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The effects of unemployment on the family

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Abstract

Unemployment is a stressor event that affects the functioning and homeostasis of the entire family system. The sources of stress are a function of the material scarcity brought on by financial loss, the unemployed family member's loss of the breadwinner role, and the family unit's loss of status. In addition, the re-employment process imposes stress on the system. The effects of unemployment are apparent when the family is conceptualized as a social system where each member is a subsystem that affects and is affected by each of the other subsystem family members. Theoretically, the family system maintains a balance or homeostasis that sustains its life and way of functioning. When the system experiences sudden stressor events such as unemployment, disequilibrium occurs. Family roles are lost or shifted such that unemployment does not just affect individuals. As a result, some families are negatively impacted as manifested by deteriorated familial and external social relationships.

THE EFFECTS OF UNEMPLOYMENT
ON THE FAMILY

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INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

Unemployment is a stressor event that affects the functioning and homeostasis of the entire family system. The sources of stress are a function of the material scarcity brought on by financial loss, the unemployed family member's loss of the breadwinner role, and the family unit's loss of status. In addition, the re-employment process imposes stress on the system. The effects of unemployment are apparent when the family is conceptualized as a social system where each member is a subsystem that affects and is affected by each of the other subsystem family members. Theoretically, the family system maintains a balance or homeostasis that sustains its life and way of functioning. When the system experiences sudden stressor events such as unemployment, disequilibrium occurs. Family roles are lost or shifted such that unemployment does not just affect individuals. As a result, some families are negatively impacted as manifested by deteriorated familial and external social relationships.

Unemployment in the United States has recently elevated to record heights. In 1982 the official labor market statistics reported an overall unemployment rate of 10.4% of the labor force (Klein, 1983). During this time, some 85% of the labor force lived in family units. Over one third of the labor force participants were married men and over one fourth were married

women. Between mid 1981 to the end of 1982, the number of unemployed workers living in family units increased from 7 to 10 million. It appears that black families and female-headed families are hit hardest by the incidence, prevalence and duration of unemployment (Moen, 1979).

It is relevant to note that the official labor market statistics define the unemployed as those individuals who want a job and are actively seeking employment. It excludes "hidden unemployment" whereby individuals have ceased job search efforts or are discouraged from labor force participation. An example of the latter might be the single-parent with young children. Hence, the true extent of the unemployment problem for families is not exposed.

Another fact is that since the unemployment statistics report data on the individual, the relationship of unemployment to the family is obscured. Spouses and children of the unemployed are the invisible victims of joblessness, when in reality, the state of unemployment has ripple effects that infiltrate the family system. Clearly, in this context, job loss must be viewed as a family experience. The inadequate link to the marketplace created by unemployment elicits repercussions for every family member.

Although each family reacts to unemployment differently depending upon variables to be discussed later in the paper, all

share commonality in the experience of trauma to the system. However, in order to gain insight and understanding of the effects of joblessness and the etiology of the family system's reactions to the trauma, an explanation of the value of work to the individual and the family and the interdependent relationship between the work and family systems is warranted.

THE VALUE OF WORK

Individuals

Work plays a dominant role in the lives of adults. It structures the way time is spent and it gives individuals a sense of purpose. Its apparent importance is described by Freud as one of the two components that comprise a healthy personality and satisfies the individual's needs for safety and security, belonging, self-esteem and self-actualization identified in Maslow's hierarchy (Amundsen & Borgen, 1982). Basic physical needs for survival are satisfied by work income. Self-esteem is fostered by one's ability to independently and adequately secure and maintain one's own sustenance. Since the workplace is a major source of social interaction, it provides for the need to belong through the establishment and maintenance of interpersonal relationships and the sense of identity that is gained from the affiliation with one's respective field of work or place of employment. Also, work provides a sense of accomplishment and opportunities for self growth through self-enhancement, the exercise of creativity and

self-expression.

Families

The same individual needs described by Maslow's hierarchy are applicable to the family. Families are economically dependent upon work income to supply the resources needed to satisfy the basic needs of their members. The family's self-esteem is engendered by its independent ability for sustenance. Work income dictates the family's style of consumption and through it the need for belonging is met by its respective location in the community social strata. Unless the family's needs for security, self-esteem and belonging are met, it cannot actualize itself or "cultivate mind and spirit and become as it should be, a source of security and love for its members" (Ogg, 1963).

The interrelationship between work and the family may be described as the interaction between two systems that prescribe and identify family member roles and the division of family labor. The dual roles defined in the work and family system have reciprocal affects upon each other (Pleck & Staines, 1983). Therefore, work provides the family with order, stability and a sense of mastery and achievement (Kanter, 1977).

UNEMPLOYMENT: ITS EFFECTS ON INDIVIDUALS AND FAMILIES

Unemployment research efforts are intermittent. It seems that interest in the effects of unemployment peaks during times of

economic stress. Accordingly, most of the studies of the effects of unemployment on families are from investigations of unemployed families during The Great Depression. Their results, together with more recent findings indicate that unemployment is related to family disruption as a function of changes in marital and parental power, family violence and the family's spending behavior and division of labor. In addition, findings indicate that children and adolescents are also affected by unemployment.

It is important to examine the effects of unemployment on the individual subsystem prior to investigating the effects of unemployment on the family, because the individual effects of joblessness have negative impact on the entire family system.

The Effects of Unemployment on the Individual

For the family breadwinner, especially the male family breadwinner, there is a psychological articulation in our society that validates his masculinity and role identity (Seifer, 1978). The loss of income then equates with the loss of a socially valued role that is essential to traditional and rigid men and either male or female workers who identify with their professions. When this role is lost, the worker experiences emotional stress due to a sense of powerlessness that reduces or destroys self-esteem. According to Madonia (1983), the self-esteem of unemployed professionals is permanently affected because professionals must often times start at the bottom of their

respective career ladder upon re-employment.

Individuals differ in their reactions to the powerlessness and related stress of unemployment, but all experience a bereavement reaction that is comparable to loss by death. Atkins, Ferguson & Blakenship (1983), Finley & Lee (1978), and Jones (1979) have compared the stages of unemployment to the processes associated with bereaving death: denial, anger, bargaining and acceptance.

Initially the unemployed individual reacts with disbelief. Anger that may be directed at self or others occurs next, followed by a bargaining phase. In the bargaining phase, the unemployed person attempts to reverse the employer's decision of the job separation order, and as efforts prove fruitless, the worker sinks into depression. The final stage of the unemployment grieving process is acceptance of the joblessness which occurs with time.

The worker begins the job search process upon completion of the bereavement stages. In effect, he/she boards an "emotional roller coaster" that is characterized by enthusiasm based on unrealistic expectations, to the stage of stagnation upon realization of stiff job competition and limited employment opportunities. A stage of frustration follows because of repeated rejections and ends with a stage of apathy and the cessation of job search efforts (Amundsen & Borgen, 1982; Powell & Driscoll, 1973).

Both the unemployment and job search process subject the

individual to high levels of stress that may exacerbate existing health and/or emotional conditions or initiate new ones (Krystal, Sackett-Moran, Thompson & Cantoni, 1983; Madonia, 1983; Thompson, 1983; Voydanoff, 1983). Accordingly, individual psychiatric hospital admissions, the incidence of cardiovascular and alcohol related diseases and suicide rates are known to elevate during times of sharp economic decline (Liem & Raymon, 1982). Clearly, the negative experiences and effects of unemployment on the individual have direct bearing on the family. The individual's losses (i.e. job, self-esteem) and subsequent grief become the family's grief.

The Effects of Unemployment on the Family

Unemployment affects the lives of individuals and families. Family members may not directly experience the personal losses of job and self-esteem, but the family as a unit does experience environmental, social and financial changes and changes in the moods and behaviors of its members.

Bakke (1934) described five stages through which the unemployed family progresses. Immediate changes in family functioning are absent during the first stage. The jobless worker is in good spirits and he/she may increase participation in family life. This stage is similar to the denial stage of the grieving process. The breadwinner role is maintained and the financial impact of unemployment is minimized by savings, benefits and

other assets. In fact, these assets may help to prolong the denial phase (Krystal et al., 1983). Conflict occurs in the second stage. Finances dwindle, spending behavior is affected and competition for material resources increases. Family roles shift as wives seek work and children assume domestic responsibilities. Komarovsky (1940) found that when wives secured employment they became more powerful in decision making about family matters resulting in a loss of power and status for unemployed husbands and their reduced self-esteem as a function of the loss of economic control and role as the family breadwinner. Seifer's (1978) study of working class families indicated that unemployed husbands suffered "emotional devastation" when their wives became the breadwinner in spite of women's lib and the alleged flexibility of social roles.

The increased presence and contact of the jobless person with other family members is another source of stress. An especially burden is placed upon the wife of the unemployed. She is expected to deal with her own fears and feelings about the situation, often without psychological support, while remaining empathetic and sensitive to the feelings of all of the other family members. Liem & Raymon (1982) found in their study of blue collar workers that after one year of unemployment, wives experienced depression, anxiety, phobias and sensitivity about interpersonal relationships.

Still another source of stress for the family occurs during

the re-employment search process as family members' hopes repeatedly rise and fall (Thompson, 1983). In addition, some families suffer alone and react to the job loss by withdrawing from social contacts or by hiding the situation from friends and extended family.

The culmination of these stresses was evidenced by strained marital relations and deteriorated sexual relations in Komovsky's (1940) study. Her findings are consistent with recent research (Moen, 1983; Voydanoff, 1983).

Children are also affected by unemployment. According to Elder (1974), children of the depression developed a poor self concept and minimal identification with their parents. Unemployment subjects children to status changes among their peers that often lead to feelings of rejection and alienation. The duration of parental unemployment affects the clothing expenditures and pocket money that serve as indices of identification with peers. As these indicators are lost, children, especially adolescents, experience a loss of status among their peers. As a result, children may assume the same feelings of depression, anxiety, stress and loss of self-esteem as their parents (Madge, 1983). The psychological hardships of physical and emotional abuse and general upset in the family system is manifested in the onset or increase in misdemeanors, lower grades, fights and increased referrals to school guidance counselors due to parental unemployment (White, 1983). It appears that the personality and

temperament of the child are one of the factors that determine a youth's resiliency to unemployment changes (Madge, 1983).

Komarovsky (1940) also reported a corresponding effect on parental relationships as a function of the loss of power and status for unemployed fathers. His role as a control figure was diminished except with his younger children. Fathers were more likely to lose their authority and control over adolescents and particularly over those who worked. Basically the fathers acquiesced and returned to a "childlike state." Elder (1974) also reported losses of parental authority among adolescents. Apparently income influences the male adolescent's perception of parental power. The parent having the most income continues to be perceived as most powerful (Mc Donald, 1979).

Family conflict is intensified as a result of role confusion and the family progresses into the third stage of the unemployment process (Bakke, 1934). At this point the family threatens destruction. Scarce material resources and psychological support among family members as well as the frustration of prolonged unemployment and job search help to trigger the incidence of spouse and child abuse (Borrero, 1980; Chavetz, 1981; Guadagno, 1983). Accordingly, divorce rates and family disruption elevate during times of economic decline (South, 1985).

Stage four of the unemployment process is first characterized by experimental readjustment. The family becomes adjusted to the reality of the unemployment and moves toward its acceptance.

There is also increased respect for family members that helps to strengthen the entire family unit. During the final stage of unemployment the family resigns itself to stable readjustment and acceptance of the unemployment situation and involves itself with future planning.

COPING WITH UNEMPLOYMENT

Not all families are negatively impacted by unemployment (Thomas, McCabe & Berry, 1980). Some families use the situation as an opportunity to become more cohesive, to pursue new or long awaited interests or to alter old patterns of family functioning that will serve to strengthen it (Yearwood, 1983).

According to Voydanoff (1983), the distinction among families may be explained by the application of family stress theory. This theory considers the family's crisis meeting resources (i.e. finances, level of cohesion, communication patterns, role flexibility, coping strategies and social supports), as well as the family's definition of the event of unemployment in terms of its duration, the family's future expectations and re-employment opportunities. Other variables which influence the magnitude of the crisis of unemployment and the family's subsequent reaction are the extent of the financial and psychological hardships (Voydanoff, 1983). In all cases, the healthier the family system is prior to unemployment, the more capable it is in withstanding the accompanying stress (Angell, 1936; Cavan & Ranck, 1938;

Imig, 1981; Voydanoff, 1977, 1983).

Effective family strategies for coping with unemployment include the encouragement of a family work effort, modified financial management, increased family communication and cohesion, a rational definition of the event of unemployment and the utilization of social support (Voydanoff, 1983).

In consideration of the psychological effects of unemployment, the implications for counseling are helping approaches that include the assessment of problem solving abilities that address the emotional, financial and family crisis experienced by the client as well as the unemployment situation. In acknowledgement that each family experiences unemployment in a unique way, all share commonality in the grief associated with the personal loss and disequilibrium. Shifron, Dye & Shifron (1983) advocate that efforts be directed toward counseling that reinforces the client's self-esteem by making it clearly understood that the job loss is obviously beyond control. Counseling must focus on helping the unemployed to accept the loss by breaking ties with the previous job and developing ways to find new interests, satisfiers and creative activities (Jones, 1979). It is of essence that helps both acknowledge the normalcy of the grieving process and work with clients and their families toward its resolve.

Two helpful approaches toward the resolution of the grief process from Heikkinen's (1979) Conceptual Model for Resolving

Personal Loss are having the client dialogue about the job loss, talk about their strengths and make future projections. It is only by the maintenance and improvement of psychological and physical health that the counselor may prepare the unemployed client for the additional stress of the job search process. In addition, counselors must also be equipped to provide informational counseling in job search assistance techniques such as job development, resume writing and interviewing skills. Helpers should also be knowledgeable of local labor market dynamics and techniques that realistically examine the probability of employment.

Of particular emphasis is the importance of the protection of and maintenance of the counselor's mental health. Counselors must rationally face the prospective guilt felt by their own employment, sense of helplessness and the degree to which they assess their effectiveness with clients by their [the client's] re-employment. The counselor must achieve a balance of deviations from work to reduce the stress associated with unemployment counseling. This is necessary in order to avoid counselor burn-out as well as to maximize effectiveness and the delivery of quality service to clients.

CONCLUSIONS

One way to bring forth awareness of the problem would be to revise or amend the official statistics so that they reflect

family labor and economic indicators. Furthermore, investigative efforts should include representative samples of black families, female heads-of-household families, jobless wives and the effects of unemployment on children and adolescents.

There are no standard effects of unemployment on families as illustrated by family stress theory. Some families experience trauma and deteriorated relationships while others remain relatively unaffected (Thomas, et al., 1980). The major determinants in the family's response to the changes brought on by unemployment are its prior level of functioning and adaptability. Cavan & Ranck (1938) and Angell (1936) reported that families who were previously "well organized", "highly integrated" and adaptive withstood the effects of unemployment.

Families are affected both directly and indirectly by joblessness. The indirect effect of unemployment upon the family system results from the jobless worker's loss of self-esteem and breadwinner role which causes anger and guilt that is projected onto family members. Under these circumstances, unemployment may be the indirect cause of family dissolution. Families are affected by joblessness in a direct way by the changes in finances, social status and possible uprooting due to geographic relocation in search of work. Unfortunately the latter event fosters isolation and a lack of social support when it is needed most. Certainly the effects of unemployment on the family present ripple effects that extend to the

marketplace, schools and the community and present challenges to educators, school counselors and mental health professionals.

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