

US textile sector job loss: An exploration of implications for individuals, community, and industry

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Abstract:

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore the experiences of displaced female textile sector workers.

Design/methodology/approach – A qualitative approach to data collection and interpretation forms the methodological basis of the study. In-depth interviews were conducted with 14 female employees who were laid off from a large textile manufacturing facility in a southeastern state. Participants were selected through the local community college where they returned to school after losing their jobs.

Findings – A phenomenological interpretation of the responses led to the development of three emergent thematic areas connecting similarities and differences that surfaced across the participants' narratives. Key issues within the thematic areas point to the need for each participant to come to terms with the job loss, both emotionally and financially, and to decide where she would go from there.

Research limitations/implications – The study focuses on women employed at a single manufacturing facility and within a single state in the southeastern USA. Implications of the meanings of participants' experiences for their community and for the future of employment in the US textile sector are considered.

Practical implications – The study provides an interpretation of the impact of textile sector dynamics on the lives of displaced workers and the local community.

Originality/value – The paper offers insight into the human side of industry dynamics and declining manufacturing employment figures. It also sheds light on the extent to which some displaced textile sector workers have pursued the educational options made available through government programs designed to provide assistance with education and retraining.

Keywords: Education, Women, Textile industry, Unemployment Paper type Research paper

Article:

Manufacturing has been on the decline for the past several decades in the United States, and along with it, manufacturing jobs. According to the US Department of Agriculture, manufacturing job losses totaled 2.6 million from 2000 to 2005 (Wojan, 2005). Job loss has been particularly significant in the textile, apparel, and furniture manufacturing industries as production has gone almost entirely off-shore (Oh and Suh, 2003; Taplin, 1999). States in the southeastern region of the USA, once leaders in the textile sector, have suffered a particularly acute decline in employment as a result of such industry dynamics (Hodges and Karpova, 2006).

Textile and apparel manufacturing has a long and varied history within the USA. Initially, it developed in the Northeast during the mid-1700s, but by the mid-1800s, the focus shifted to the South because of a need for being in close proximity to raw materials such as cotton (Glass, 1992). Today, what remains are only bits and pieces of this past, as cost-saving measures such as global sourcing have decimated the once viable economic sector in the South (Hodges and Karpova, 2008; Zingraff, 1991). Production facilities have been closed in attempts to consolidate domestic production, resulting in businesses – many having employed generations of workers – altering manufacturing processes such that these workers are no longer needed. In many cases, these production companies have been the heart of their communities (Norris, 2003). As manufacturing plants close, jobs disappear, as do ancillary businesses such as gas stations and restaurants that once thrived by serving the plant's workers. Individuals employed for years in the textile sector, and sometimes at a single plant, are faced with either relocating to find another textile sector job or retraining in order to leave the sector altogether.

As depicted in Table I, US textile sector employment dropped roughly 30 percent from 2000 to 2003, declining markedly in the three primary sector categories of Textile Mills (NAICS 313), Textile Product Mills (NAICS 314), and Apparel Manufacturing (NAICS 315). In this study, a qualitative methodological framework is used to explore the human side of these figures. The primary purpose is to better understand the experience of job loss from the perspective of the displaced textile sector worker. Consideration of what their experiences mean within the broader context of the community and relative to the future of employment in the US textile and apparel industries provides a framework for interpretation.

Background

The impact of job loss

For many individuals, unemployment often causes emotional trauma, decreased self-esteem and financial hardship (Rowley and Feather, 1987). In the psychology literature, unemployment is considered one of life's biggest "stressors": the mental anxiety and financial strain it causes can negatively affect not just the unemployed worker but his or her spouse/partner and family members (Murray et al., 2003). Divorce and marriage problems (other major life stressors) have been found to increase as a result of unemployment, often impacting children and dependents as well as extended family members and the community as a whole (Penkower et al., 1988).

Unemployment has been shown to alter lifestyles, whether as a result of divorce or economic hardship or a combination of both (McKee and Bell, 1986; Strom, 2003). Men who experience unemployment typically face higher risk for divorce than women due to the drastic drop in income typically associated with the male wage earner of a household (Penkower et al., 1988). Stereotypical views place men in the position of greater job attachment, however, recent research suggests that women who have lost their jobs are just as emotionally traumatized and at risk for feelings of loss as men (Lovell and Negrey, 2001). For men and women, a job is often considered a basic need, as it can define one's identity, secure a place in the social hierarchy, and provide social outlets and activities (Nordenmark and Strandh, 1999).

NAICS	Industry and industry groups	Employment, in thousands			
		2000	2001	2002	2003
313	Textile mills	378.2	332.9	290.9	260.3
314	Textile product mills	216.3	205.7	194.6	179.8
315	Apparel manufacturing	496.8	426.5	359.7	312.7
	Total textile complex	1,091.3	965.1	845.2	752.8

Table I.
US textile sector employment dynamics
Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics

Although some research has been done on the effects of manufacturing unemployment in general, there is very little extant research focused specifically on textile and apparel related unemployment. Little is known about what textile sector workers do after losing their jobs. News reports on factory closures might mention increases in community college enrollment or increases in employment in other sectors (Hodges and Karpova, 2008) but it is a topic that has surfaced infrequently within scholarly journals. Of notable concern is the lack of information pertaining to unemployed workers across gender and racial lines. By the mid twentieth century, African Americans comprised a significant portion of mill employees in the South (Fink and Reed, 1994; Glass, 1992). In more recent times, employment in manual labor jobs reflect the large numbers of Hispanics and Asians recently immigrated to the US (United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1997-2005). Moreover, women's labor has been integral to the foundation of US textile and apparel production since its beginnings in the eighteenth century (Conway, 1979; Daly et al., 1987; Potwin, 1927). Indeed, according to Mittelhauser (1997), as recently as 1996 nearly half of all textile workers and approximately three-quarters of apparel industry employees in the US were women (p. 25). This means that women are just as likely, if not more, than men to lose textile sector jobs.

What happens to women when they lose their jobs? Murray et al. (2003) found that unemployed women faced a higher risk of depression and that those who are single and without children tended to suffer the greatest

problems with mental health. However, a study by Perrucci et al. (1997) that compared unemployed male and female plant workers found that considering economic issues alone, women did not suffer a greater income loss than men, as their wages were generally less to begin with. Considering the large-scale layoffs characteristic of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century textile sector, understanding the impact of unemployment on women, as well as minorities, is imperative.

Options available to displaced textile sector workers

Much research concerning the topic of unemployment considers different options for those found in such a situation. These options include pursuing some type of formal education, such as completing a high school diploma, passing the General Educational Development (GED) exam, or acquiring a college degree[1]. Additionally, re-training for a new position or for work in a new field may also be undertaken. Acquiring more training and education prior to starting a new job search, while a lofty commitment on many fronts, generally increases the likelihood of finding employment (Estes et al., 2002; Howe, 1998). Moreover, those who participate in retraining programs that develop occupational skills often experience higher levels of self-esteem and self-efficacy and lower levels of depression during the subsequent job search and once established in the new position (Creed et al., 2001).

Some displaced workers may decide to leave the manufacturing sector altogether. Two of the fastest growing employment sectors in the US are healthcare and service, with retail constituting the largest facet of the service industry (Jobs with Justice, 2001).

According to Haugen (1986), the most common occupations within the retail trade are sales workers, sales supervisors, cashiers, and service workers (p. 14). Women have generally had little difficulty securing such jobs. Studies have found that the majority of cashiers (80 percent) are women (Duggan, 2001), and that women make up at least 83 percent of apparel sales personnel (Wootton, 1997, p. 16). Despite the prevalence of opportunities within retail, there are several disadvantages to employment within this industry. As Duggan (2001) points out, “The retail industry holds the dubious distinction of offering the largest percentage of part-time work in the US economy” (p. 101). This is especially true in the apparel-retailing sector, where the majority of employees are part-time (Leslie, 2002, p. 64). Part-time employment is often characterized by unpredictable hours and a lack of employee benefits (Duggan, 2001, p. 98).

Another option besides changing job type is to relocate to an area where textile and apparel manufacturing jobs are still available. While this may be possible for some, for others, familial responsibilities and relocation costs are potential deterring factors. As the globalization of textile and apparel manufacturing continues, those workers who do go through the effort and expense of moving may face similar job cuts even after relocating (Norris, 2003).

Sources of economic support for displaced textile sector workers

For the unemployed textile worker, the best option may be to pursue further education or training. Options for assistance with such pursuits are typically available through the former employer, local government agencies, private and non-profit agencies, as well as community colleges and universities. Changes in the economic structure of the United States’ workforce, prompted more specifically by the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), have given way to more federally funded grants that provide displaced workers some amount of assistance. This may include income subsidies, retraining programs or both (United States Department of Labor: Employment and Training Administration, n.d.). Three main programs, the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) grant, Trade Adjustment Assistance (TAA), and Trade Readjustment Allowance (TRA), currently constitute the bulk of the assistance available to workers unemployed by the textile sector.

The WIA grant is part of the Workforce Investment Act, and the Adult and Dislocated Worker Program is responsible for the worker benefits that assist individuals in their re-training and job search efforts. According to the US Department of Labor the goals of the program center on achieving employment and increasing earnings as quickly as possible after being laid off. The Adult and Dislocated Worker Program’s definition of

“dislocated worker” applies to most of the workers involved in the mass layoffs in the textile and apparel manufacturing industries, therefore many are eligible to receive benefits through this program (United States Department of Labor: Employment and Training Administration, n.d.).

As textile sector layoffs increased, the need for assistance with reemployment became greater. The TAA grant was established to assist workers affected by the loss of domestic manufacturing jobs across the US when production shifted elsewhere and imports increased (United States Department of Labor: Employment and Training Administration, n.d.). The benefits of the TAA grant include “Rapid Response Assistance” which occurs during the actual layoff, wherein information about support programs is provided to the workers immediately. Reemployment services, generally in the form of counseling or referrals, are then offered to individuals during their search for a new job. Job search allowances are also provided in the form of monetary assistance during the job search process, and those who do find work may receive a relocation allowance assisting them in the event that relocation is necessary. Training focused on a specific occupational program is also made available.

The TRA grant, a sub-program of the TAA grant, provides income for displaced workers while they are enrolled in a training program. These workers may be eligible for this assistance for up to two years while they complete their programs of study. Additionally, workers who participate in the TRA or TAA programs may be able to receive a health care credit, which reduces out-of-pocket healthcare expenses (United States Department of Labor: Employment and Training Administration, n.d.).

The outcomes of these support programs depend on the individual and the extent to which he or she utilizes them. For instance, though the types of support for further education or training may make the idea of going back to school appealing to some, there are several reasons why others may choose not to take advantage of the opportunity. These reasons might include the need for childcare, lack of interest or motivation, or perceived difficulties stemming from age or familial circumstances. Norris (2003) found that many older displaced workers chose not to participate in retraining and education opportunities due to their proximity to retirement. Many women are still responsible for the majority of domestic duties, whether or not they are also working outside of the home (Reay, 2003). Going to school obviously necessitates time spent away from home in addition to any regular work schedule, a factor that may present challenges for women who are also heads of household and cannot conform to the demands of the traditional college structure (Reay, 2003).

Despite a marked decline in textile and apparel industry jobs (see Table I) a gap in knowledge exists regarding the impact of this decline on the lives of individuals and their communities. A primary objective of this study, therefore, is to develop an in-depth understanding of the experience of textile sector unemployment. An investigation of the ways that individuals and communities are directly impacted by recent industry changes provides a much needed foundation from which to explore the implications of industry change for the future of the US workforce.

Methodology

A qualitative approach to data collection and interpretation forms the methodological basis of the study. Upon receipt of Institutional Review Board approval to conduct research with human subjects from the authors’ university, in-depth interviews were conducted with 14 females who had previously worked at a large textile manufacturing facility in the southeastern USA. This facility laid-off over 5,000 people when it closed in 2003, and had manufactured home textiles in this location for over 115 years. Participants were contacted through administrative officials at the local community college where many unemployed textile sector workers, including roughly 4,000 of those laid off by this particular company, have found assistance in their job searches and/or retraining.

Participants’ education levels at the time of the layoff ranged from one year of high school to a four-year degree. Time spent working in the industry ranged from 3.5 years to more than 40 years, with the average time in textile sector jobs being 27 years. All of the participants relied on a combination of unemployment benefits

and the abovementioned government assistance programs to make ends meet. Occupational training or reeducation included a wide array of academic and vocational options, ranging from welding and motor sports technology to office management and business administration.

Interviews were conducted on-site at the college over a two-month period during 2006. To ensure a systematic approach to the data collection process, the interviewer followed an outline containing fifteen open-ended questions. Every question was followed by a series of probes. Each interview began with the participant reflecting on her experience with being laid off by the company and what it meant for her at that point in her life. Because each had made the decision to return to school, participants were encouraged to talk about any related issues, including the responses of others, such as family and friends, to the decision. Participants were also invited to discuss their views on the future of manufacturing and the apparel industry in general, and specifically in regards to employment opportunities relative to their local communities. Interviews lasted approximately one hour and were audio-taped with the participant's permission. As an incentive for devoting the time necessary for participation, each participant was given a \$25 gift card for use at a major retailer upon completion of the interview[2].

As is protocol within qualitative research, interviews were conducted with a small number of participants until responses reached saturation and the researchers noted repetition in the responses (Kvale, 1996; McCracken, 1988). The interviews were then transcribed with simultaneous development of notations by one of the authors. Then, following the process of interpretive analysis (Spiggle, 1994; Thompson et al., 1990), both authors developed narratives based on the transcriptions. Both authors then interpreted these narratives for significant themes that could be used to describe participants' experiences and perceptions. Both authors worked separately to analyze the narratives and then together to merge them into a consistent whole. The resulting interpretation provides a snapshot of the impact of the plant's closure in the lives of some of its former employees[3].

Interpretation

A phenomenological interpretation (van Manen, 1990) of the responses led to the development of three emergent thematic areas connecting similar issues that surfaced across the participants' narratives:

- (1) becoming unemployed;
- (2) deciding on the options; and
- (3) looking ahead.

Within these emergent themes, commonalities and differences among participants' responses are explored. Key issues within the themes point to the need for each participant to come to terms with the job loss, both emotionally and financially, and to decide where she would go from there.

Becoming unemployed

At the beginning of the interview, each participant was asked to describe what she did at her job prior to being laid off by the company and to reflect on the experience of being let go. Describing how it happened brought up emotions as if it had occurred just yesterday, and necessarily led to a discussion of what it meant at that point in her life, how she felt at the time, and the subsequent adjustments, both financially and emotionally, that had to be made.

Some participants saw the loss as minor, such as Tonya who said, "It was just a paycheck for me[4]." Others, like Phyllis' sister-in-law, were devastated and without direction:

I have a sister-in-law who lost her job there and she's having a really tough time. But I guess she's adjusted to it now. But she's had a really, really hard time (Phyllis).

Regardless of perspective, participant expressions of the experience were charged with emotion a full two years after the event. The impact was clearly still being felt by many of the women, who, like Patty, described the loss with a certain degree of nostalgia:

There's more people that's been so hurt and disappointed and because they've lost their jobs, they didn't realize how good a job they had. If you have something, you don't realize how good it is until you just go somewhere else and get something else. But there's not very many people that wish that they were not at their old job (Patty).

When asked how they learned they would be laid off, none of the participants had confirmation that the plant was closing until it happened, though a few mentioned feeling that change may be on the way. Some learned of the plant's closing while watching the news on television, others while they were at work in the plant:

We were still running the office like nothing was going on. But we all knew that something was going on. We knew that the company was in big trouble. And I was on the phone and they told me to hang up the phone, that we had to go to a meeting and at the meeting we were told that we had 45 minutes to get out of the building. So it was very quick when it happened (Charlotte).

Participants were in disbelief and remembered thinking that it was just another temporary shutdown, which, according to Wilma, happened fairly regularly at the plant:

I worked 40 years in the mill. We were just put off from time to time (Wilma).

As Phyllis explained:

For as long as I worked there, there was always rumors that this was happening and that was happening. But I think it took us all by surprise that anything ever happened. We always pulled through it (Phyllis).

Patty in part blames herself for losing her job, in that she thinks she should have seen it coming and not denied the inevitable job search:

It's just, you know, I can't blame anyone else but Patty, because if I had wanted to, I could have gone out and found something else ... But honestly, we never, ever dreamed that they'd close the doors for good (Patty).

Each woman was asked to reflect on how she felt when the layoff initially occurred. Naturally, all remembered feeling anxious, though to different degrees and for different reasons. For example, Patty, who worked at the plant for nearly 39 years and was its first female supervisor, not only found it hard to accept, but was at a loss to think of what she would do next:

They tried to tell us to accept change and you know, and when it's [someone] on the job as long as I have been and somebody as old as I am, especially, it's hard (Patty).

Patty eventually came to terms with the situation and decided to complete her GED as well as coursework for an Associate's Degree. Melinda had a similar experience:

It was terrible, I mean, for somebody that hadn't ever been, I had been there all my life. And you know, I made my mind up that after I had been out a while and felt sorry for myself, I made my mind up that I was going back to school (Melinda).

Alongside the anxiety participants experienced about what to do next was the interim reality of not having a regular paycheck. The women found themselves strained financially, and unable to help family members as

they had been. This was the case for Brenda, who had been paying for her daughter's college education prior to being laid off. Participants described having to cut back on what they bought. This was true for Wilma, who was forced to work at a minimum wage job in a fast food restaurant, a job she still held at the time of the interview:

I used to go to the grocery store and I bought anything I wanted to buy. Now, I have to be careful how much I buy because of the bills we have. Between what my husband makes, his Social Security check, and what I earn at [the fast food restaurant] we just get by. So that's curtailed my spending ... we go out to a movie every couple months or something ... we don't go out very much and I have to be real careful with my spending (Wilma).

Yet all of the participants were fortunate enough not to have lost homes or cars, a fate faced by many of their former co-workers. As Patty describes:

But I haven't had it ... as bad as some of the others I know, it's been really bad for them. They've lost their home and everything else. But everybody in this area here, have tried, the churches have tried, you know, food banks, and they've actually tried to help people (Patty).

Because Patty's husband went on disability leave prior to the layoff, she had already been forced to cut back on expenses, thus was not as financially vulnerable as others were when the company closed its doors.

When asked about what they missed the most about their jobs in the mill, participants cited money and the fact that they liked the hours or specific tasks:

I miss the money. Yeah, even with my college degree now, I'm not making near the kind of money that I was (Tonya).

I miss the hours. They were 12-hour shifts. And I was off two days per week and every other weekend (Andrea).

Yet it was relationships with co-workers that the participants mentioned most often:

I mostly miss the people. We were sort of like family (Wilma).

What I miss most, I miss my friends. With all of the years that I had been working and when you were out on the floor, you know, I was very close to everybody, really and truly. I mean, when you work in an office with someone and you get along very well with each other, you know, you get a close bond. But when you're out on the floor, you become friends with quite a few people. And you know them (Janet).

I miss the people 'cause in the different jobs that I did with the company, I met a lot of different people (Charlotte).

Beyond missing the daily interactions with plant co-workers, participants' feelings signal a deeper involvement in their position at the plant than it being "just a job." Whether the company provided financial stability, an outlet for social enjoyment, or both, the women's connections with their professional lives were important. As Melinda, who worked for 40 years at the plant explained:

I miss my job. I liked my job. I liked the people, and, I don't know, it was just home. It was just comfortable (Melinda).

For all of the participants, becoming unemployed was a major adjustment. It was difficult to go from the security of a job that had been there for years to facing an uncertain future and an increasingly tight job market. Many recounted going through a range of emotions, such as Brenda, who states:

I took unemployment. I guess I kind of wallowed in self pity, you know, just to adjust to it. I thought you know, “Now what am I going to do? I got the rest of my life.” And the jobs [out there] just didn’t pay anything (Brenda).

Faced with the unknown, Brenda made the decision to return to school as preparation for what she knew would be a challenging job search.

Deciding on the options

Because the plant closure happened quickly and without warning, participants described having to make decisions about what to do next in a very short period of time. As displaced textile sector workers, federal assistance was available to each of them, but to varying degrees. As Wilma explains:

When they first closed the mill they had a meeting. [They said if] anybody needs any help, let us know. So I said “Well, I’ll go there and see what they’ve got to say.” They said, “You got any money in a 401K?” “Yes.” “Have you got any money in savings?” “Well, I think we got \$200 in savings.” “We’re sorry, we can’t help you. If you didn’t have anything we could help you, but since you got something, we can’t help you” (Wilma).

If, like Wilma, one had “too much” money to qualify for emergency assistance, the immediate choice was between seeking new employment and going to school. Participants recalled that neither option was ideal. Wilma was one of many who decided to return to school so that she could receive some kind of financial support. However, this decision was fraught with anxiety for most of the women. For example, Martha, who had worked at the plant for 36 years, felt unsure of her place at college:

To go from high school and so many years [of work] and going to college with all of the modern technology that I don’t know anything about. When I got into college, I felt like a dinosaur ... I had never touched a computer (Martha).

In the days and weeks following the plant closure, representatives from both the state’s Employment Security Commission and the local community college sat at makeshift workstations set up in the middle of one of the company’s larger production facilities. The purpose of these “Rapid Response” teams, supported largely by TAA funds, was to share as much information about the options available to the workers and to provide support for filing the necessary paperwork as quickly as possible. The decision essentially came down to either pursuing community college opportunities with only unemployment benefits functioning as income, or to look for a new job in an area where manufacturing – textile and otherwise – was rapidly disappearing.

Most of the women had at least a high school education when the plant closed. Some, however, did not. Others had as much as a four-year degree. The women in this study represent the majority of workers laid off from the company, in that they decided to return to school in some manner. Yet the decisions did not end there. The three grants that made educational pursuits available to them would expire within two years of the layoff, necessitating an almost immediate selection of a major program of study. While some knew exactly what they hoped to do, others did not. Most relied on academic advisors to funnel them into the available training programs. Some found this rushed decision-making to have long-term negative effects. For example, Phyllis expressed concern over the fact that she was forced into studying a subject due to time constraints, a decision that she now regrets:

So I got in that program (Motor Sports Management Technology). I was committed to it ... after you went into a particular program, you couldn't change. I [now] feel like the two years was for nothing (Phyllis).

Martha chose Health Care Management as her major, but due to issues beyond her control, found that the financial support ran out too soon:

Unfortunately for some of the things that we chose to go into, [we] didn't have enough time. The money didn't last long enough for me to get my degree. So for me to get my degree I had to pay for [the rest] myself (Martha).

One of the biggest reasons why participants opted to return to school was the financial benefit. Not only were there tuition benefits as part of the TRA and WIA grants, but unemployment benefits were attached to one's program of study and the length of tenure in a degree seeking program (provided it was in less than two years). Unemployment benefits typically cease much sooner than the 18 to 24 months of support allowed for by the TRA grant. The thinking behind providing these benefits to former textile workers is to allow them to maintain a certain quality of life while giving them hope of better jobs after the degree is completed. Participants thought this was the best benefit that they received:

I'm just thankful that the government was willing to help us out. You know, there was a lot of people that lost their job. I went back to school and that was a wonderful thing for them to do (Andrea).

Even though I received unemployment, I think it was a hefty amount. I really do, I mean they paid me to go to school. I could not believe it (Lynn).

Further education provided the women with the hope of not just recovering from the emotional and financial hardships of unemployment, but of avoiding the desperation experienced by many of their co-workers who did not pursue the options available. As Judy remarked:

The government did real well with letting people go to school ... If they hadn't of, there'd been a lot of people that would've killed their selves. It would have been a lot worse. It would have been almost kind of like a war zone, you know. I think that people would have went crazy. And some of them have committed suicide. And you know that's sad, but I do think that the government is trying to keep that from happening (Judy).

Returning to school acted as a surrogate for the loss of workplace interactions that many missed so much. Some of the participants reconnected with former co-workers while making new friends. Melinda, who went back for her GED and graduated at the same time as her granddaughter, is extremely positive about her experiences as a returning student:

I was older and when I started the GED class, I thought "I'm going to be, you know ... I'm going to be so out of place." And I went, and there were more older people over there than there were kids. It was just like stepping out of a mess and into something great. I felt like, I just stepped in and everything felt like it just fell into place after that. And I thought, "Well, why in the world did I wait so long?" (Melinda).

Despite initial anxieties, participant responses reflected feelings of pride and a sense of accomplishment that came from pursuing further education at the community college level:

I always wanted to go to school because I wanted to learn and um, it was the best thing that ever happened that they (the TRA grant) offered to take care of it for me ... I chose Medical Office

Administration. And I loved it. I loved the whole program. Went through two years of it and graduated with a 4.0 (Tonya).

As Lynn, the only person in her family ever to go to college states, “There should be a law that everybody has to go to college. It changed my life. I will never be the same person again” (Lynn).

When asked if they were better off now than they were prior to being unemployed, most said that they were in a better place in terms of personal accomplishment. However, nearly all felt that they had not gained much of a foothold in terms of their finances, even with a college degree. For example, Sheila went back to school and earned her degree in business, and is currently employed as a sales associate for a large retailer. However, she earns approximately half of what she made working at the mill. Likewise, the job search itself was not made any easier for some, who, like Judy, returned to school but still had difficulty finding gainful employment. Judy had an 8th grade education when the mill closed but took courses on passing the GED in order to be more competitive in the job market:

When I did the GED I thought, you know, I’ll probably be able to go right out there and find me a job anywhere ... Wrong. That was so wrong (Judy).

Phyllis, who got a two-year Associates degree, had sent out over 300 résumés, and at the time of the research had not been called for a single interview. When asked what she planned to do next, she responded:

I have no idea. I’m going day by day. I have no earthly idea. I just keep putting in those resumes and hopefully one will hit (Phyllis).

Indeed, the economy of the region was badly impacted by the company’s closure (Hodges and Karpova, 2008). Although it is unknown how many of the plant’s 5,000 employees found new jobs, as some retired, moved away or are since deceased, the college has record of working with approximately 4,000 of them. However, other indicators can be used to understand the ripple effect that the plant’s closure has had on the local job economy, such as when a single office job opening at a local food distribution company received over 1,500 applications, suggesting that many have not been able to find gainful employment. From Phyllis’ perspective, this is an indication of the challenges faced not just by the individual displaced workers, but by the community as a whole:

I guess we’re all still going through a healing process and everybody’s just like me, trying to figure out “What now?” (Phyllis).

Looking ahead

As part of the interview process, each participant was asked to talk about what she hoped to do in the near future considering her educational pursuits, and whether she thought the textile sector would be a viable option again at some point. A broad range of responses were given, with some planning to immediately seek employment upon graduation, and others considering further degrees, retiring, or taking additional time away from the job market. Without question, none of the participants envisioned having textile sector jobs again, and all expressed negative opinions of the sector’s future within their local community, or the US for that matter. Such opinions were at the root of the decision to acquire alternative skills via further education and retraining. As a result of the time and effort that the participants put into furthering their education, each of the woman’s future involved a personal and professional sea change. Even though they all had extremely fond memories of working at the textile plant, none of them looked forward to a return to manufacturing work of any kind. When asked about where each saw herself in five to ten years, most envisioned being in a better job than they had in the mill. Some, like Linda, felt unsure of what was to come:

You know, I try not to look that far ahead. If I plan something ... something [else] happens [so] I don’t get to do it. I usually don’t plan a whole lot (Linda).

Ideal jobs ranged from working in a school system to working at the Department of Motor Vehicles. Wilma, who received a degree in Medical Office Administration, hopes to work with children in some capacity:

Five years from now, I see myself working ... I would like to work somewhere, working with kids. I like kids. They're my thing (Wilma).

It is important to note that most of the participants still saw themselves as “displaced textile workers” and had yet to fully integrate their new professional paths into their work-related identities. For each participant, overcoming the loss of her identity as a textile worker has been a long and challenging process. In addition to the stress coming from familial, financial, and school commitments, each woman essentially had to start over again and craft a new professional identity. Like Tonya, participants speak of the experience like recovering from an illness, and reflected on the difficulty of the journey while trying to remain focused on the potential positive outcomes:

I feel like I'm doing better. I don't want my kids to end up working in a mill ... It forced me... it kicked me in the butt, you know. And I think with the college education, I could you know, possibly, grow into a better position (Tonya).

Since the participants had spent at least a few, and in most cases, many years working in the textile sector, each was asked to share her opinion of its future within the US and within the region. Responses were overwhelmingly negative, but for a variety of reasons. For example, Phyllis believes that textile companies will continue to go out of business or send the jobs overseas until the industry has become “obsolete, [eventually] there will be none [left]” (Phyllis). Melinda feels the same and said, “I think it'll be gone. It's [just that there's] too much stuff coming in from overseas. Jobs are disappearing everywhere” (Melinda). Charlotte describes a severing of the symbiotic relationship that the community once had with US textile and apparel manufacturing, a description that is clearly tinged with resentment:

So we gave them the jobs and then we're giving them the equipment to do it with ... It did upset me to know how many people were going to be affected by this. And it has distressed me considerably to see what they have done to [the town]. They not only destroyed the mill, but they've taken away the history. The [name of the town] means “City of Looms” and there are no looms left ... I think it has done a great deal of damage to the community itself. I think there is a great deal of resentment [among] the people that I've talked to that are really upset to see the city being destroyed (Charlotte).

Yet participants clearly recognize the complexity of the situation. That is, it is not just the textile and apparel companies that are behind the changing face of the community, it is also the consumer. Today's US consumer expects to be able to buy a lot for as little as possible. The implications for the industry, jobs, and thus the community are clear to Tonya, who asked:

The wages that they are paying people in other countries, I mean it doesn't even come near to what I was making. Why would they want to pay somebody \$17 an hour when somebody else is going to do it for \$2 or \$3? (Tonya)

Participants, while recognizing that change is inevitable, had differing opinions about the potential impact this change would have on the job market and ultimately the future of their communities:

The only jobs that I see that's opening is truck driving ... I mean that's all that I really have seen in the paper. I mean [there is] hardly nothing [available] (Judy).

In contrast, others saw improvement on the horizon, but with a marked difference. As Andrea states, “It will improve ... Just not in textiles” (Andrea). Phyllis believed things would begin to get better, but primarily for the young people graduating from high school. Linda sees the situation gradually getting better with time:

I think it’s improving. Well, I think there’s other companies opening up. When the big lay off came, everybody was out looking. People have found jobs for various reasons, whether it’s new companies opening up, [and] people are retiring (Linda).

Overall, the participants look forward with some degree of optimism, but clearly find it difficult to forget the impact that the mill and textile manufacturing has had on their community over the years. As Melinda explains:

The company was just like a family. Even the mill hill, I never lived on the mill hill, but I know a lot of people that did. And they, it was so close that it was just like, it was like a family living. Everybody knew everybody (Melinda).

Interestingly, the former owner of the company is building a research campus on the land where the mill used to be. Meant to bring hope to the town’s beleaguered economy, the campus is touted as the way forward and the core of the community’s economic development initiative (Bell, 2006). As to whether this initiative will bring the town back to life again, Patty replied, “We can only hope, you know, we can only hope” (Patty). Participants are watching the progress with mixed emotions and a healthy degree of skepticism about the changes it could bring. As Melinda points out:

It’s going to bring people back. It’s not going to bring the community back ... It’s going to bring a different type of people. See the people that worked in the cotton mill, we were just cotton mill people. And this is going to be a different kind of people (Melinda).

Discussion and implications

The goal of this study was to explore the experiences of former textile sector workers. Major themes arising from the in-depth interviews describe the experience of being let go from long-time jobs and the concomitant financial, emotional, and psycho-social changes it necessitated in participant’s lives. Implications of these changes for the community via the symbiotic link between the employment of individuals and the health of the local economy were revealed and particularly as they surfaced within the lives of the participants. Although unemployment may be considered a fact of life for all working people, what is most important about the experiences of these women is that they lost jobs that can no longer be replaced. At once unemployed and unemployable, the women faced retraining and then a job search, a combination that would be challenging for anyone, but especially for those whose educational backgrounds are limited and/or are near retirement age.

Making the choice to return to school was a decision wrought with much anxiety and anticipation for the participants. Governmental benefits and financial support eased this decision for some, who regarded the help that they received, whether from TRA, TAA or WIA options, to be the primary impetus for deciding to go to school. Others saw it as the opportunity to fulfill a lifelong goal or to make a better life for themselves and their families. Although participants pursued different programs of study, these programs provided them with the skills necessary for the new career they were hoping to pursue. As the industry continues to adapt to the global economy, more and more workers will find themselves facing similar choices. Whether or not local job markets can absorb these individuals becomes the most critical question. Although promoted as a primary force for economic development, it is not clear how the research campus under construction at the site of the former plant will provide employment for those who used to work in the plant. Touting biotechnology as the new textile manufacturing in the area (North Carolina Research Campus, 2006), such jobs will likely pass the participants by, since none of them pursued biotechnology degrees. Indeed, those participants who have re-entered the job market find themselves working in primarily retail, service, and healthcare positions for far less money than they made in manufacturing. Moreover, participant responses pointed to another challenge: Working part-time

for a “big-box” retailer or fast food restaurant typically offers little, if any, benefits, in the form of health insurance or contributions to retirement funds (Duggan, 2001).

When the participants reflected on their lives at the plant and the jobs that they had lost, many conveyed feelings of loss about the connection or sense of community that they were part of when they were working. Co-workers were likely to be considered friends, especially by those who had spent 20 or more years working at the same plant with many of the same people. Those who considered work to be social outlet felt an enormous sense of loss when the job ceased, but were able to fill this void with relationships with their new classmates and often by re-connecting with former co-workers that they would see on campus. Instead of commiserating over the daily grind of the textile plant, the women now provided support for each other in the classroom.

The findings of this study are consistent with other research on the psychological and social effects of unemployment (Lovell and Negrey, 2001; Nordenmark and Strandh, 1999; Rowley and Feather, 1987). For the women in this study, being laid off created major financial and emotional stress in their lives and brought about a crisis in terms of their working identities. Pursuing further education required they make a tradeoff between professional development and limited financial freedom. It was the case for the women in this study that when one door closed, another opened. It is not yet clear if the second door leads to a promising future. Indeed, this study is limited by the fact that it explored the experiences of displaced textile sector workers at only one point in time. Further research is necessary to investigate the ultimate trajectory followed by former textile workers who return to school to acquire more training. Such research could be larger in scale than the present study, and rely on quantitative methods to encompass a greater number of displaced workers to determine the impact of job loss in the lives of these workers as a group. Longitudinal studies are needed that examine intended versus actual career paths, regional employment dynamics and other changes relevant to the participants’ working lives. Similarly, future research may consider families’ experiences of unemployment, and particularly cases wherein multiple family members have been unemployed by the textile sector.

The greatest disparity between participants emerged in their visions for the future. Those who had a positive outlook when seeking employment also considered their community to be growing and offering opportunities for new jobs and employment in the area. Conversely, those who were struggling to find jobs had a more negative outlook and were not necessarily satisfied with the program of study that they had chosen. Yet, regardless of personal situation, all participants believed that the textile industry had left the region and the USA for good. Reasons cited for this belief included the inexpensive cost of labor in developing countries versus the cost of producing the same goods in the USA.

As for the impact of acute job losses on the textile sector, the reputation of the sector as a whole has become vulnerable. Participants indicated a degree of resentment, though not necessarily directed at their former employer, about losing jobs to overseas companies and even supplying these companies with the plant’s own equipment. With the disappearance of domestic manufacturing and many of its former workers reaching retirement age, any positive sentiment about the textile industry may fall by the wayside to be replaced by a growing bitterness that these jobs are no longer available to hard-working Americans but outsourced to workers in foreign countries. In a changing political environment, the feelings and attitudes about the “new” textile worker abroad may be cause for concern for some companies seeking to manage their image in the face of negative press (Hodges and Karpova, 2008). Continued textile sector outsourcing may necessitate some degree of impression management. That is, those companies that outsourced their manufacturing in order to survive may want to consider continuing to invest in the communities that provided them with the local workforce they once needed to thrive. Much more research is needed in order to understand what twenty-first century industry dynamics mean not just for the macro-level picture of the US workforce, but for the micro-level picture of everyday life in former mill towns.

Notes

1. Passing the GED is considered an equivalent to receiving a high school diploma.
2. Because the incentive was used solely for recruitment purposes it did not influence actual responses of the participants.
3. It is important to note that the experiences of the 14 participants are not interpreted as a representation of all of the plant's displaced workers, nor is the interpretation meant to be used as a generalization. Instead, in keeping with the methodological assumptions of interpretive research, these experiences are interpreted to provide an in-depth examination of the phenomenon of job loss among this particular group of women (van Manen, 1990).
4. For the purposes of participant confidentiality, pseudonyms are used in place of real names.

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