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Prolonged unemployment: The reality and responses

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Prolonged unemployment: The reality and responses

Abstract

Prolonged unemployment is a profound social problem as evidenced by a rise in the suicide rate, mental hospital admissions, prison terms, homicides, and health related 1 deaths which appear in statistics several years later (Reigle, 1982). Roberts (1985) described the problem bluntly when she wrote, "unemployment is a killer" (p. 169). Shifron, Dye, and Shifron (1983) reported disturbing statistics that show an estimated 15 million Americans to be "hidden unemployed" or "discouraged workers", those who have given up on finding a job and no longer appear in labor statistics. Hidden unemployment in this article means simply 'not counted' in labor statistics and includes those who are not looking for work because they are discouraged as well as those who are still looking.

PROLONGED UNEMPLOYMENT:
THE REALITY AND RESPONSES

A Research Paper
Presented to
The Department of Educational Administration
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In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

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David C. Nethercott

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Prolonged unemployment is a profound social problem as evidenced by a rise in the suicide rate, mental hospital admissions, prison terms, homicides, and health related deaths which appear in statistics several years later (Reigle, 1982). Roberts (1985) described the problem bluntly when she wrote, "unemployment is a killer" (p. 169). Shifron, Dye, and Shifron (1983) reported disturbing statistics that show an estimated 15 million Americans to be "hidden unemployed" or "discouraged workers", those who have given up on finding a job and no longer appear in labor statistics. Hidden unemployment in this article means simply 'not counted' in labor statistics and includes those who are not looking for work because they are discouraged as well as those who are still looking.

Unemployment became a problem in Blackhawk County, Iowa, beginning with lay offs from Deere & Company during 1980 when the unemployment figure rose from 3.7% in January to 5.9% in December (Iowa Department of Job Service, 1981). With further Deere & Company terminations and the later bankruptcy of Rath Packing Company, unemployment rose steadily to the September, 1985, level of 9.7% which represented 5,500 persons who were officially recorded as out of work (Iowa Department of Job Service, 1985). The evidence suggests the strong possibility

that there are many more hidden unemployed in Blackhawk County than the 5,500 shown in published statistics since the labor force in Blackhawk County fell from an average of 69,500 in 1980 to 56,700 in September of 1985 (Iowa Department of Job Service, 1981; 1985).

The main purposes of this article are (1) to enable professional helpers to understand the stress and loss experienced by unemployed workers and (2) to show those helpers that a variety of church and community based responses can be made. Toward the achievement of these purposes this article will (a) describe emotional reactions which are common to the unemployed and (b) report a number of church based responses to the problem of unemployment which have been initiated and sustained by an ecumenical coalition of churches called Churches in Ministry to the Unemployed (CIMU).

Emotional Reactions

Sheard, Stalley, and Williamson (1983) outlined a variety of emotional reactions to job loss that include a sense of relief, excitement, fear, loneliness, and depression. The Reverend David L. Williamson has had extensive experience leading a church based support group ministry in suburban Minneapolis, Minnesota, and was invited to share with the clergy of Blackhawk County during January, 1983 about how

churches can respond to the stress associated with job loss. Williamson (1983) spoke of emotional reactions experienced by the unemployed and of the value of support group ministries offered by churches.

From the stimulus of Reverend Williamson's visit to Blackhawk County a support group ministry was begun at Valley View Baptist church with a major similarity to Williamson's ministry in that the Valley View ministry placed emphasis on the emotions experienced with job loss and transition. A further similarity has been the high value placed on mutual concern and support. These emphases are common to church based programs for the unemployed and have been summarized in the statement by Thompson (1982) as "one is not what one earns, does or has; one is as one loves." The Valley View Baptist support group ministry was begun in the general context of doing pastoral ministry with those who are facing a life crisis as described by Rightor (1979).

Having launched into a support group ministry that was open to members of Valley View Baptist Church as well as to the community, the author was surprised by the forcefulness of the emotion being expressed in the group setting. As a result of nearly three years of meetings four major themes have been summarized which tell of the stress and the loss associated

with long term unemployment. Those major themes are: (1) anger and frustration, (2) loss of dignity and self-worth, (3) powerlessness, and (4) alienation from society. In the following section these four themes will be described with supporting evidence from the literature, and from group and individual interactions with the unemployed.

Anger and Frustration

According to Powell and Driscoll (1973) a sense of relief and relaxation is usually the first feeling experienced by a laid off worker. However, when unemployment persists and the possibility of finding a job seems remote, anger and frustration become prominent emotions (Avery, 1985). For example, a support group member spoke of being ready to blow up, calling himself a walking time bomb. According to Finley and Lee (1981), as in later stages of grief, anger and frustration properly worked through give way to a certain acceptance, if only resignation toward one's fate.

Common sources of anger and frustration have been reported by support group members as: (1) futile employment contacts that are required by the state in order to receive unemployment benefits, (2) the message from prospective employers that the worker is over qualified or under

qualified, or the message that they would not feel satisfied with the job, rather than allowing the worker to decide, (3) job training programs offered for which they as skilled workers are placed on low priority, (4) the belief that employers hire those they already know, not those they recruit by application and interview, (5) an encounter in which they are told in a glib manner to leave town to find work elsewhere as if leaving town is easy, and (6) the memory of a corporation that promised long term work but delivered long term unemployment instead.

Loss of Dignity and Self-Worth

Profound feelings of loss of personal dignity and self-worth are reported by the unemployed. Job termination itself results in a grief reaction which has been described as a loss of congruence between the self I used to be and the self which I now am (Finley & Lee, 1981). Keefe (1984) described the loss of self-worth experienced by workers when they were no longer able to make their customary purchases as a loss of commodity identity. Those who no longer receive unemployment benefits talk about not being counted, of being ignored, or being hidden and left out of the true economic picture. They speak of being a new minority society without public recognition and proper dignity granted

to them. One image stands out, that of the person who described feeling like a leper.

Powerlessness

Feelings of rejection and impotence may prevail as the unemployed experience others making decisions about them which they can no longer control according to Thompson (1983). For example, homeowners who have put their life savings into their mortgages must continue to pay the costs or see their investment return to the bank. At every point the unemployed wonder where to turn, what to do, finding few viable choices for them and their families.

In addition, as unions continue to lose strength, the unemployed voice feelings of powerlessness concerning unions and corporate policy. The unemployed complain that many corporations do not care about the welfare of American workers as they choose to build plants and hire workers overseas. Large corporations are seen as having increased economic power at the expense of the American worker. Furthermore, blue collar workers wonder if unions will regain strength as promoters of worker's rights and interests.

Alienation from Society

Concurrent with long term unemployment is a widening sense of alienation from society. Hurst and Shepard (1985)

found that distrust and suspicion are voiced by the unemployed toward public officials and institutions including employment agencies. Those who are working are said by group members to be blind to what is actually happening in society, and they are said not to care about unemployed persons so long as they themselves are doing well. Conversations tend toward 'them and us' talk with a perception of 'them, the 'haves', as not caring about 'us', the 'have nots.'

The unemployed tend to drop out socially and politically, choosing not to vote, staying away from friends and family, and becoming less likely to attend church. This social and political movement toward isolation is further reinforced when the unemployed drop their subscriptions to newspapers due to the cost.

Society is not ready to handle the problems of the new poor in a fair and equitable manner according to the unemployed. These are men and women who want to work, who don't want to be on welfare, and who want a fair chance to reenter the economic system. They see themselves as falling through the safety net in many ways because what they have saved and cared for over the years now causes them to be ineligible for government assistance.

Church Based Responses

The following measures taken on behalf of the unemployed by CIMU have evolved in the order in which they are presented below. These measures have arisen out of an awareness of the stress and grief that are present with job loss.

Support Group

The support group, Worker Without Wages, as previously mentioned began in January of 1983 with several members of Valley View Baptist Church. The group soon moved to a home nearby with additional participants from the community. Two-hour meetings have been held each Thursday with this writer leading, assisted by a University of Northern Iowa graduate student, Ed Fulmer, who was recruited through an informal class contact at the University.

Group tasks have included several of the ten curative factors described by Yalom (1975) including the sharing of social service information, instilling of hope, breaking of social and emotional isolation, and the ventilation of feelings. Group members refer to ventilation as a primary satisfier for them about the group. There is a danger, from a leader's perspective, that angry feelings will dominate group interactions. The leader's task has been to help group

members explore the sense of hurt and fear that lies behind their expressed anger.

The primary focus of the support group has been to offer emotional support rather than offering direct job search skill training. Masson and Jacobs (1980) categorized six kinds of groups including mutual sharing types of groups which accurately describes the purpose and function of Workers Without Wages. In mutual sharing groups, members get in touch with their own feelings and discover that others share similar feelings and experiences. Common features of support groups are (a) a shared problem or concern and (b) an emphasis upon group members helping one another according to Pearson (1983). Pearson also distinguished between groups that offer a remedial function and those which offer enhancement functions. Workers Without Wages has been more of the former as group members have been helped to become more functional and have been prevented from becoming less functional in their adjustment to job loss and job transition.

Most meetings have been extended periods of discussion with time taken for introductions whenever a new person has entered the group. Quite often speakers have been invited to come and speak about political issues, job search information, and financial management, for example. Group members have

usually decided who or what they have wanted to hear in order to offer them a sense of empowerment as they make decisions about the group process.

Ecumenical Action

CIMU emerged in the late winter of 1983 as church leaders and lay-persons gathered to talk about needs of the unemployed in Blackhawk County. After several meetings the following goals were stated: (1) raise the level of awareness of the unemployment problem, (2) offer support to one another as we work in our various churches, and (3) take specific actions toward alleviating stress associated with unemployment. Those goals continue to guide CIMU responses to unemployment with the additional goal of helping other churches beyond CIMU to do ministry with the unemployed.

CIMU Goals Implemented

First, raising the level of awareness of the unemployment problem has been aided by local media. Numerous articles have appeared in the Cedar Falls Citizen and the Waterloo Courier telling about CIMU and the support group (Reive, 1983). KWWL Television featured the support group on Iowa Illustrated and also featured a sermon on unemployment from Valley View Baptist Church. Several new ideas have surfaced recently in

the support group. One was to have a parade of the unemployed. Such awareness raising was intended to break the unemployed out of their sense of alienation by telling the community that a human problem is all around them.

Second, offering support to one another as church leaders has been done through monthly CIMU meetings where problems and frustrations associated with unemployment are explored. Most lay church leaders do not know how to begin and are looking for some ideas on how to do something in their own church. Therefore, CIMU meetings focus on training lay persons to do ministry along with offering current social service information. The main thrust of the support offered is to equip CIMU participants to take the first step toward the unemployed in their churches instead of putting the burden on the unemployed. New churches are regularly invited to CIMU meetings as a way of expanding what is being done in the community.

Third, taking specific actions has been the most difficult and the most exciting dimension of CIMU operations. Four major actions will be described briefly.

One action has been a free Community Supper that has been served each Tuesday for about two years in a downtown Cedar Falls church. CIMU did not start the supper but has offered.

a network for the provision of money, food, and volunteers. Eight churches cooperate in rotation to feed an average of 235 persons each week. Participants have said how glad they are to be able to get away from home for a family night out that they otherwise could not afford.

Another action has been Barter Shop, an exchange of goods and services begun two years ago by a CIMU participant. Barter Shop has been open to employed and unemployed persons with a fifty cents per month fee and meets bi-monthly in a face-to-face setting where exchanges are made and guest speakers tell about making the most of limited resources. Exchanges began on a quid-pro-quo basis, but were soon done on a more altruistic basis with unstructured sharing. Barter Shop has had an ongoing garage sale and has entered several craft sales.

A recent action has been the initiation of a Work Support and Recreation Club (WSRC) jointly sponsored by the Blackhawk County YMCA which aims at stress reduction and job transition assistance through education, recreation, and support. Entire families have been served through this every Friday evening program with child care offered to children six and under. Every other meeting has been open for recreation; alternating meetings have included ninety minutes of program and one hour

of recreation. During program time speakers have told about job search skills and life management skills followed by interaction in small groups. About forty persons were enrolled in September 1985 in this completely free offering.

Another recent action has been the requesting of funding from two denominations, The American Baptist Churches, USA, and the Christian Church in the Upper Midwest. A \$5,000 grant was obtained from the American Baptist Churches, USA to be used to assist with housing costs, emergency medical costs, food, and fuel. CIMU has worked closely with local churches and local social service agencies to determine allocations of funds and also in order to avoid a duplication of services. CIMU has also received a small grant from the Christian Church in the Upper Midwest for use with the YMCA ministry.

Summary

Unemployment is too important as a social problem in American to be allowed to remain hidden. Helpers of the unemployed can expect to hear strong emotional reactions from them such as anger, loss of self-worth, powerlessness, and alienation, in the context of high stress and a grieving process. CIMU is an example of what responses can be made to unemployment during hard economic times.

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