



Unemployment and underemployment: A narrative analysis about loss

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ABSTRACT

In this study, we conducted a narrative analysis of interviews with unemployed and underemployed adults to better understand their experiences and to learn how they are coping with job loss. Seven men and six women from diverse backgrounds who were receiving career exploration and job search services were interviewed at a one-stop career center in a northeastern city of the United States. Using narrative inquiry as the methodological lens, the findings revealed three themes: the story of unemployment, factors that affect the unemployment experience, and coping strategies for unemployment. The participants used both micro and macro perspectives in constructing meaning about their work-based problems. The participants who had access to financial resources, relational and instrumental support, and adaptive coping skills seemed to be managing the crisis reasonably well. Other participants, particularly those faced with health issues, poverty, and lack of relational and instrumental support were struggling, often manifesting feelings of despair and frustration. The three themes were integrated in the discussion, highlighting implications for theory, research, counseling, and public policy.

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1. Introduction

The unemployment crisis of the Great Recession has evoked extraordinary challenges for individuals, communities, and nations. Given the global pervasiveness of the problem of access to sustainable work, many policy analysts and economists believe that this recession has dramatically recast the nature of work and non-work (Clifton, 2011; Krugman, 2012; Stiglitz, 2012). The literature on unemployment and underemployment points to the aversive consequences of unemployment for individuals and communities (Paul & Moser, 2009; Wanberg, 2012; Wilson, 1996). However, the vast majority of these studies are quantitative, and while clearly informative, do not provide the level of depth and nuance available in qualitative studies. In addition, with some exceptions (e.g., Gabriel, Gray, & Goregaokar, 2010; Johnson & Jackson, 2012), much of the literature on unemployment was conducted prior to the Great Recession. Furthermore, while scholars and policy analysts (e.g., McKee-Ryan, Song, Wanberg, & Kinicki, 2005; Sadeh & Karniol, 2012) have developed illuminating models of adjustment to and coping with unemployment, much of this work has been designed without an in-depth analysis of the ways that unemployed adults understand and attribute meaning to their experience. In this study, we seek to redress these limitations by using a narrative inquiry approach to understand the ways in which unemployed and underemployed adults understand and cope with their situations. In using a narrative approach, we seek to develop ideas and inferences from the ground up that will inform theory, research, and counseling practice.

Our decision to include both unemployment and underemployment within the same study is based on the fact that many people who have been caught in the maelstrom of the recession have vacillated between having no work at all to having work that is far less congruent with their interests and abilities. By including both unemployed and underemployed adults as participants, we have an opportunity to explore a broad spectrum of responses and stories about the psychological impact of constricted job opportunities and job loss. Indeed, Dooley (2003) argued that unemployment and underemployment exist along a continuum, with similar effects on

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psychological and physical well-being. (To simplify the presentation, we use the term “unemployment” to encompass all of the participants in this study; in fact, each of these individuals experienced some degree of unemployment following their job loss.)

Narrative inquiry, unlike other qualitative methods, reflects a perspective about the way that people make sense of their experiences, as opposed to providing a specific set of research methods and procedures (Clandinin, 2007; Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998). Narrative inquiry can be implemented by a wide array of methods; each methodological approach is linked by the goal of mapping the arc of an individual's life story (Lemley & Mitchell, 2012; Lieblich et al., 1998). We have elected to take a broader, macro-level perspective in this study to capture the richness and depth of the participants' experiences, which are often obscured in the more structured approaches that focus on circumscribed phrases and chunks of text. Moreover, narrative inquiry is used to give voice to the specific subgroups of people who are often silenced and marginalized (Lieblich et al., 1998). Narrative inquiry mirrors the objectives of identifying relationships and patterns in human behavior found in traditional psychological research, albeit deriving these observations from a close exploration of the ways in which people make sense of their lives, their histories, and their future trajectories.

To place the narrative analyses in a context, it is important to review the relevant major themes within the psychological literature on unemployment, underemployment, and job loss. The selected literature review is designed to function as the general story arc, with the individual life histories reported in this study providing the diverse trajectories that are needed for a fully-fleshed out psychological examination of unemployment. The major points in the story arc can be optimally framed by a focused review of the literature on the consequences of unemployment followed by a review of how people manage and cope with this daunting challenge.

Historically, the experience of unemployment has been viewed through a deficit model. Jahoda (1982) posited that employment provides “access to categories of experience,” such as social support, material resources, and a sense of purpose. Unemployment, therefore, limits access to these experiences. Warr (1987) elaborated on this model by naming nine different categories of experience that unemployed people may find inaccessible: physical security, valued social position, availability of money, externally generated goals, variety, environmental predictability, control, interpersonal contact, and opportunity for skill use. Blustein (2006) argued that optimally working can fulfill our needs for survival, relational connections, and self-determination.

The empirical literature on the lack of access to work confirms the aforementioned conceptual perspectives in painting a rather bleak view of job loss and unemployment (e.g., Fryer & Fagan, 2003; Paul & Moser, 2009; Wanberg, 2012). For the most part, unemployment, particularly episodes that last longer than six months, is associated with significant deleterious effects in psychological and physical well-being (Paul & Moser; Wanberg). For example, a number of studies have demonstrated the link between unemployment and mental health problems, including depression, somatization, anxiety, and substance abuse (e.g., Johnson & Jackson, 2012; Reininghaus et al., 2008; Sadeh & Karniol, 2012). From a community perspective, Wilson (1996) found that neighborhoods ravaged by unemployment lost their sense of cohesiveness and became increasingly fractured across the full spectrum of indices of a good life (e.g., security; quality of relationships, health care). While some scholars have speculated that if the mental health problems associated with unemployment may have preceded the job loss, the empirical research shows that unemployment is causally predictive of mental health problems (cf. Paul & Moser).

The unemployment literature also has identified some coping strategies that seem useful in managing the psychological consequences of unemployment. From a conceptual perspective, Fryer and Payne (1984) proposed an agency model that viewed unemployment as creating a psychological void, which people would take initiative to fill by finding different outlets for self-expression and attempting to cope in varying ways. As summarized in a meta-analysis by McKee-Ryan et al. (2005), the following factors are most strongly associated with adaptive reactions to unemployment: feelings of self-worth, perceived control and optimism, less financial stress, a cognitive appraisal of being unemployed that is not overly negative, lower levels of career salience, and supportive family members.

While the literature points to a wide array of ways that people, in aggregate, manage unemployment, the reality of the ways in which people actually cope with unemployment is very likely more complex. In this context, we affirm the view that was advanced by Gabriel et al. who noted that coping:

is not rational, purposive behaviour aimed at returning a person to equilibrium. In dealing with a painful event, such as job loss, people try to make sense of it by constructing a story that emplots the event, offers consolation, and sustains their sense of selfhood (2010, p. 1688).

Additional insights about the coping strategies used by unemployed adults can be gleaned from the Gabriel et al. (2010) narrative study of British managers after the age of 50 who were faced with unemployment during the Great Recession. Gabriel et al. outlined three ways that unemployed managers and professionals view job loss within their personal stories. In the first approach, people understood job loss as a temporary derailment, characterized by a view of the future that includes a recommencement of their previous career and an intensive job search. The second meaning people make of their unemployment is the end of their career, in which job loss is viewed as an “unqualified catastrophe”, and maybe a product of injustice. People who understand their job loss in this way are unable to find solace in the event and have a tendency to ascribe its occurrence to their own personal failings or to the cruelty of others. The third construction of job loss is a radical discontinuity in people's career trajectories, although not necessarily a negative one. People who view their job loss in this way tend to attribute it to social factors, fortune, or other uncontrollable factors. They see their life as continuing, just differently than before, and view their unemployment as the beginning of a new life chapter.

In addition to protective psychological factors and proximal relational resources, broader contextual resources also are influential in helping people manage unemployment. For example, the negative effects of unemployment on mental health seem to be lessened in

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