

Chapter 7.

The Job Seeker Role as Resource: Achieving Reemployment and Enhancing Mental Health*

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In this paper, we review the impact of job loss on physical and mental health, emphasizing the mechanisms by which job loss leads to deleterious outcomes. We then describe the transitional role of job seeker, and examine the challenges faced by job seekers. The JOBS program, a preventive intervention developed by the Michigan Prevention Research Center to help job seekers meet the challenges of finding a new job, is then described. We discuss results of preventive trials that document its impact on reemployment and mental health. We view these preventive trials as experiments in life course development, which can yield dividends in both improved well being and scientific understanding.

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In the modern economy, job loss is pervasive. As economic changes trigger workplace shutdowns and reductions in the workforce, many workers who would never have thought themselves vulnerable in the past are losing jobs (Price, 1990). In 1994, approximately 8 million people were unemployed in the United States. Of those 8 million people, between 50% and 65% were unemployed because they lost their jobs (U.S. Department of Labor, 1995). Given the pervasiveness of the phenomenon, we must understand both the impact of job loss on health and mental health and the mechanisms through which that impact occurs.

The transition from unemployment to reemployment is a turning point in an individual's life (Elder, Gimbel, & Ivie, 1991; Pickles & Rutter, 1991). An unsuccessful transition can close opportunities and place a person on a downward trajectory in terms of social mobility. Successfully negotiating the transition can relieve a number of the stressors of unemployment. In some cases, finding a new job may provide new opportunities and place the individual on a trajectory of upward mobility. Successfully negotiating the transition may also have an amplifying effect; success breeds more confidence.

Job loss is a stressful life event that influences physical and mental health (Pearlin, 1989; Pearlin, Lieberman, Menaghan, & Mullan, 1981). As a primary stressor, job loss can lead to an array of secondary stressors, most notably economic hardship. The physical and mental health consequences of job loss depend not only upon the job loss itself, but also on the number and strength of secondary stressors, such as increased debt and family conflict, triggered by the event. This formulation has been particularly useful in distinguishing life events as primary stressors from their various secondary sequelae. However, most accounts of the relationship between stressors such as job loss and health do not sufficiently emphasize the goal directed orientation of individuals as they cope with stressful events (Thoits, 1994).

Recent developments in role theory (Baker & Faulkner, 1991; Callero, 1994) complement the view of the individual as an active agent in the coping process. These accounts view roles as resources and elaborate on our conception of job loss as a role loss with consequent losses of both material and personal psychological resources. This view supplements the stress process perspective in important ways, by both specifying the resources at stake for the job loser and emphasizing that the job seeker is an active agent, striving to claim a new job role in society.

Impacts of Job Loss on Health and Mental Health: Empirical Findings

Findings from the Great Depression to the present, based on cross-sectional, longitudinal, and prospective designs, have documented the psychological and social costs of job loss for the unemployed person, for members of the person's family, and for the family as a whole (for a recent review, see Dew, Penkower, & Bromet, 1991). Although some people may lose their jobs because of mental health problems, several studies have demonstrated that job loss produces mental health problems which, in fact, extend beyond any prior problems (Dooley, Catalano, & Wilson, 1994; Kessler, Turner, & House, 1987).

Job loss has adverse effects on the job seeker's social and psychological functioning (Vinokur, Caplan, & Williams, 1987). It leads to increases in depressive symptoms (Catalano, 1991; Catalano & Dooley, 1977; Kessler, Turner & House, 1988; 1989), increased anxiety (Catalano, 1991), decreased subjective perceptions of competence (Warr, Jackson, & Banks, 1988), and decreased self-esteem (Jackson & Warr, 1984). Job loss is also associated with increased risk of suicide attempts (Platt & Kreitman, 1985), increased risk of alcohol abuse (Catalano, Dooley, Wilson, & Hough, 1993), and increased propensity for violent behavior (Catalano, Dooley, Novaco, & Wilson, 1993).

Job loss also affects members of the job seeker's family (Dew et al., 1991; Elder & Caspi, 1988). The job seeker's increased propensity for aggressive, even violent, behavior often manifests itself in the context of the family. Positive correlations have been found between job loss and both spousal abuse (Windschuttle, 1980) and child abuse (Gil, 1970; Parke & Collmer, 1975). Research also indicates that the wives of job losers have a higher prevalence of psychiatric disorders than wives of people who remain employed (Bebbington, Hurry, Tennant, Stuart & Wing, 1981). Finally, job loss has been linked to marital and family dissolution (Liem & Liem, 1988).

Not all job loss is harmful, however. While the majority of research on job loss has documented its deleterious effects, job loss may, in some instances, actually be beneficial for an individual's physical and mental health (Wheaton, 1990). The meaning and impact of a job loss depend, in part, on the history of the job role for the individual. For example, many jobs and organizational contexts are stressful (Ganster & Schaubroeck, 1991; Kahn & Byosiere, 1992). When individuals lose jobs that expose them to chronic stressors, the loss may actually relieve stress and benefit health.

Job Loss as Role Loss: Impact on Material and Personal Resources

We propose that job loss is linked to physical and mental health risk through role loss and its consequences. Roles afford access to both material and personal resources in society (Baker & Faulkner, 1991; Callero, 1994). Involuntary job loss entails not only loss of income and access to the resources that income allows, but also a loss of status, occupational identity, and feeling of control over events. These losses of material and personal resources and the stressors associated with them trigger distress and mental health problems (Jahoda, 1981); Warr & Jackson, 1984) Of course, the degree of stress depends importantly on both the salience of the work role (Thoits, 1991) and the degree to which the individual was dependent on the lost resources.

Job Loss and Economic Hardship

A number of studies have identified economic hardship as a key mediating influence between job loss and depressive symptomatology (Kessler, Turner & House, 1987; Price, van Ryn, & Vinokur, 1992; Vinokur, Price, & Schul, 1995). Furthermore, substantial evidence supports the relationship between economic hardship and health outcomes more generally (Umberson, Wortman, & Kessler, 1992).

In the case of job loss, the resulting economic hardship may have effects on mental and physical health through at least three pathways. First, economic hardship may deprive individuals and their families of resources needed to sustain physical health and general well being. Second, economic hardship can produce a cascade of stressful events with both immediate and delayed effects on health and well being. Third, the stresses of economic hardship can influence family dynamics, which in turn affect mental health.

Economic Deprivation.

Economic hardship may affect physical health and general well being through negative effects on nutrition and loss of access to health care. Poor nutrition has its own radiating set of consequences on well-being: Poor nutrition can make both children and adults more susceptible to physical illness (Beasley, 1991), and malnourished children show lower levels of school achievement (Pollitt, 1994), increasing the likelihood of continued downward social mobility in later generations.

Because health insurance in the United States is frequently directly tied to paid employment, one of the most immediate consequences of job loss is diminished access to health care. Price (1990) has observed that families will often reallocate limited benefits among family members. For example, a family may seek treatment for children while neglecting acute conditions among adults. Individuals may fail to seek either preventive services or care for acute and chronic conditions. In these circumstances, acute conditions can become chronic, and chronic conditions may deteriorate still further (Price, 1990). These health effects, of course, also influence the capacity of unemployed persons to seek new employment that might reverse the flow of negative health and unemployment effects.

Cascade of Stressful Events

Economic hardships produce a cascade of stressful economic life events that challenge the coping capacities of families and individuals. In the short term, economic hardship forces people to worry about facets of life that previously had been taken for granted. Inability to meet payments for housing may lead to foreclosure or eviction. Loss of an automobile means the loss of not only family transportation, but also a key resource for an effective job search.

Economic hardship can also have delayed effects. People may cope with their financial difficulties by using credit cards or installment purchase plans, or by drawing heavily from savings. These approaches to coping with financial strain can have long term negative consequences. Drawing heavily from savings and taking on additional debt create a spiral of financial economic problems that will continue even after employment is regained. These long-term financial problems may be even greater for older individuals who lose their pensions along with their jobs (Price, 1990).

Reverberation of Economic Stressors throughout the Family

Still another set of mechanisms implicating economic hardship and family dynamics mediates the relationship between unemployment status and poor mental health. Several studies suggest that the distress displayed by job losers affects the well being of their spouses (Liem & Liem, 1988; Penkower, Bromet, & Dew, 1988) as well as their children (Elder & Caspi, 1988; Justice & Duncan, 1977; Steinberg, Catalano & Dooley, 1981). Recent results reported by Vinokur, Price and Caplan (1996) reveal that couple dynamics influence the mental health of the unemployed person. Their analyses suggest that economic hardship increases depressive symptoms in both job losers and their spouses. Depressed spouses or partners then withdraw social support from the unemployed person and increase undermining behaviors. Both reduced support and increased undermining by the spouse then increase the depression and reduce the marital satisfaction of the unemployed person. Economic hardship associated with job loss in a family has direct effects on the spouse or partner, which in turn erodes that person's capacity to support the job loser, with predictable effects on the job loser's mental health.

Influence of Job Loss on Personal Identity and Mastery

Roles are used to construct the self (Callero, 1992; 1994; Turner, 1978). Losing the central roles of worker and provider is a major challenge to a person's identity. Ezzy (1993) argues that job loss is a form of status passage that directly disrupts an individual's attempt to sustain a consistent and positive self-image and therefore increases the risk of mental health problems. Furthermore, because life domains are interrelated, role loss in one domain has radiating effects on other domains. Thus, loss of an occupational role also presents identity challenges to the individual in the role of friend, spouse and parent.

Job Loss and Erosion of Personal Identity and Friendship Ties

Some jobs are low in status, but few are as stigmatized as unemployment. Unemployment status represents a form of “spoiled identity” (Goffman, 1963); job losers will often construct an alternative work identity such as “consultant” or “student” to avoid the erosion of self-esteem and demoralization often associated with socially devalued roles and statuses (Hughes, 1945).

Job loss may also present a challenge to identity and self esteem by altering an individual’s network of friends and social support. The loss of a job may result in the loss of a primary source of contact with friends (Bolton & Oatley, 1987). Since friendships often arise and are maintained by proximity (Whyte, 1956), the bonds of friendship are more difficult to maintain when people are no longer employed by the same organization. Over time, the frequency of contact with friends from the previous job decreases (Atkinson, Liem, & Liem, 1983), and this loss of friendship networks can erode mental health. Kessler, Turner, and House (1988) found that being integrated into an affiliative network reduced the impact of unemployment on anxiety, depression, somatization and physical illness of job losers. Their findings underline the importance of supportive friendships for identity and well-being.

Job-Loss and Family Relations

Finally, one’s identity, sense of mastery and competence are normally sustained in valued and sanctioned social roles as provider, spouse and parent within the family (Thoits, 1991). Job loss disrupts these roles and the sense of personal identity and mastery they provide. This role disruption takes a number of different forms. Job loss introduces new and pressing agendas into the family, including coping with financial hardship and mobilizing to find reemployment, that can disrupt previously stable household role allocations and relationships (Conger, et al., 1990; Menaghan, 1991).

When role reallocation involves shifts in authority and status in the family, the resulting shift in power dynamics can lead to conflicts that threaten the short-term stability of the couple relationship (Atkinson, Liem, & Liem, 1986). Such a re-alignment can undermine the self-confidence of the job seeker and the partner in coping with job loss individually and as a couple (Howe, Caplan, Foster, Lockshin, & McGrath, 1995; Vinokur & Caplan, 1987). It can also reduce the likelihood that the couple will develop workable solutions to the concrete demand of the crisis and, consequently, can increase the risk of depression for both partners (e.g., Kowalik & Gotlib, 1987; Vinokur, et al., 1996). This destabilizing process can result in a downward trajectory in the marital relationship that may end in separation and divorce (Gottman, 1993). Job loss and economic hardship also place strains on parent child relationships (Conger et al., 1990; Elder & Caspi, 1988). These strains not only undermine the parent's sense of identity and mastery, but often increase the likelihood of parental irritability, conflicts between parent and child, harsh punishment, and family violence and child abuse (Broman, Hamilton, & Hoffman, 1990).

Summary

Job loss is role loss. Paid work roles provide access to critical material resources that sustain life, health, and well being for individuals and families. Paid work roles also provide emotionally significant identity resources to individuals in their role as family provider and as a contributing member of the community. Job loss strips away access to these essential material and identity resources. The loss of these resources may then result in a series of short and long-term problems for individuals and families, including mental health problems and increased risk of divorce, family violence, and child abuse. A recent study by Turner (1995), using a national probability sample of unemployed persons, found that the negative health consequences of unemployment are determined by identity strains and economic hardship. However, he also suggests that those two classes of strains are differentially important for different groups of job losers. Job losers with high SES, especially those for whom the work role is most salient, may

suffer more from the loss of identity than from the loss of material resources. Job losers with low SES, on the other hand, may suffer more from the increased financial strain (Turner, 1995).

The Transitional Role of Job Seeker

As we have argued, job loss is a major role loss that casts the individual into a new stigmatized social status as an unemployed person (Ezzy, 1993). Status as an unemployed person does not provide the individual with a coherent positive identity or with an alternative social role that guides action. Consequently, in addition to the humiliation, disappointment, feelings of betrayal, and financial pressures that accompany job loss, job losers also experience a sense of crisis. Since unresolved crises tend to have powerful negative effects on mental health (Turner & Avison, 1992), the resolution of this crisis by successfully assuming a more satisfactory role in the social structure is an important first step. Once a new role is assumed, the sense of crisis gives way to the struggle of enacting the new role successfully. Although individuals are motivated to actively solve the problems that face them (Thoits, 1994), their motivation becomes directed and translated into action only when they can mold a plan that will lead to their goal. Having a realistic achievable goal enhances one's sense of mastery and further energizes actions.

Being unemployed does not provide a vision of a realistic goal. Hence, the first turning point for job losers is to escape the transitory status as an unemployed person by defining themselves with a more satisfactory role. Some job losers define themselves as students and return to school; others define themselves as parents and resume or take on child-rearing responsibilities; and still others define themselves as retired. However, for the majority of job losers, to alleviate economic hardship and protect their identity, they must often claim their old occupational role by finding a new job.

Successfully Enacting the Role of Job Seeker

The task of finding and assuming a new job is not straightforward. Successfully coping with unemployment and obtaining a new job largely depends on an individual's ability to assume the transitional role of job seeker. Defining themselves as job seekers is the first step toward the development of an articulated, concrete course of action that seems realistic and achievable. Assuming the role of job seeker is the turning point that transforms the psychological distress of job loss into a directed plan of action. .

Successfully enacting any role, including that of job seeker, involves several skills. Although the transitional role of job seeker is generally recognized in society, job-seeking skills are seldom formally taught. Most people learn job search skills informally through either self-help programs (Azrin & Beasalel, 1982) or self-help books (e.g., Bolles, 1995). Mastery of these job search skills, which are critical to landing a job, becomes a new challenge for the job seeker.

What knowledge, skills, and attitudes allow job seekers to enact their role successfully? First job seekers have to recognize the set of marketable skills they possess. Second, they need to decide which occupational role they wish to claim and know how to find employers who desire employees with the occupational role and skills. Third, they need to know how to present themselves and communicate their skills so employers will recognize their value. And fourth, they need to be able to evaluate the merit of jobs that are offered to them. These skills form a repertoire of skilled social behaviors involved in the enactment of a social role: They involve merging and presenting components of one's identity (skills to be used in the workplace as well as personality traits) to complementary role players (i.e., employers) according to norms that are appropriate for socially constructed channels (job applications, resumes) and situations (networking, calls for job inquiries, interviews).

One new perspective expands the traditional concept of social roles to include their dynamic aspects as claims to and uses of resources (Baker & Faulkner, 1991; Callero, 1994). This perspective suggests that the role of job seeker itself, skillfully and persistently enacted, is a vital resource in successfully claiming a role that will lead to reemployment. This new perspective underscores the importance for the job loser of assuming the job-seeking role. Through the psychological assumption of the role and its successful communication to others, the job seeker is able to mobilize various resources that are instrumental in pursuit of a new job. For example, presenting oneself as a job seeker allows the person to ask relatives, friends, and former coworkers and employers to provide leads and information on promising jobs, and for transportation to job interviews. Self-presentation as a job seeker also allows the person to legitimately ask a spouse for help in various tasks, including help with various household and family duties (e.g., child care), so that time is available for the job search. In fact, claiming this role may be a requirement of official employee assistance programs such as job retraining, career- planning seminars, and job search workshops.

Challenges in the Job Seeker Role

Even within the role of job seeker, there is uncertainty associated with searching for a new job. This uncertainty has a number of elements, that add to the complexity and threat of the major tasks involved in enacting this role (Caplan, Vinokur, Price, & van Ryn, 1989). Job seekers may be unaware of which of their skills are most marketable and how those skills conform to possible occupations. In addition, in many cases the job seeker will not know where geographically or in which industrial sectors to look for a new job. Even if one has a clear sense of which skills are marketable and where to look, there remains the question of how to present oneself in the job search. For example, it is not enough to declare oneself a job seeker in general. A provisional occupational role must be claimed, both to direct ones own efforts and to mobilize and focus the aid of supportive friends and family. Finally, the job seeker will face numerous setbacks before a new job is won, including refusals, rejections and delays. If

setbacks create discouragement and hopelessness, a sustained and effective job search is unlikely. Furthermore, these setbacks can trigger more serious problems for vulnerable individuals, including depression, drinking problems, and family conflict (Kessler et al., 1988; Price, 1992).

A successful job-search program must meet several formidable challenges in teaching job seeking skills. The program must recruit individuals who are shaken by their recent job loss, uncertain about their financial and career futures, and frequently haunted by self-doubts about their marketability. The program must gain the trust of these often fragile candidates, help them realize the positive aspects of assuming the role of job seeker, determine their own marketable skills, identify provisional occupational roles, appraise the barriers facing them in their job search, develop their job-seeking skills, and increase their confidence in the job search process, support them in a sometimes unfamiliar job market, inoculate them against the inevitable setbacks, and finally, help them make career decisions that will launch them into the next phase of their working lives.

The Michigan JOBS Program as Training in Skillful Role Enactment

The Michigan Prevention Research Center developed the JOBS program, a preventive intervention in which unemployed people learn how to be skillful job seekers (Caplan, et al., 1989; Price & Vinokur, 1995; Vinokur, Price & Schul, 1995). *The program consists of a job search workshop with co-trainers who facilitate group processes oriented to maximize active learning experiences.* The program helps participants recognize and assume the role of job seeker as a positive transitional role that can facilitate reemployment. The JOBS program further helps the participants discover how to draw on and play out the personal and social resources that become accessible by enacting the job seeker role. More generally, the program (1) clarifies the cognitive and procedural tasks involved in the enactment of the job seeker role, (2) teaches effective ways to exercise the skills needed to perform those tasks, and (3) inoculates

the participants against setbacks by using cognitive, motivational and behavioral techniques. Taken together, these elements bolster the motivational and coping resources of the program's participants.

Clarifying the Job Seeker Script and Learning to be a Skillful Job Seeker.

The JOBS program is designed to clarify the frequently unfamiliar job seeker script, starting with how to begin the job search and finishing with a focus on how to handle the outcomes. *The program begins with self and market appraisal where the candidate identifies marketable skills, assesses market opportunities and identifies alternative job and career possibilities.* This stage essentially allows job seekers to assess “possible selves” (Markus & Nurius, 1986) and examine their previous work and personal life to identify transferable skills that match new job or career options.

In the second stage, participants begin to engage in the job environment by searching for potential employment opportunities. Job seekers learn that conventional sources of information, such as want ads, are frequently of little use and that personal and social network contacts are much more valuable (Granovetter, 1974).

After identifying potential employment opportunities, the job seeker must contact those employers and create a favorable impression. The key to skillful self-presentation is learning to “think like an employer” (Curran, 1992). A job seeker must communicate aspects of his/her background and skills that would legitimize the employer's decision to hire them. Thinking like an employer provides the participants with the appropriate perspective so they can effectively target their presentation. This new perspective also helps participants to identify weaknesses in their qualifications and to reframe them as potential strengths. For example, older workers might argue strongly that their long career reflects a substantial depth of experience, not easily obtained elsewhere, rather than a lack of energy or other attributes the employer might associate with older workers.

Participants also learn how to skillfully contact prospective employers (Granovetter, 1974). One tactic involves obtaining purely informational interviews to learn more about the kind of work the organization does and what kind of skills, qualifications, training and experiences are needed. The informational interview lets prospective employers observe the skills and demeanor of a job seeker without feeling pressured to respond to direct queries about a job. Informational interviews also allow job seekers to communicate their assets and availability. In some cases, they may offer to do volunteer work or a limited scope project to demonstrate their skills and make themselves memorable to a prospective employer.

Finally, a persistent and skilled job search may generate more than one job offer. Therefore, the management of job choice (Power & Aldag, 1985) is critical. Participants learn to evaluate the true quality of potential jobs to further their long-term economic interests and well-being and to manage relationships with prospective employers, even if a job offer is declined.

Active Learning and Inoculation Against Setbacks: Key Ingredients

Active learning and inoculation against setbacks are key ingredients in the delivery of the JOBS program. These facets are essential for the skills learned in the program to transfer to the actual job search. They provide participants with the motivational and coping resources to maintain a focused and energized job search even after setbacks.

Building Skills and Motivation through Active Learning.

Active learning helps participants discover the resources that they possess and how to apply them most effectively to cope with their job search problems and meet their reemployment goals. The purpose of the active learning process is twofold: to maximize specific job seeking skills and to enhance both the specific job search self-efficacy and the global sense of mastery (Pearlin et al., 1981). Together, job search self-efficacy and the sense of mastery serve as motivational forces that sustain job search activities (Bandura, 1977).

In the JOBS program, the group is used as the medium for implementing the active learning process. *Participants practice the skills in situ during the course of the program and receive feedback from other participants and trainers to further refine their job seeking skills.* For example, in learning how to perform in a job interview, participants first observe trainers modeling skilled interview behavior. Next, participants role-play the interview situation, with each person in the group serving as both interviewer and job seeker. Finally, participants offer each other advice and support to further improve tactics of self- presentation. This process exposes the participants to each other's strengths and weaknesses and allows them to learn from and help each other in a socially supportive environment guided by trainers who provide constructive feedback. By actively engaging participants in their own learning, the program enhances feelings of mastery over the previously unfamiliar job seeker role.

Bolstering Coping Resources through Inoculation against Setbacks

Another key component in the coping repertoire of a job seeker is the inoculation against setbacks (Meichenbaum, 1985). *Because even the most skillfully enacted roles will meet with periodic failure and rejection, the individual must anticipate setbacks in the job search and rehearse coping strategies.* Participants are encouraged to diagnose possible barriers to their activities and to imagine possible rejections and failures in the job search process. They then generate and evaluate possible tactics to remove the barriers and avoid or deal with the setbacks. This process inoculates job seekers against setbacks by training them to rapidly and effectively mobilize effective coping strategies when setbacks loom ahead. *The result is a repertoire of responses that minimize demoralization and helplessness when the inevitable problems are encountered.*

Impact of the JOBS Program

The JOBS program has been studied in two large-scale, randomized, preventive trials initiated in Michigan during the past decade. In each trial, recently unemployed workers were recruited in Michigan Unemployment Offices. They were invited either to participate in the JOBS program or (in the control group) to receive a take home set of materials that contained the written content of the program. In both randomized trials, the JOBS program was conducted with groups of 15 to 20 unemployed participants using male-female trainer pairs. The program was conducted in five half-day sessions and has been described in a detailed implementation manual (Curran, 1992). In both trials, the JOBS program was delivered in community centers, school classrooms, and rented rooms in hotels or other settings that were geographically accessible to the participants. Detailed reports of both trials are available in Caplan et al. (1989) and Vinokur et al. (1995). The major findings of these trials are summarized below.

Reemployment and Mental Health

The results of the JOBS I trial clearly indicated that the participants of the JOBS program obtained new jobs sooner and achieved higher rates of reemployment (Caplan et al., 1989). Also, participants obtained higher paying jobs than their control group counterparts did. Over the two and a -half year follow-up, the economic advantages gained by the JOBS participants persisted and showed no indication of diminishing in comparison with the control group (Vinokur, van Ryn, Gramlich, & Price, 1991). Perhaps most important, participants in the JOBS program showed clear mental health benefits (Caplan et al., 1989; Vinokur, Price, & Caplan, 1991). JOBS participants showed significantly lower levels of psychological distress and depression when compared with their control group counterparts. The mental health benefits appeared to be connected to reemployment, and they persisted throughout the course of the initial JOBS trial. Furthermore, participation in the JOBS program appeared to have psychological benefits beyond those associated with reemployment. Even participants who were unable to obtain reemployment initially continued to show higher levels of job search

confidence and morale over time than did their control group counterparts, for whom job search confidence sharply eroded with continued unemployment (Vinokur, Price, & Caplan, 1991).

These initial results indicate that being taught the skills needed to enact the job seeker role had a number of important consequences for the program participants, including more rapid reemployment at higher paying jobs and prevention of depression associated with prolonged unemployment. Beyond that, these initial results suggest that participation in the program increased participants' confidence and sense of efficacy, even among those whose job search was more prolonged and who were not yet reemployed.

Greater Gains for Those at Higher Risk

Not all people experiencing involuntary job loss are at equal risk for serious physical and mental health problems. To identify those job losers most at risk for subsequent mental health problems, particularly depression, we conducted a set of risk analyses (Price et al., 1992 soc). *These analyses indicated that participants at particularly high risk for depression were those with elevated levels of depressive symptomatology, high levels of economic hardship, and low levels of social assertiveness at baseline measurement.* A reanalysis of the JOBS I trial that compared high- and low-risk participants in the JOBS program and their control group counterparts clearly indicated that the vast majority of mental health benefits of the JOBS program were for high risk participants (Price et al., 1992). Furthermore, these benefits appeared to occur for those high- risk participants who would have otherwise developed the most severe depressive symptoms had they not been exposed to the JOBS program.

To provide more rigorous causal evidence for these findings about high- risk participants, the JOBS II trial was conducted as a prospective trial in which high-risk participants, as well as lower risk participants, were randomly assigned to the experimental (JOBS) and control conditions. Results of the JOBS II trial clearly replicated the reemployment and mental health findings of JOBS I. *Participation in the JOBS program promoted higher levels of reemployment and mental health. Perhaps more important, however, JOBS II confirmed the benefits of JOBS for high-risk participants.* The high-risk participants received the majority of benefits. While both high- and low-risk participants experienced an increased sense of mastery after participating

in the JOBS program, reemployment rates and mental health benefits were considerably higher for high- risk participants.

High-risk people, left to their own devices, are most likely to lose confidence, remain unemployed, and periodically fall into episodes of depression. It is precisely these high- risk people, however, who also show the greatest preventive benefits from the skills and confidence gained through the JOBS program (Vinokur et al., 1995). The JOBS II trial also collected data from the spouses and significant others of job losers about the distress and social and emotional functioning of JOBS participants and controls. These data from a “natural rater” in the environment of job losers corroborate the self-reports of job losers themselves, providing external validity for the impact of the JOBS program.

Benefits and Costs of the JOBS Program

A benefit-cost analysis conducted by Vinokur, van Ryn, Gramlich, and Price (1991) indicated that the JOBS program not only produced substantially higher personal income for JOBS participants, but also generated higher state and federal tax revenues. *These findings suggest that adoption of the program by government-based human services would pay for itself in less than a year.*

Some may fear that the JOBS program, in promoting reemployment for one group within society, is simply taking jobs from others, but *there is reason to believe that such displacement effects are minimal.* Labor economists Davidson and Woodbury (1993) have examined the issue of displacement effects of programs that promote reemployment among workers who lost their jobs and qualify for unemployment compensation. They found that the displacement effects of the programs were minimal and were offset by the overall improvement in the economy that results from reducing the duration of job vacancies. This accelerated job filling, in turn, leads to the creation of more job opportunities through increases in economic efficiency. Thus, *if such programs succeed in reemploying people more quickly or in helping people obtain jobs more suitable for their skills, they enhance the efficiency of the labor market and ultimately contribute to economic growth.*

Mechanisms of Action: Reduced Financial Strain and Increased Mastery

The broad outlines of some of the main mechanisms of action of the JOBS program on mental health are beginning to emerge. Specifically, *financial strain is the critical mediator between unemployment and poor mental health* (Kessler et al., 1987; 1988; Vinokur, Caplan & Williams, 1987). Financial strain has also been found to be a mediator between stressful life events such as widowhood and negative mental health outcomes (Umberson et al., 1992). Other research has demonstrated that reemployment restored mental health to pre-unemployment levels by reducing economic hardship and financial strain (e.g., Kessler et al., 1988). *The JOBS intervention had significant effects on reemployment rates, monthly income, and mental health. Therefore the JOBS program is most likely to help improve mental health by facilitating reemployment, which restores income and reduces economic hardship.*

Findings from the JOBS trials also suggest that the program facilitates reemployment by enhancing feelings of mastery and enabling participants to engage in a skilled and persistent job search. Our results suggest that an enhanced sense of mastery is a likely mediating mechanism between experience in the JOBS program and reemployment. Analysis of the JOBS II preventive trial by Vinokur, Price, & Schul (1995) indicated that respondents who participated in the JOBS program showed increased levels of mastery. Thus, a likely mechanism of action is that JOBS provides needed job seeking skills, inoculation against setbacks, and an increased sense of mastery that facilitates reemployment, decreases economic hardship, and improves mental health. *The intervention is particularly successful for high-risk respondents who are less able to mobilize psychological resources for a successful job search.*

Toward Tests of Generalizability and Implementation in the Community

Both from a theoretical and a practical perspective, these initial results suggest the need for a second generation of preventive trials to examine generalizability across various populations and community contexts. For example, results of both JOBS trials demonstrated that high-risk respondents (those with initially higher levels of depressive symptoms and economic hardship) benefit most from the intervention, suggesting that efficiency and cost- effectiveness might be increased by recruiting only high-risk participants. *However, the effectiveness of the JOBS intervention appears to depend on the supportive participation of low-risk participants.* Future effectiveness trials are needed to test this hypothesis.

A second relevant example involves the role of spouses and significant others. *Supportive and undermining behavior from an intimate partner is consequential for effective enactment of the search role and for the mental health of the couple* (Howe, et al., 1995; Vinokur, et al., 1996). This suggests a second kind of trial, enlisting the cooperation and support *of the spouse or significant other in the JOBS program itself.* A set of preventive trials is under way to test this hypothesis and will allow replication of a new JOBS intervention for couples in Michigan and Maryland, states with quite different labor markets.

Beyond questions of generalizability are *questions of implementation of preventive interventions in the community.* This third generation of prevention research *poses questions about cultural differences in community receptivity and organizational readiness for the adoption of innovative prevention programs* (Price & Lorion, 1988; Price & Vinokur, 1995). For example, we need to know a great deal more about the fit between preventive programs such as the JOBS program, thus far delivered in relatively ideal conditions, and existing agencies and communities with different resources, cultures, and organizational capabilities.

Conclusion: Preventive Trials as Experiments in Life Course Development

Job loss is a psychosocial condition that can lead to deleterious emotional, behavioral, and physical effects. It entails the loss of a valued role in society that carries with it crucial material and personal resources. It often results in economic hardship and corrodes one's sense of mastery, personal identity and close relationship. This assault on material and personal resources in turn produces a broad array of impacts on physical and mental health, not only for the job loser, but often for family members as well.

Job loss also represents a turning point in life. Left to their own devices, some job losers will successfully claim a new work role in society and reap all of the protective economic and psychological resources that a good job provides. Many others, overwhelmed by the cascade of negative financial events and an eroded sense of mastery, will suffer discouragement and depression and may become a burden or source of stress to their families.

The transitional role of job seeker can facilitate coping with unemployment and the passage to reemployment. The job seeker role is challenging and requires persistent, skilled role performance under conditions in which setbacks and rejection are the rule rather than the exception. The JOBS preventive trials show that skillful and persistent use of the job seeker role can be taught, resulting in positive outcomes for individuals, families, and communities. Individuals who enact the job seeker role skillfully experience less psychological distress and depression and greater economic gains, and their family members exhibit more supportive relationships and lower likelihood of divorce and spousal abuse. Communities could experience economic growth and generate greater tax revenues.

When turning points in life, such as job loss, are positively influenced under the controlled conditions of a preventive trial, there are scientific benefits as well. In the past, our understanding of the mechanisms and impact of social adversity on health and mental health has relied heavily on the results of social and epidemiological survey studies, sometimes supplemented by intensive qualitative research (Kessler, Price, & Wortman, 1985). Longitudinal studies, in particular epidemiological studies, have uncovered antecedents of physical and mental health and have confirmed the importance of personal and social resources, such as mastery and social support, in understanding the stress process and its sequelae.

We believe that preventive trials such as the JOBS studies provide a different kind of opportunity to understand the antecedents, mechanisms, and outcomes of the stress process. Their special contribution is to provide an opportunity to actively and positively intervene in the lives of vulnerable persons under controlled conditions. Preventive trials such as the JOBS trials are experiments in life course development. Like other experiments, they afford an opportunity for greater control over hypothesized antecedents, and therefore provide a firmer grasp of causal processes influencing developmental and health outcomes. In the case of the JOBS trials, for example, our experimental results, in conjunction with longitudinal analyses of mediational processes, have increased our confidence about the decisive role of economic hardship and mastery in influencing the occupational and health outcomes of job loss.

Our understanding of the stress process for a number of adverse psychosocial conditions may have now reached the point where a number of such preventive experiments to influence the life course are possible. If so, we may be on the threshold of a new generation of studies on coping with adversity that will provide the dual benefit of scientific understanding and social improvement.

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