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# Unemployment and Social Integration: A Review

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*A review of the literature identifies the loss of work as a stressful life event that has been linked to a number of psychosocial ills. The paper examines the loss of social relationships, a major noneconomic cost of unemployment, as a major contributor to the development of those ills. Practice implications of this finding are identified.*

## Basic Theory

The loss of work is a stressful life event. A sizeable body of literature now exists that links stressful life events to the onset of both physical and psychiatric illness (Dean & Lin, 1977; Dohrenwend, B. & Dohrenwend, B. 1974; Greenblatt & Becerra, 1982; Liang, J.; Duorkin, L.; Kahana, E.; Mazian, 1980; Liem, R. & Liem, J.; 1978; Pearlin & Lieberman, 1979). Psychological distress is a central feature in life events, though certainly not the sole feature. The importance of considering social factors that may modify the effects of stressors on illness has been emphasized. In the stress buffering hypothesis it is suggested that social support is a modifying influence that enables individuals to cope with stressful life events (Myers, J., Lindenthal, J. & Pepper, 1975).

Major or frequent life changes, particularly undesirable ones such as unemployment, can lead to psychological disequilibrium. While some individuals adapt or cope, others report feelings of distress which may take the form of maladaptations such as health difficulties and psychiatric illness. On the other hand, others may adapt favorably because of the availability of social support.

Unemployment can be considered particularly stressful because it involves the loss of life-sustaining resources and a major social role which may effect the ability to carry out other social roles. Mueller (1981) contends that most studies of the relation-

ship of stress to depression have pointed to the loss of or exits from the social field as particularly harmful because they involve significant disruptions in personal networks. Mueller concluded that the stressfulness of events is closely tied to the degree of disruption they create in a social network and the most noxious elements of these events may be their impact on individuals' networks. Hence, it is appropriate to study stressful events in terms of the level of disruption they cause in social networks. This paper reviews the literature that has investigated the impact of unemployment on social relationships.

Social relationships and social supports are traditional themes in social work practice, because these are seen as enhancing "the goodness of fit between individuals and their environments." The basic idea of a person-environment-fit model is that an individual's adjustment consists of the goodness of fit between the characteristics of the person and the properties of the environment. A person's environment might include the family, work place, and neighborhood. Stress results when the supplies or demands of the environment do not match the needs or abilities of the person. The greater the lack of fit, the more stress a person experiences. Unemployment contributes to such a misfit for most individuals (Kahn, 1981).

Mueller (1981) and Turner (1981) have suggested that the study of social networks may be helpful in assessing the contribution of the social environment to psychological disorder. Turner suggests the concept of social network "may provide the unifying framework in which diverse findings with regard to the relationship of social factors to psychiatric factors may be reintegrated" (Turner, 1981).

The social network is a useful concept for operationalizing the ties one has to others. As Liem and Liem (1978) suggest, the concept of the social network allows one to "draw into a single frame of reference the community of networks which act on or around the individual, and those community settings which make up the pattern of interaction in the community. The social networks of individuals provide knowledge of their support."

A person's network can be conceptualized as a series of concentric rings, with the nuclear family in the smallest circle, followed by relatives, neighbors, friends, fellow workers, and

organizational affiliates and so forth. Social networks contain all of the relationship links which engage a person. Somewhere within the network, the individual must obtain the types of support needed. Often the outer circles are efficient in serving instrumental needs, whereas the inner circles provide expressive sustenance (Greenblatt, et al., 1982).

The way social networks act as buffers against the detrimental effects of life events has also been described in the literature. Social networks act as a potential reservoir for social support that might buffer stress by providing emotional support and instrumental types of help, and by maintaining a sense of self-esteem because the person feels needed. Networks also carry with them the notion of mutual obligations which contribute to social cohesion (Caplan, 1979; Vinkor & Caplan, 1986; Cobb, 1976). The need for social support is greatest when a person is undergoing change that is of an undesirable or unexpected nature such as unemployment.

Granoveter (1972) identified the outer circles of networks as crucial in providing chances for social mobility, and in affecting social integration, because these outer circles act as links to other networks. Such links facilitate a person's search for work. Economists have noted the importance of personal contacts in the search for work. These links are lost when individuals become unemployed because they lose contact with work associates.

Studies of social networks have identified both a qualitative and quantitative aspect of network analysis. The evidence supports the assumption that although networks of healthy individuals are important in some quantitative sense, it is the quality of network interactions that has the most impact (Gore, 1979). Liang et al. (1980) postulates that the objective aspects of social integration and morale are mediated by a person's subjective sense of integration. Therefore, individuals' perceptions and feelings of being closely connected to others are important to their sense of well being.

It can be hypothesized that the psychosocial state of the individual, and his/her level of integration are related to both the size and quality of a person's relationships. Myers et al. (1975) have concluded that people who have ready and meaningful

access to others feel integrated into the system, are satisfied with their roles, and are better able to cope with the impact of life events.

### Unemployment and Social Integration

Social researchers had theoretical reasons derived from Durkheim (1951) for being concerned about the effect of unemployment on social relationships. Economically induced social mobility whether it is up or down may lead to a loss of social integration. An individual's sense of well-being is maintained by finding a sense of meaning outside him/herself that is developed through involvement with others. The loss of work dislodges people from a social role that may have made them feel a part of a larger social community and given their lives a purpose. The loss of work may threaten their position in the community, and their perceived purpose in the social system. Consequently the loss of work is bound to have negative psychological and social consequences.

Morse and Weiss (1955) found that work does not simply function as a means of earning a living. They found that most people would continue working even if there was no economic necessity. Their explanation for this attitude was that it was through work that most people found a tie into society, and therefore workers find the work role important in maintaining their sense of well being.

Kaplan and Tausky (1969, 1972, 1974), in research done in the late 1960's and early 1970's on individuals at various levels of the social strata, confirmed Morse and Weiss' findings that while people identify the economic function as most important, they also prize the social function of work (1969, 1972, 1974).

Work integrates a person into the social system by conferring a role and status upon a person, and usually work embeds a person within a potential social network. Work is a central life activity which gives a person's life meaning and continuity. Work provides not only the means of existence but friends, contacts, and possibly memberships in formal organizations. Work also leads to opportunities for upward mobility. It is the loss of all of these opportunities that leads to the belief that unemployment will lead to reduced integration.

Getting a job and succeeding in it manifests a central societal expectation. In all cultures people need to engage in activities that confirm the individual's sense of self as a fully recognized member of the society. Through work an individual achieves a social and a personal identity.

One way to view work within a psychological and social perspective is to use Maslow's scale of hierarchical needs (1962). If that is done, one sees that material and economic rewards that work provides are at the bottom of the scale. Work is seen as part of a person's creative nature in that it gives a person an opportunity to express him/herself. If work is lost an individual loses the sense of gratification that is gained from productive accomplishment.

Rosenblatt (1966) reports on five functions of work: (a) income production, (b) a way to structure time and energy, (c) the possibility for meaningful experiences, (d) a way to establish social relations, (e) and the provision of a social identity. Rainwater (1974) adds that the person receives confirmation that indeed he/she has something to offer. Only the first of these functions could be thought of as economic.

Classical economists have overlooked many of these non-economic aspects of work. They believe that everyone has a 24-hour endowment of "nonwork" or leisure. It is assumed that leisure is a more desired utility than work. Economists believe that the provision of income is the only way to change that view of work (Lutz, 1980). Definitions of unemployment as a purely economic problem have been criticized for not taking into account a much broader range of psychosocial consequences of joblessness concerns that researchers are now beginning to take seriously.

The recognition of the psychosocial functions of work, which goes back to Freud's formulation of the ability to love, work, and play as the embodiment of mental health, provides another way of looking at work. Leisure from a psychosocial perspective may not be any more desirable than work, but it may in fact be inferior to work. A psychosocial perspective of work would also consider the psychosocial damage that would be caused by lack of opportunity to work.

It is recognized that the psychosocial effect, and the meaning

that one attaches to work may vary according to the type of work performed. For those who are engaged in unpleasant work, unemployment might provide some comfort in that they may feel freed from the burden of a stressful circumstance. The real crunch for these people occurs when other jobs are not readily available. Even if work is unsatisfying, economic deprivation is probably worse. One can assume that the effects of unemployment may converge for those who like their work, and those who don't, when they confront the realities of trying to maintain a prior standard of living on a drastically reduced income.

#### The Research Evidence on the Effects of Unemployment on Social Relationships

Social researchers have been investigating the effect of unemployment on psychological and social functioning since the Great Depression. This literature has identified many of the stresses that follow job loss. The early studies tended to be more exploratory and qualitative in nature. The quantitative studies that came after the Depression confirmed the findings of the early researchers that unemployment had severe psychosocial consequences. One of these consequences is that unemployment is a threat to social relationships.

In the United States two of those early researchers were Bakke (1933, 1940) and Komarovsky (1940). One of the common interesting features of these early studies is the identification of the effect of unemployment on family and social relationships. They note over time that unemployment may stress the very relationships that earlier served to moderate its negative effects. These researchers recognized that the unemployed person was part of a system whose members experienced distress along with the unemployed. Also found was a process of disengagement among the unemployed which they linked to a need to reduce expenditures, which forced them to give up some forms of recreation and participation in formal organizations. They also linked the humiliation of being without work as leading to a tendency to withdraw from social relationships. Bakke further observes that outside relationships were important for sustaining family stability because they provide emotional support, encouragement, financial assistance, and job leads.

These researchers also found that the unemployed man's and his wife's social isolation extends not only to informal social life, but also affects participation in formal organizations. One of the most tragic aspects of prolonged unemployment is the gradual but inevitable isolation of unemployed workers from the community institutions of which they were a part. Perhaps the worker views these contacts as a luxury, but participation in social groups may have given the individual a sense of belonging and social status. The loss of these connections may give a feeling of being separated from society. Wilcock and Franke (1963, 86) report that if these feelings of alienation persist over time, individuals "may become an active enemy of the social order which has deprived them not only an income, but consequently of all relationships which made their lives valuable."

Pope (1964), who studied unemployed auto workers in the early 1960s, found an inverse relationship between economic loss and social contacts. This effect increased with high status persons perhaps because contact with peers heightens their sense of relative deprivation. Aiken and Ferman (1966) came to similar conclusions in their study of ex-Packard workers. Their findings indicate that such disruptions dislodge not only stable social ties, but lead to social disintegration by alienating the worker from the social and political system.

Wilcock and Franke (1963) remind us that one of the losses inherent in unemployment is the loss of association with fellow workers. Unemployed people lose not only their economic base, but they may also lose their base in the social system when job loss is a result of a plant closure. Kasl and Cobb (1978) suggest scattered residential locations in urban areas cause friendship networks to be work based, and therefore friendships are placed at risk when work is lost.

There have been recent investigations of unemployment and social integration that have converged with these earlier studies in their conclusions about the effect of unemployment on social relationships. Atkinson, et al. (1987) conclude that unemployment is associated with less social support than continuous employment. In their study, unemployment placed the most strain on the inner-circle of social network relationships. The unemployed they studied seemed to rely more heavily on people out-



side the immediate family for advice, information, and other types of instrumental help.

Recent studies seem to suggest a "push-pull" phenomenon between unemployment and social support. Unemployment places social networks under stress, yet those who successfully cope with unemployment derive high levels of support from those networks (Fineman, 1984; Stokes & Cochrane, 1984; Binns & Marrs, 1984; Briar, 1982; Buss and Redburn, 1983; Gore, 1978; Marsden, 1982).

Support from others seems critical to the coping process of the majority of unemployed, but there are many reasons to assume that unemployment will disrupt networks. The obvious disruption comes from being removed from the work group which may be composed of friends and associates. Memberships in family and social networks may be altered by decisions to migrate to seek work. Aiken et al. (1968) found unemployment decreased the level of social visiting by the displaced worker. These researchers along with Fineman (1984) suggest that shame about one's unemployed status may be a factor in reduced visiting. Another explanation for withdrawal is that others within the individual's social network may disengage from the unemployed person after an initial period of support. A reason for this withdrawal may be found in the lack of opportunity for the unemployed person to engage in reciprocal supportive behavior. Dooley and Catalano (1980) report that if the friendship circles of the unemployed are composed of people in similar circumstances, who are also psychologically and economically stressed, they might not have the resources to provide support as in the past. Perhaps high unemployment in an area might generate a supportive milieu common in "the all in the same lifeboat" phenomenon. However, the overall evidence seems to indicate the more likely outcome is that unemployment creates an environment where there are fewer individuals willing to provide support. Additionally, unemployment may generate competition and resentment. Hence social withdrawal may be both an individual and a group dynamic (Brockner, et al. 1985; Marsden, 1982).

Concern about economics, even among the employed, during periods of rising unemployment, may cause them to pull

back as they decide to conserve resources. The research also indicates that the longer a person is unemployed, the more likely that others will blame the unemployed for failing to find work. There is also the suggestion that individuals in an unemployed person's social network may avoid the person because they are embarrassed by their friend's loss of status. Swinbourn (1981) reports that some unemployed report their friends avoid them as if unemployment is catching.

A number of researchers applying Durkheim's theories on social integration and suicide found a relationship between the functioning of the economy and suicide rates. McMahon et al. (1963) found that the suicide rate rises with unemployment. Rushing (1968) also found a rise in the suicide rate among the unemployed, but he saw this effect concentrated among low income groups. Pierce (1967) hypothesized that economic fluctuation, both up and down, reduced social cohesion, and led to an increased frequency of suicide. Using a time series design, he compared the suicide rates of white males of similar age for the years 1919 to 1940. He correlated those rates with an index of common stock prices, and he found a relationship between the two. As stock prices went down the suicide rate went up.

There have been a number of similar studies, but done on a larger scale with aggregate data to assess the impact of unemployment on individuals and society. These aggregate studies are a useful adjunct to support the observations of the earlier qualitative studies. One of the earliest versions of this type of work was done by Komura and Clarke (1935) who examined increases in psychiatric hospital admissions. They concluded that the Depression was a contributing factor to rising admissions. They also found that many hospital superintendents had difficulty in discharging patients, because the economic position of many of their families made them unwilling to receive the patient back into the home. More recently Brenner (1984) has correlated an increase in unemployment rates with an increase in various social conditions such as psychiatric hospital admissions, health difficulties, suicide, homicide, mortality, prison admissions, and child abuse, to name a few. In looking at mental hospital admission rates, he concluded that unemployment may indicate actual downward mobility, or fear of it, that leads to

increased mental distress among individuals (Brenner & Mooney, 1983). The implication is that unemployment leads to social disintegration which then results in psychiatric difficulties. It is the increase in such ills that is the measurable psychosocial cost of unemployment (Brenner, 1973). Among the mechanisms Brenner sees accounting for an increase in social pathology is a theme of loss. He identified the loss of social identity, the loss of basic resources, loss of social relations, and forced migration. He warns that those who are downwardly mobile are the most vulnerable (Brenner, 1984).

Brenner and those who have done similar types of research have been criticized because the aggregate nature of such data challenge the ecological fallacy since no individual was shown to be hospitalized after experiencing economic distress. Nevertheless the Brenner findings are an important addition to the earlier qualitative studies, and the reliability of the findings have been established through replications (Catalano & Dooley, 1977, 1978; Dooley & Catalano, 1979; Ahr, Gorodesky, & Won, 1981).

Another criticism of this type of research is that it fails to specify the intervening variables, and the researchers do not deal with the issue of the direction of the relationships. It is generally agreed that the unemployed are more emotionally unstable than employed people, but whether they are so because of their unemployment is much like the "chicken and egg" question, or as Dooley and Catalano (1980) ask, "do the disordered drift downward, or does unemployment cause disorder?"

Catalano, Dooley, and Brenner have two hypotheses or explanations for their findings that partially answer the critics who raise the issue of the ecological fallacy. The first is the "provocative" thesis which says that the economic situation causes stress in people, and provokes a crisis that may require psychiatric intervention. This theory assumes that economic deterioration elicits dysfunction when one loses the social or material resources that enabled one to cope. The "uncovering" thesis starts from the assumption that the behavior among the newly institutionalized does not drastically alter their earlier behavior, but what changes after economic deterioration is the tolerance levels of others in their social network to cope with their behavior (Dooley and Catalano, 1979). For example, a normal adolescent

crisis is made worse by the stresses of unemployment which reduces parental effectiveness to deal with that crisis. Parents then seek help for a crisis that they might have handled had they not been experiencing increased levels of stress.

Brenner's (1973) interpretation of his findings are that economic stress leads to social disorganization that is reflected in an increase of symptoms, or an increased intolerance of deviance, which will result from the inability of individuals to perform socially designated roles. Inability to fulfill one's social roles frequently results from a downward shift in income and status. The economy provides the fundamental means whereby individuals fulfill the majority of their aspirations, as well as the more immediate social obligations. The unemployed are unable to maintain their accustomed or intended life style and status. The jobless person may therefore be unable to meet the requirements of others who form the network of his/her social relations, responsibilities, and requirements. Therefore unemployment is likely to create problems within social networks.

The aggregate studies leave open the possibility that those experiencing distress during an economic downturn are not the unemployed. It may be that unemployment does not just have an economic and psychosocial effect on the job loser, but this effect reverberates through the unemployed person's family, social network, community, and so forth. Other than the research on the unemployed breadwinner, the impact of unemployment has not been widely studied. Most of the research addressing this topic has been conducted with specific groups of married men. Research is needed to identify how unemployment affects family members other than the job loser.

#### The Relationship Between Depression, Integration, and Unemployment

In the literature on the unemployed, the most consistently reported loss besides income is the diminution of self-esteem that leads to an increase in depressive symptoms. The explanation for the loss of self-esteem as a consequence of joblessness is that individuals lose some aspects of personal identity.

Myers et al. (1975) point out that much of one's identity is dependent upon occupational status. They assert that work might

provide a certain type of therapeutic environment in that work is often a supportive milieu. Freud (1961) describes the embodiment of mental health as an ability to love and work. Brown et al. (1975) hint at the prospect of a job being a buffer to vulnerability because it helps to improve economic circumstances, alleviates boredom, enables a greater variety of social relationships, and enhances self-worth by providing opportunities for achievement.

Psychological difficulties of unemployment also develop from concern about present and future security, and the apprehension about mobility issues such as the feeling of not getting ahead. In addition, there is a perception that respect from others is not forthcoming, and there is self-recrimination that is inevitable in a society with an ideology of blaming the victim. Briar et al. (1982) found that most workers initially blamed the employers or the economic system for their status when they first became unemployed, but as their experience with unemployment lengthened in duration, they began to blame themselves. Along with the theme of loss, this blaming of self might be considered the basis for a depressive symptomatology.

Certainly the loss of social relations is another source of depression. It is recognized that morale and unemployment may be entangled in terms of accounting for the reduced social contact. Those who make the "chicken and egg" argument might say depression caused the job loss, and was not an outcome of job loss, or at least that argument might explain social withdrawal as an outcome of depression independent of lost work. Another explanation is similar to the one postulated by Brown (1978) who says that depression is a dependent variable. The assumption is that job loss is an independent variable which leads to a series of additional losses (loss of self-esteem, tangible resources, social connections), which then results in depression.

It appears that there is a circular relationship between income, networks, and morale. Economic anxieties, loss of self-esteem, and not being able to afford to socialize leads to lowered social contacts and lowered morale. This lowered morale lessens the propensity to socialize, and may also diminish motivation to look for work which lengthens unemployment. Lack of contacts may also reduce one of the resources for finding new work.

## Conclusions

A full employment economy is probably one of the most effective preventive programs for community mental health. What is alarming is the growing tendency of policy makers to be content with an acceptable minimum level of unemployment. Unemployment makes social interactions difficult and contributes to an increase in psychiatric symptoms. Psychological problems may lead to an increase in hospital admissions as shown by Brenner (1973, 1983, 1984), as well as to an increase of professional help-seeking (Dooley & Catalano, 1979). The point is that those who make the political decisions about acceptable minimum levels of unemployment need to consider the impact of their decisions on mental health, family life, and social cohesion in the community.

If unemployment occurs some means of maintaining social support is needed. Probably the most consistent intervention suggestion for the unemployed worker is the assertion of self-help support group strategies (Buss and Redburn, 1983; Briar, 1983; Fedrau, 1984; Kasl & Cobb, 1978; Keiselbach, 1987; Krystal, 1983; Madonia, 1983). These types of groups are seen as helping to combat isolation, empower workers, raise consciousness, give a sense of usefulness, and provide a nonstigmatized access to services. Self-help groups are also frequently used as aides in the search for reemployment.

Types of programs that foster participation and maintain social contacts include job banks, recreation, hobbies, social action, and task-oriented groups to provide the means of dealing with common strains of joblessness. What seems to be overlooked in the literature is the need to help the individual sustain former contacts, and maintain social contacts in a community context to ward off feelings of separateness among the unemployed.

There is convergence among current studies with the studies of the Depression Era that employment and unemployment are critical determinants of individual, family, and social functioning. The review of the literature indicates that one of the psychosocial costs of unemployment is increased isolation among the unemployed. This lack of connectedness has been linked to

many other ills, and suggests a need to refocus employment and macro-economic policy to consider those costs.

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