions concerning adaptation during employment transitions. Rather than conceptualising labour market integration as a passive consequence of obtaining employment, the findings suggest that it involves an active process of adjustment to changing economic and social circumstances. This interpretation corresponds with contemporary perspectives that emphasise the interaction between structural labour market conditions and individual capacities to respond to challenges associated with employment transitions.

The emerging theory, conceptualised as *Bridging the Gap to the First Salary*, offers a theoretical explanation of how individuals experience and manage the period between employment entry and the achievement of financial stability. The theoretical contribution of the emerging theory lies in its explanation of how formally unemployed individuals transform employment acquisition into sustainable labour market participation.

Rather than conceptualising labour market integration as a discrete outcome, the theory conceptualises it as a process of resource mobilisation, adaptation and persistence through which individuals gradually convert symbolic employment status into actual economic security. The findings therefore suggest that labour market integration should be understood not merely as obtaining employment but as achieving the capacity to sustain employment until financial stability is established.

While previous research has predominantly focused on unemployment, employability and labour market participation, the present findings highlight the importance of examining what occurs after employment has been obtained. The study therefore expands existing knowledge by identifying a distinct transitional phase characterised by temporary social vulnerability, uncertainty and the need to mobilise available resources in order to achieve sustainable labour market integration. Building upon this theoretical explanation, the present study identifies a transitional mechanism linking formal employment status and actual economic security. The concept of *Bridging the Gap to the First Salary* extends existing understandings of labour market integration by demonstrating that successful integration depends not only on obtaining employment but also on the ability to mobilise resources and sustain employment during a period of temporary social vulnerability.

From a social work perspective, the emerging theory contributes to a broader understanding of labour market integration as a process that extends beyond obtaining employment. It demonstrates how temporary social vulnerability may persist despite formal labour market participation and draws attention to the interaction between economic resources, social support and employment sustainability. This interpretation is further illustrated by one participant's

observation that *“Getting the job did not immediately change my situation. The real change came when I received my first salary and no longer needed help from others.”* (P3)

From a social work perspective, the results highlight the importance of recognising the period immediately following labour market entry as a potentially vulnerable phase requiring targeted attention. Existing employment support measures frequently focus on obtaining employment, whereas considerably less attention is devoted to challenges emerging during the initial phase of employment. The findings point to the need for a broader understanding of employment support that extends beyond job placement alone and takes into account the circumstances affecting individuals after employment has been secured.

Practical support measures may include transportation subsidies, reimbursement of employment-entry expenses, temporary financial assistance and coordinated interventions aimed at reducing the risk of employment discontinuation.

Particular attention should be devoted to individuals with limited financial resources and restricted access to informal support networks, as these circumstances may increase vulnerability despite successful labour market entry. Furthermore, closer cooperation between employment services, social workers and local support organisations may facilitate the identification of individuals at risk and enable the provision of timely assistance during this transition period.

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. The study was conducted among participants residing in the District of Rožňava and reflects their subjective experiences of the transition from unemployment to employment. Consequently, the findings are not intended to provide statistical generalisation but rather an in-depth understanding of the studied phenomenon. Future research could examine whether similar experiences occur in different labour market contexts, geographical regions or occupational sectors. Additional research may also explore the role of institutional support mechanisms in promoting sustainable labour market integration and reducing vulnerability during employment transitions.

Conclusion

The findings reveal that obtaining employment does not automatically result in economic stability or complete labour market integration. Although participants successfully entered employment, they frequently continued to experience financial pressure associated with transportation costs, accommodation expenses, work-related expenditures and the absence of regular income during the first weeks of employment. These circumstances created a period of temporary social vulnerability despite formal labour market participation.

The emerging theory conceptualises this period as a transitional phase during which individuals transform employment acquisition into sustainable labour market participation. The findings suggest that the sustainability of employment is influenced not only by access to work opportunities but also by the availability of financial, social and practical resources that enable individuals to manage the immediate demands associated with employment entry.

The study further highlights the importance of family support, informal assistance and individual coping strategies in overcoming the financial demands associated with entering employment. The findings indicate that these resources played an important role in helping participants manage the period between starting work and receiving their first salary. This

suggests that employment sustainability is shaped not only by individual motivation but also by the broader social and economic conditions in which labour market participation takes place. From the perspective of social work, the findings draw attention to a phase of labour market integration that remains largely overlooked within existing employment support systems. Participants' experiences indicate that obtaining employment does not necessarily eliminate immediate financial hardship. On the contrary, the costs associated with entering employment, including transportation, work clothing, accommodation, meals and mandatory medical examinations, may create barriers that threaten employment retention before the first salary is received. The findings therefore point to the need for measures specifically targeting this transition period. Such measures may include temporary financial assistance, reimbursement of employment-entry expenses, emergency support schemes or coordinated interventions between employment services and social workers aimed at helping individuals overcome the period preceding the first salary.

The study contributes to the existing body of knowledge by identifying a form of social vulnerability that may remain hidden behind formal employment status. The findings suggest that sustainable labour market integration is achieved not simply through access to employment but through the successful management of the transition period leading to financial stability. By drawing attention to the period preceding the first salary, the study expands current understanding of employment transitions and highlights an area that deserves greater consideration within social work research, labour market policy and employment support practice.

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