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HELPING THE UNEMPLOYED CLIENT

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Abstract

This paper analyzes ways in which the social work profession can reaffirm its professional service responsibilities to unemployed clients. It is suggested that social work practice should address not just the effects of unemployment but also the jobless condition itself. The human costs of unemployment and their implications for changes in social work assessment and intervention are cited.

Introduction

Delinquency, family violence, depression, stress-related health problems, and withdrawal of the aged are a few of the myriad of issues addressed by social workers. While seemingly disparate, in many cases such problems are linked. Recent research on the effects of unemployment suggests that joblessness and consequent economic insecurity may precipitate a wide range of individual, family, and community problems.¹ Yet the link between unemployment and the problems that clients bring to social service agency doors is not always apparent. In fact, by the time clients seek help, those for whom the original precipitating condition was unemployment may bring as the presenting problem such symptoms as mental illness, ulcers, or child abuse. This paper will analyze this phenomenon and its implications for the social work profession and for the development of innovative social service responses to unemployed clients.

As social workers seek to probe beneath symptoms to uncover the basis of the disorders that prompt clients to seek social work help, some problem sources such as joblessness may not be obvious because of the very nature of the condition. Yet the fact that unemployment is a critical shaper of individual and family functioning is well documented by research from the Depression of the 1930's.² Such studies attributed

a number of devastating consequences to unemployment such as suicide, death from physical deprivation, emotional and health disorders, as well as the destruction of interpersonal relationships. In more recent years, however, the impact of unemployment has been somewhat disguised. Relative improvements in the standard of living over that of the 1930's, along with the perceived viability of programs such as public assistance, food stamps, and unemployment benefits lead some to assume that the unemployed are surviving the hardships of modern day joblessness.³ Moreover, the absence of widespread depression reinforces the likelihood that joblessness is attributed to personal defects rather than system problems.

Unemployment: The source of many clients problems

Recent research on unemployment suggests its strong linkage to spouse and child abuse, suicide, depression, and mental illness; crime, stress-related health disorders such as heart disease, renal disorders and ulcers, maternal and infant mortality, self-depreciation, marital conflict, as well as a reduction in life span.⁴ While such research generates important new information about the effects of unemployment on individual and family functioning, it is constrained by designs that do not yield definitive findings about whether unemployment "causes" or is merely strongly associated with the social, emotional, economic, and health problems.

Ideally, research on the effects of unemployment should include longitudinal studies of workers whose functioning is first assessed prior to job loss or the onset of the job search, then during their unemployment, and finally at the time of their reemployment. An exemplary longitudinal study is the research conducted by Kasl and Cobb on the effects of unemployment on workers' blood pressure.⁵ Measures of workers' blood pressure were acquired prior to the receipt of news of their lay-off, at periods during their unemployment, and then during their reemployment. This longitudinal research definitively showed the strong relationship between unemployment and increases in blood pressure. Blood pressure immediately rose for these workers upon the news of their impending

lay-offs and plant closure, during their unemployment, and continued to be clinically high until their reemployment at which time it dropped.

Similar longitudinal studies are needed that generate baseline data on personal functioning prior to the onset of unemployment so that its impact can be measured without being confounded by worker problems that existed prior to unemployment. Even so, the very nature of unemployment impedes the design of such longitudinal studies. Making known to workers imminent lay-offs and plant closure plans can be a very uncomfortable process for both employers and employees. In one study conducted by the author, several workers learned of their unemployment by overhearing others talking about it. They, like many victims of lay-offs, were the last to know about their job dislocation and were reluctant for others to find out.

Correlational or single interview studies comprise the majority of sources of recent knowledge on the human costs of unemployment. For example, Harvey M. Brenner has analyzed the degree of association between rises in unemployment and simultaneous increases in such indicators as mental hospital admissions, homicides, suicides, prison admission rates and stress related health problems.⁶ While his correlational analyses may seemingly weaken his findings, this research has helped to shape policy makers' awareness of the human side of unemployment. In fact, limitations in the research designs of many studies of unemployment do not necessarily detract from the importance of the findings. Such designs merely reduce the extent to which causality can be assumed between unemployment and the spectrum of subsequent problems with which the condition is associated.

Social workers are in positions where strong empirical evidence of causation is not an essential prerequisite to innovative problem-solving efforts. In fact, it is often the leadership efforts of social workers that bring to public view the very problems and issues that later evolve into subjects of inquiry for basic research. For example, some time before substantial data bases existed regarding the prevalence of child abuse, social workers were pressing for the development of programs and laws to ensure improved

responses to abused children and their families. The pioneering efforts of welfare rights advocates concerned with the need for fair hearings might not have sparked Supreme Court action mandating such hearings if a substantial data base had been required before action was taken. The social work profession is not known to sit on the sidelines when human needs are overlooked just because all the facts are not in. The profession is rooted to decades of advocacy and activism to bring unmet needs and problems to the foreground of public awareness and community responsiveness.

Unemployment: A fundamental issue for social work

It might be expected that a profession concerned about the needs and stresses that lead people to seek services would be at the vanguard of policy and service innovations for the unemployed. While there are notable exceptions, the profession appears to have been relatively detached from unemployment issues. Such uninvolvement can be attributed to several factors. Some might argue that the condition is so organically linked to the economic system that to address unemployment requires the focused attention of the profession on the political and economical structures that permit it to persist. Others may suggest that unemployment is an intractable social problem, which the social work profession lacks the resources to confront. It may be argued that social workers are not trained to fully understand the sources and causes of unemployment and thus are ambivalent about work itself. Furthermore, the animosity generated by forced work schemes for welfare recipients may reinforce the pattern of uninvolvement. The prevalent, but incorrect, assumption that the unemployed are jobless because of personal deficiency may also exacerbate social work beliefs that therapy is a necessary prerequisite to job acquisition and job security.

The increasing prevalence of unemployment among professionals, including social workers, begins to erode beliefs that joblessness is caused by personal inadequacies.⁸ Moreover, fluctuations in the economy and in the demand for services and goods may sharpen the realization that most jobs in both white and blue collar labor markets may be subject to termination

regardless of the personal attributes of the workers who fill them.

Not only is unemployment often viewed as a sign of a troubled person rather than an indication of labor market inadequacies, but the fact that most unemployment is due to an insufficient number of jobs is not well understood.

Implications of unemployment for social service innovations

Neglect of unemployment issues within the profession may result in deficient social work responses to the needs of the unemployed that should compel social service innovations within a number of social service agencies. Research by Fahs-Beck on the use of Family Service Agencies showed that unemployment was the second most frequent "environmental problems" brought to the agency by clients.⁹ Yet "environmental problems" such as income, unemployment and housing received less than the average number of hours of attention in interviews as compared to child-related problems, personality adjustment of an adult, family, home management. The actual distribution of agency interview time, by the principal focus of services was five percent for income, housing, unemployment and health even though every one of seven clients brought unemployment problems to the agency.¹⁰ Fahs-Beck explained that in many such cases "the most that the family agency can do for clients as individuals is to refer them to some specialized community resources and, if necessary, to serve as the client's advocate with this resource."¹¹

Statements from persons, such as former secretary of HEW Califano, assert that the most pressing problem facing families today is unemployment of the "breadwinner."¹² If this is so, where do families splintered by unemployment seek help? Since such problems do not constitute the core of helping services provided by family service agencies or many other agencies staffed by social workers, where are they addressed?

Some might assume that the expansion in recent years in the employment and training service sector in

our local communities signals a growing support network for the unemployed. This may be true for only a segment of the unemployed since eligibility is contingent on income, residency, age, and other attributes such as being a "displaced homemaker" or a "first-time offender." While critical services are available to eligible individuals representing key target groups such as youth, veterans or ethnic minorities, such categorical approaches similar to those in some of social service programs may result in a fragmented array of service responses. In fact, as these employment and training services evolve in local communities, their planners struggle with the challenges similar to those in the social service sector to build an integrated network of services. Moreover, some employment and training programs are constrained by income eligibility requirements that promote client access only after a precipitous economic skid downward. Thus, some if not many unemployed persons may fall through the cracks, not just of the social service sector, but the employment and training sector as well.

The blame syndrome and help-seeking activities

Many workers whose unemployment is due to job dislocation are able initially to blame the system or their employer at the time of job loss. However, the ensuing weeks of rejection by prospective employers begin to erode their self-image encouraging self-doubts and castigations. Soon the focus of blame changes as the workers, as well as those around them, hold them culpable for their joblessness.¹³

When pressed into seeking help from social service agencies, unemployed workers may present themselves as compellingly in need of self-growth, improved interpersonal relationships and self-image changes. Some unemployed workers may be convinced that success in acquiring a job is contingent on some personal change. Recasting their condition of unemployment as a problem in emotional functioning, assertive behavior, or marital conflict provides a safety value that temporarily protect them from the harsh realities of their unemployment. Such a redefinition of the situation also promotes the image that the compulsion to change is earnest. Since, in seeking help, they appear to be

actively trying to solve their problems.

There are few recourses open to the unemployed worker who has difficulty finding employment; most do not resort to acts of violence or self-destruction even though their desperation may be profound. Eventually, many unemployed persons may seek help from a social service agency. The point at which they seek help will vary. Some may be prompted by the self-doubts, self-blame and the conviction that if they can change themselves in some way they will be able to acquire a good job. Others may seek help for a wide range of additional problems precipitated by their joblessness. These may include depression and suicidal preoccupation, substance abuse, family conflict or violence, and stress-related problems in functioning. As the effects of unemployment take their toll, some may also be experiencing additional problems of health disorders and financial and social upheaval, and, as a result, may be simultaneously seeking help from several agencies. Another group of unemployed may require help on an involuntary basis; they may have committed a crime or find themselves institutionalized for mental or physical health problems.

Social service responses to the unemployed

Despite the various help seeking pathways into the social service sector, the job-related problems of the unemployed may be disguised by the symptoms they bring as the "presenting problem." In seeking help for interpersonal problems, their hope that self-change will lead to eventual employment, may be reinforced by social service personnel who feel trained and well-equipped to deal with problems in interpersonal functioning. For both the social worker and client, personal changes may be easier to bring about than job acquisition.¹⁴ While the unemployed client is able to invest in treatment to work through the problems prompted or related to his or her joblessness, the harsh realities of the jobless condition and its consequences are temporarily dimmed from view. Convinced that job acquisition is contingent on self-change, unemployed clients can stave off accusations from others that they are not really working hard at finding a job.

Helping activities that focus on self-change rather than the job search may also strengthen patterns of denial and optimism that often accompany long-term unemployment. Such patterns were evident in the author's study of unemployed blue collar workers who believed that a good job was right around the corner even after fifteen months of joblessness.¹⁵ Such denial and optimism may place the social worker in a complicated position. On one hand, it may be important to help unemployment clients invest their energies in job-seeking; yet, if jobs are not available in the line of work for which they are looking, some other course may need to be pursued. Often untrained in vocational assessment and employment counseling skills, social workers may be more comfortable focusing primarily on client problems that are amenable to the helping strategies which they can easily pursue. Consequently, "psychological" rather than "employment" resources may be the primary source of help offered to the unemployed client. Moreover, the social worker's definition of the problem may be linked to the services and resources that can be readily marshalled to remedy it.

One must ask, however, whether social work responses to the unemployed should center exclusively on the psychological or mental health needs of the unemployed client or should simultaneously address the employment problems of the client as well. It can be argued that social workers should have several options regarding their response to unemployed clients. For example, if the presenting problem is unemployment, then job acquisition should be a treatment goal. Social workers should be familiar with the job-seeking process and the local labor market and comfortable in their advocacy and support roles for their job-seeking clients.¹⁶ Sustained attention to the job needs of a client may result in either a referral to an employment agency, or if CETA eligible, to a CETA program. More often than not, however, the social worker may even seek to acquire skills in job development, a rather unprecise but growing area of skill acquisition. Also essential is the knowledge of rudimentary job-seeking techniques and tools including "informational interviews," resume writing; effective telephone and personal interview styles and behaviors, and the use of personal acquaintances as sources of information about job openings. It is possible that clients who

have failed in their job search after attending a job-seeking workshop may have withdrawn and become isolated. Morale building derived from group support of other job-seekers may be as important to this client as the job search tools themselves. Sometimes booster sessions may be necessary (so helpful with other very disciplined tasks such as abstinence from cigarettes, chemical dependencies, or compliance with a weight control program), as motivation may need to be re-instigated.

The social worker must be able to sort out clearly the client's job readiness and work competencies from other problems such as depression, stress-related health problems, violent or drug-related behavior. In cases when the full toll of unemployment has been exacted, its effects may be irreversible. Yet, for many unemployed persons, their problems may disappear when a job is acquired. Findings from research on joblessness among a sample of young and aged workers demonstrated the therapeutic effectiveness of jobs in reducing or eliminating depression, suicidal pre-occupation, poor eating and sleeping habits as well as interpersonal conflict and tension.¹⁷

More systematic concern with unemployment problems of our clients should result not just in a restructuring of social services but in new leadership roles for social service agencies as well. The watershed of problems stemming from unemployment can be most vividly seen in the clients seeking help at our agency doors. Social workers providing direct services to these clients as well as those in administrative roles should be the first to focus public attention on the human costs of plant closures and the consequent dislocation of workers, and to speak out about mounting unemployment problems among groups of workers. As unemployment increases in local communities, social workers should immediately monitor the consequent demand for social services and advocate for the needs of its victims.

Our profession must reaffirm its concern about unemployment that was once prevalent in its earlier tradition.¹⁸ As long as work remains a well-rationed good of society, a privilege rather than an entitlement with enforceable guarantees, the human toll from unemployment will continue to haunt our agencies and

our communities. As the nation enters another recessionary period, the appeal for help by unemployed victims of political attempts to curb inflation will undoubtedly be reflected in rising caseloads of persons whose injuries should not longer be disguised or re-defined.

Footnotes

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⁶ Brenner, Estimating the Social Costs of National Economic Policy, op. cit.

⁷ See Katharine Hooper Briar, "The Meaning of Work and Its Implications for Social Work Education" (paper presented at the Council on Social Work Education Annual Program Meeting, New Orleans, 1978).

⁸ See Table A-21, "Unemployment Rates of Persons Sixteen Years and Over and Percent Distribution of Unemployed by Occupation Group: Annual Averages, 1958-77," Employment and Training Report of the President, U.S. Dept. of Labor (Washington, D.C. 1978), p. 215.

⁹ Dorothy Fahs-Beck, Mary Ann Jones, Progress on Family Problems, Family Service Association of America, New York, 1967, p. 43.

¹⁰ Op. cit., p. 36.

¹¹ Op. cit., p. 60.

¹² See former Secretary Joseph A. Califano's Preliminary Report to Governor Jimmy Carter, 1976.

¹³Katharine Hooper Briar, The Effect of Unemployment Workers and Their Families, op. cit.

¹⁴This pattern was evident in the early stages of the start-up program discussed by the author in The Effects of Long-Term Unemployment on Workers and Their Families, op. cit. See Chapter 6.

¹⁵Op. cit.

¹⁶Recommendations for social work training are cited in Katharine Hooper Briar's "The Meaning of Work and Its Implications for Social Work Education," op. cit.

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