

The Excluded, the Vulnerable and the Reintegrated in a Neoliberal Era: Qualitative Dimensions of the Unemployment Experience*

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Résumé

Dans l'étude qualitative qui suit, nous envisageons les tendances à la vulnérabilité qu'entraîne le chômage structurel. À cet effet, nous concentrons notre attention sur un échantillon de travailleurs souvent négligés dans les études sur le chômage : les travailleurs à temps plein ayant eu un emploi stable avant d'être mis à pied. Notre échantillon est composé de 29 travailleurs canadiens ayant perdu un emploi à temps plein à la suite d'une restructuration. L'enquête sur le sort de ces travailleurs, que nous suivons pendant deux ans, permet de connaître plus intimement leur vécu, lors d'une perte d'emploi structurelle. Nous constatons des itinéraires menant à la réintégration, mais aussi d'autres menant à une vulnérabilité accrue et à une exclusion du marché du travail. L'article s'achève sur des suggestions quant à des politiques susceptibles de remédier à certains des effets les plus négatifs de la restructuration néolibérale du marché de l'emploi.

Abstract

In this qualitative study, we examine the pathways to vulnerability created by structural unemployment. We focus on a sample of workers often neglected in unemployment studies, namely full-time workers who have held steady employment before job loss. Our sample consists of 29 Canadian workers, restructured from full-time employment and followed for two years. By investigating what happens to these workers we are able to gain valuable insight into the "lived experience" of structural job loss. Their stories describe pathways that lead to re-integration, but also expose pathways that result in heightened states of vulnerability and exclusion from the labour market. The paper concludes with a number of policy suggestions aimed at redressing some of the most negative effects of neoliberal labour market restructuring.

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Introduction

This paper examines the experiences of twenty-nine Canadians representing a range of occupations whose jobs ended because of a non-seasonal layoff or company closure. We refer to these workers as structurally unemployed. These once steadily-employed, full-time workers have been neglected in unemployment studies. By investigating the reemployment experiences of the structurally unemployed we are able to gain valuable insight into the processes of labour market reintegration. At the same time we can highlight alternate pathways that lead to exclusion. This segment of the labour market is important because it has long been associated with the idea of standard employment — the work norm. Addressing the question of how these workers fare after restructuring provides a window on the broader dynamic of contemporary labour market change.

This study is based on interviews with a non-random purposive sample of restructured full-time workers. While our qualitative data does not allow us to draw representative conclusions, it does enable us to paint a picture of the restructuring process and its effect on the lives and livelihoods of these workers. This study is part of a larger analysis of employment restructuring among standard workers which has explored the quantitative side of the restructuring equation using outcome data from Statistics Canada's Survey of Income and Labour Dynamics (SLID). According to SLID, more than half a million Canadian workers were restructured from full-time employment in each year of the period 1993 to 2001. Our analysis of SLID data found that less than half of all restructured full-time workers were in stable full-time employment two years after their job loss. The prospects for the other half were grim. Many were precariously employed and a significant number remained unemployed (Silver, Wilson and Shields, 2004; Shields, Silver and Wilson, 2001).

Labour Market Restructuring

Fundamental changes have occurred in the Canadian labour market within the last two decades to challenge traditional notions of job stability, economic security, and public support. The pressures of global economic restructuring, intensified international competition, and rapid technological change have set the context for nation-wide economic and labour market transformation. One consequence of these changes is that traditionally advantaged workers face a higher risk of unemployment. While the unemployment rate in Canada dropped to under 8% by the end of the 1990s (Statistics Canada, 1999) permanent layoffs began to affect such groups as public sector workers, older and higher paid workers, middle managers and professionals (Picot and Lin, 1997). Job tenure increased during the late 1990s (Picot, Heisz and Nakamura, 2000) and companies began to rely more heavily on a core of long-term employees (Heisz, 1996). As a result, full-time job creation and hiring was suppressed (Picot and Heisz,

2000a) and workers had less mobility (Picot, Heisz and Nakamura, 2000; and Morissette, 2004). The combination of less full-time hiring and an increase in the quality of the Canadian labour force has resulted in heightened competition (Picot and Heisz, 2000a) and an increase in such non-standard work as part-time, contract, homework, and own account self-employment. Increasingly older workers (55 and over), women, people working in service occupations, members of visible minority groups, and people who had spent extended periods of time with one employer have been drawn into non-standard work following a layoff (Galarneau and Stratyckuk, 2001).

Statistics Canada documents point out that “[d]espite strong job growth in the last couple of years, the percentage of workers who were underemployed has yet to drop this decade [1990s]” (1999: 19). In addition to the almost 800,000 Canadians who are underemployed, Grenon and Chun find that “a growing number of workers have temporary jobs” (1997: 27). Heisz (1996) found growing polarisation of job duration with the probability that a new job would last beyond six months declining significantly while the probability that a job which had lasted more than six months would extend beyond five years increasing. The inability of new job holders to achieve job security in an age of lean production (Roberts, 1995) and organisational restructuring to effect flexibility, is reflected in a study which found 42% of Canadians felt they had lost control over their economic futures (Ekos, 1996).

This increase in Canadian’s employment anxiety, despite a lowered unemployment rate (Picot, Heisz and Nakamura, 2000) may have as much to do with changes in public policy as with the dynamics of the labour market. Since the early 1990s, the renamed Employment Insurance (EI) program, now completely self-financed by employer and employee premiums, has undergone a host of changes in order to “tighten up” the system. Some of these changes include raising the benefit qualification requirement, reducing the benefit rate, and completely disqualifying workers who quit ‘without just cause’. Following a steady fall in EI use throughout the decade of the 1990s almost half of unemployed Canadians were ineligible for EI benefits (Crompton and Vickers, 2000).

Changes in EI reflect a neoliberal belief that compensation for the unemployed is bad for the labour market because the unemployed will be less willing to accept a job and the employed will be more willing to quit (Atkinson and Micklewright, 1991) The privatisation and individuation of the unemployment safety net has forced many of those ineligible for EI to move back with their parents, live on savings, seek help from friends and relatives, or apply for social assistance (Crompton and Vickers, 2000). This trend to privatisation also helps to explain a rise in job stability (Heisz and Cote, 1998), a statistic that can be easily misinterpreted.

Over the last number of decades there has been a worrying trend towards greatly expanded income and wealth polarization. The richest 10% of families made 314 times more money than the poorest 10%, who saw their average market income fall from \$4000 per year in 1989 to less than \$500 in 1996. The middle income class also has been heavily affected with a drop from 60% of families making between \$24,500 and \$65,000 (in 1996 dollars) in 1973 to only 44% in 1996 (Yalnizyan, 1998). The gap between high and lower income earners has continued to expand since then (Little, 2004: B7). With less public social support and the disparity of an “hour glass labour market” (Burke and Shields, 1999) reducing people’s ability to achieve financial security, the question of what, more broadly speaking, is happening to increasing numbers of Canadian workers is posed.

Social Exclusion: Neoliberalism and the New Labour Market

To say that unemployed and underemployed Canadians face a greater risk of poverty does not tell the whole story. “Social exclusion,” is a holistic concept concerned more with relational issues than with the traditional financial distributional analysis in policy debates surrounding poverty. Emerging from a European discourse that sought to move past the limitations of poverty-terminology and coinciding with the declining economic climate and mounting pressures on modern welfare states (Evans, 1998), social exclusion is inextricably connected to notions of social cohesion, inclusion and integration (Freiler, 2000).

Much of the social exclusion policy discourse is focused on the employment relationship. Neoliberal-oriented understandings of social exclusion, however, limit their measure of when “social inclusion” is achieved to active engagement with paid work/employment. Having a job, any job, is considered satisfactory to having met inclusion standards. In this way the problem of social exclusion comes to be individualized. Public social welfare support systems developed under a Keynesian policy framework have been subject to intensive critique by neoliberals who have viewed these systems as separate from and hostile to labour market attachment.

Neoliberals argue that the welfare state creates “poverty traps” and a culture of welfare dependency (Clarke and Piven, 2001: 33-34). Additionally, welfare state spending is seen as an impediment to economic growth in the new, competitive global economy (Evans, 1998). The problem—neoliberal critics have been especially quick to point out—is that Keynesian-era social programs were not designed to respond to the demands of the new (Post Cold war) economy. Keynesian social policies have focused on supplying income supports for those on social assistance rather than concentrating state efforts on welfare-to-work and other programs designed to equip the “socially excluded”

with the tools necessary for finding their way back into the mainstream (Ebersold, 1998). In the new global economy competitiveness is increasingly understood to be premised on strong human capital assets—the effective utilization of a highly skilled labour force (Reich, 1991).

Within neoliberal discourse, there is also an attempt to draw a distinction between the so-called “deserving poor” and the “undeserving poor” (Russell, 2000; and Katz, 1989). For the undeserving component (those who are fit to work but who have become “dependent” upon the passive supports of the social security state) welfare should be restructured toward active programs which offer the opportunity to upgrade skills and provide incentives to become self-sufficient. Those who fail to take advantage of these opportunities should be cut from social supports—according to the neoliberal perspective. A primary motto of this new public policy is “no rights without responsibilities”. For instance, access to benefits for unemployment “should carry the obligation to look actively for work, and it is up to the governments to ensure that welfare systems do not discourage active search” (Giddens, 1998: 65). This approach calls for a radical restructuring of the welfare state. It is an approach that comes to view the problem of social exclusion from an individualistic perspective. The state may play a role in assisting individuals with skills training and job preparedness (including resume writing and job search activities) but it is up to individuals to take the initiative and to prepare themselves to enter the job market. Once equipped for the labour market, individuals must take ultimate responsibility for the provision of their own and their families’ well-being.

What neoliberal accounts so often fail to address is the reality that social exclusion is not simply a consequence of individual failure or welfare state policies, but the result of structural, economic forces. There are simply not enough good jobs in the new economy; a situation which flows out of an economic environment geared toward promoting increased labour market flexibility. This naturally results in the casualization of work (i.e., the increased use of insecure forms of employment such as temporary, contract, part-time and self-employment), a movement away from policies that promote full-employment, and a drop in real incomes. Hence, it should be of little surprise—at the level of the labour force—that exclusion and polarization are becoming more pronounced (Burke and Shields, 2000) under neoliberal led regimes.

Graham Room notes that while the financial indicators used to define poverty are insufficient in predicting hardship and exclusion, “nevertheless, the key importance of financial resources in triggering and perpetuating social exclusion should be recognised, since a whole range of deprivations and hardships are associated with lack of such resources” (1995: 235). In addition to income, key multidimensional factors in studying

social exclusion include health, education, access to services, housing, debt, quality of life, dignity and autonomy (Cheetam and Fuller, 1998; Barry, 1998).

The aim of this qualitative study is to understand the *process* of social exclusion that is set in motion by job restructuring.

Methodology

A non-random purposive sample of twenty-nine individuals was drawn from employment-support organisations in Toronto and Vancouver. Each person interviewed had experienced a structural job loss (i.e. not fired for cause) from a full-time job within three months of the interview. While not statistically representative, the sample reflects the heterogeneity of Canadian society including participants who identified themselves as Scottish, Punjabi, Italian, Japanese, British, West Indian, Chilean, Chinese, and others. There were fifteen females and fourteen males and the group as a whole exhibited great diversity in terms of age, gender, marital status, and number of dependants. “Supply-side” arguments contend that unemployment is due to individual characteristics (Sheehan and Tomlinson, 1995), however, the only thread that seems to link our participants is the experience of structural job loss, not their gender, age, education level, ethnic background, or field of employment.

The group included a mixture of single, married, divorced and separated individuals, while some participants were living common law or with dependent parents. Participants were between 36 and 58 years old. The mean age was just over 48 years, and the median approximately 50. Education varied from having not finished high school to a Master degree. Twice as many participants had some or complete university as had some or complete high school, making this a fairly well educated group. Job tenure prior to displacement averaged well over a decade and the average annual income at the time of displacement was over \$53,000 with a median of \$39,000. Workers in this study were employed in a variety of “white” and “blue” collar fields including real estate, human resources, unionised factory work, trucking, accounting, retail, clerical and manual labour. In sum, these workers were in the prime of their earning years and had established a strong attachment to the labour market.

Corresponding to SLID data on workers displaced from full-time employment, more than 30% earned above \$15 per hour, 80% were not covered by union status, 90% worked in the private sector, and 60% of the unemployed workers in this study had some post-secondary education. While our study contained more female, older and professional workers than one might expect in a national sample, these inconsistencies can be partly explained by urban location (Shields, Silver and Wilson, 2001).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants in 2000, with a follow-up interview in 2002. Interviews were transcribed for coding and analysis. During the first interview, we explored work experiences, sources of financial support, emotional and social support before, during and after their displacement. We also examined the subjective experience of unemployment, searching strategies and future expectations and conceptions of financial security.

A shorter follow-up interview was conducted approximately two years after the first interview. Of the original 29, a total of 24 individuals were reached and agreed to participate. This second round of interviews focussed on the length of time spent unemployed, current job prospects and job history since the last interview. Other aspects of participant's lives were also explored, including perceived barriers to gaining stable employment, the effectiveness of support organisations accessed, and changes in financial, social and/or marital status.

Getting to Know Some of the Participants

Downsized After 22 Years

Beth [the names of all participants have been changed] is an early-fifties divorcee who rents an apartment in Toronto where she lives with her ninety-two year-old mother. Her only child, a daughter, left the city for university approximately five years before her layoff but has returned to live nearby. Starting out with just a high school degree, Beth worked hard at her job where for twenty-two years she was promoted up the corporate ladder within the 180 person strong Accounts Payable department. In fact, for her last ten months of employment she worked as part of a special, four member group tracing and investigating unpaid invoices from suppliers.

What happened next? The financially troubled company downsized heavily, arbitrarily cutting wages of senior workers and finally firing 80% of the Accounts Payable staff and 1200 of its total employees. Beth explains that the company substituted young, part-time students for her position and many others. Ironically, the final ten months of Beth's employment with the company were her best, despite "terrible" working conditions where people increasingly feared for their jobs:

I loved it. My boss was super and flexible and she was so nice that you wanted to give more. And she was devastated, we were all...she was crying, she was devastated and I said to her, "[boss' name], these last ten months have been the best ten months of my life at [company's name]," and she said, "Well, this is the worst day of my life." And they've even let her go.

Led into an office and told that her services were no longer required, Beth did not break down or become depressed as many of her coworkers did. Instead:

I got mad as a hatter. I never once shed a tear. I thought, "How dare they do this to me. I'm supposed to be one of the best tracers." I'm in this special group for ten months and then they let me go, they don't let another girl go, they don't let half the incompetent people at [new headquarters] go, they let me go. So between Thursday of being let go and Tuesday going back for my package and meeting with Human Resources, I got a lawyer...because my package wasn't very good.

With the help of her lawyer, and on the strength of her above average performance reviews, Beth managed to negotiate a severance package providing more money than originally offered and three letters of reference. However, the company did not pay a lump sum, instead paying biweekly and retaining the right to stop payment if Beth found another job before the severance ran out. This, and the lack of outplacement counseling, could have been a potential barrier and source of stress but Beth instead used the time to upgrade her skills and hone her resume.

While she may have been productive, the restructuring experience had lingering emotional repercussions for Beth:

I was fuming, absolutely fuming, and I still am fifteen months later, you can tell by my voice. My anger is still there. I grew up in the days where you went to school, you got a job and you stayed. You were loyal to them and they were loyal to you...I did my work to the best of my ability and then it was like a slap in the face.

This combined with the disappointment at how little she receives from Employment Insurance even after 22 years paying into the program, have left Beth in what would be a very bad financial position save for the small amount her mother contributes. Beth notes:

It's been a really mixed year. It's been an up and down kind of year. A lot of frustration...I never made a lot of money at [the retail company] but I survived and I was OK and I always felt I guess that I would stay there, you know, retire, and then all of a sudden to be let go, downsized and here I am, at that t i m e I'm 50... 50 years of age, unemployed, going out and looking for work, competing with youngsters, computer skills I lack and it has been a real up

and down kind of year.

The stress of the displacement ordeal is clear in both Beth's insecurity at the time of the interview and her expectations for the future:

Hopefully I will get a job, and God willing I will get a job, and then maybe...another thing that is scary is I've heard, too, between now and when I'm sixty-five I could go through seven or eight jobs because it is not permanent anymore and it is contract. That terrifies me, absolutely terrifies me. I don't want to have to go through even two or three more jobs. I would like to find a job and be content with that.

The Closing Down of a Career

I came out of the house, put the key into the truck and my whole body started to shake. I was having problems breathing, et cetera, et cetera. I ended up in hospital for about four days. They did tests, they didn't know what it was...after that they thought it may be stress related. Then it cleared up...so I don't know if it was all this pressure on me, whether I was keeping it bottled inside and finally it took its toll...I don't know.

Watching coworkers lose their jobs over the year and a half it took the company to shut down the steel fabrication plant where he worked, the stress of the impending but unspecified closure finally appears to have become too much for William. A grandfather and married, this millwright and machinist worked for the same company for twenty-five years before it closed his plant. Through his work experience, union courses, and union involvement, he ended up president of his plant's local, taking an active role in attempting to save the facility from closure.

William, like the other workers knew for some time that the plant was in danger of being shut down. As he puts it:

Well, we figured, when we signed the last voucher, it'd probably be the last one we'd sign, the writing was sort of on the wall but no one wanted to believe it.

Kept on till the bitter end because of his position as union head, William was in some ways luckier than other workers who did not reach twenty-five years and so instead of a pension, received a severance package of less value. Still, the pension only paid \$12,000 per year, nowhere near the \$50,000 plus he was making previously, and despite

the continuation of full medical and dental coverage until age sixty-five, the career tradesman faced some unpleasant financial times following displacement.

Fearful of a second mortgage on his paid off home, when asked how he and his wife were surviving on their combined income of \$22,000 William answered simply, “*Very carefully*”. Although he upgraded his machinist skills at College after the layoff, he has had trouble reentering the workforce and feels that the two biggest obstacles are his age and health. Asked if he ever feels discouraged at his inability to find a job, William admits:

Yeah, I was sort of down about two weeks ago because there was nothing coming and I sent all these resumes and there was no contact for interviews and so I started wondering if the machine was working or was the resume going out—just sort of second guessing.

While financially insecure and struggling to reintegrate into the labour force, William remained motivated and kept his expectations realistic, finding ample support from his wife who five years earlier had lost her job as well after twenty-seven years.

A Rough Ride

Ed was a hard worker but it did not matter in the end. A middle aged professional driver for a Vancouver-based company, he saw his company bought out and amalgamated with a US parent company. Following the plot of many a displaced worker’s story, the new company cut services and less profitable accounts and was thus able to begin “*shaving drivers off from the bottom*” of the seniority list. While low on the seniority list because of a recent move from self-employment to full-time union status, Ed’s conscientious nature and work ethic meant he was kept on longer than those with similar seniority.

I liked going to work. A month and a half was about all they could keep me. They laid all the other drivers off...On one Friday there was about 12-15 that were let go. Very demoralizing. You know your head is on the chopping block and you know it is just a matter of time. They kept me on a little while longer painting cans and so on but then it came to the point where I was the last there.

Watching more senior drivers being kept even though they “showed little effort”, “didn’t assist fellow drivers”, and were nonetheless looking at substantial buy-outs left him “*bitter, disappointed, [and] angry*”.

Evaluating the situation, Ed feels that both management and union are at fault. The company restructured in such a way that meant short term profit but long term instability while the union, in not compromising its regulations, rewarded inferior drivers

and cost jobs.

You can't fight management, you can't fight the unions, you can't fight the two of them. The union had its place there, they had a little too much. They didn't allow the management to positively restructure to keep a few more drivers so what do you say? So that was it and I was gone.

Even if he had been kept on, Ed is not sure he would be willing to fit himself into the new work climate:

I held on for 3 years and that was it. I was talking to a friend who was two positions above me and he is "on call" nights and weekends. I had been working too long to go back into something like that. My family means a lot to me, too.

Happily married and raising an adopted son with fetal alcohol syndrome, Ed gave up being an independent contractor and started working for the company just so he would have more time with his son and wife. Unfortunately, his layoff has meant his wife now has to work full-time plus overtime, they have had to take one of their cars off the road, and they can not afford to take their son on a trip this year.

Ed is all too aware that age, experience, and a grade 12 education are barriers to finding suitable employment that will support his family and get his life back to normal.

I'm 47, I just really felt the need to go somewhere else before I get any older. I am concerned about my actual work experience. I can drive a truck but 1/5 of the people on the road drive trucks and it's not a good feeling. That and age, I worry. Right now we are thinking of selling the house and taking that money to take time to go back to school. I think it would be possibly the smartest things I did.

Although he would have liked to continue his education, specifically in the field of computers, the realities of bills and life and immediate income have meant that Ed has stayed with the trucking sector. Even with a wealth of experience and fully licensed to drive anything on the road, jobs are sparse. For Ed, job search has been, "[d]epressing. I find I have extreme energy drain. I'm able to sleep like I have never slept before. It gets hard to get up in the morning. Just to have someone say no to you again."

The layoff experience has had a direct impact on Ed's sense of personal worth, "Well, my self-esteem is really low, putting value on a job, the ability to work. I put a lot of value to

that. *Self-esteem is low but the friends are there. I have a variety of people*". The support from friends, his wife, and his church are helping, but Ed admits he feels a sense of panic and worries constantly about having to sell his house just to survive. Compounding his difficult situation, his severance was not particularly generous, he did receive outplacement services and he was classified as "employable" and not eligible for educational expenses under Employment Insurance regulations, leaving him little financial space to upgrade his skills.

Ready, Set, Gone

It was time. Amanda was ready to leave. After fifteen years and having reached the senior managerial level, she decided that an impending layoff would be a great time for a career change. Although she enjoyed her senior trouble-shooting role, Amanda was nonetheless relieved when the mass layoff finally happened and she was free to explore other options.

With the financial and emotional support of her common-law husband, the security of owning their home, savings, solid professional experience, and an Honours B.A. in Psychology, Amanda describes the displacement experience as almost a necessary step for her personally:

In a weird way, probably the worst thing that could have happened for me personally, in terms of my preference, was to be told that we still had a job. Because I had got into my mind, I had got to the point where I really think...there was nothing scary about that decision, there was nothing uncomfortable...My concern was for other people in the team...people who have more financial responsibilities than I do and some of the people that had just joined the organization and our team six months before who really like the team, who had gone through a job search and who really wanted to be here.

A major part of Amanda's serene attitude towards the anticipated displacement seems to be founded in her experience working in the company's human resource department and the knowledge that her severance package was going to be a generous one. Additionally, she has kept fairly close ties with former colleagues, some of whom are still with the company. Speaking of dinners and social events with the ex-coworkers, she says, "*It was a nice way to kind of transition out, so it is not quite such an abrupt ending*".

Indicating a desire to work in a more autonomous environment, Amanda provides further clues to her holistic philosophy:

As long as I can sustain my basic needs and ... I have to consider my husband – he is in the picture too. So it is not just me but if we were not in a position

where we were going to lose the house or something, where we can't buy food – but beyond that other than basic needs I am not really motivated by the amount of money that I make. So my objective in life has never been “I must make \$100,000 a year by the time I am a certain age”. It is really more what I get out of it, and I am intrinsically motivated so I tend to ...it is what the position does for me, what the job does for me, what the skill level is that I can develop, what can I learn that I haven't done before, where can I take this to that hasn't been done – like that kind of thing. So that is more what motivates me than funds or money. I mean if I want to travel some place and will I have enough money to be able to go there but...

The shifting sensibility of workers through the generations is illuminated as Amanda explains her father's reaction to the news that she had lost her job:

Most of them — I mean my husband's family – once they knew that you're covered, get severance and covered pretty much to the end of the year, then they are ok so that is fine. My dad was different. Because his background and work were like – the first thing he wanted to know was, “Are you looking, where are you looking, what are you doing?” and I had to kind of really explain “Dad, it is ok, I'm not concerned. This is a good opportunity for me to take some time.” But he probably still has a little bit of discomfort with that, because his thinking is that you worked for one company and you stayed with them for a long time. The employment history and turnover was different for him.

Clearly, Amanda's high self-esteem, strong familial support, and positive attitude towards job transitions allowed her to deal with the initial layoff in a productive way.

Constructing the Outcome Pathways

What happened to these individuals over the course of the two years following their structural job loss? We constructed three categories to capture the outcomes of this transition: reintegrated, vulnerable and excluded. The criteria we used were employment status (full-time, part-time, self-employed, contract, or unemployed), changes in wage/salary, feelings of job and financial security, and their sense of social and professional well-being.

The “reintegrated” group consists of participants who have reintegrated back into the labour market following their displacement. They had obtained and maintained at least one stable job (lasting more than one year) since the first interview, their earnings were comparable to the job they were restructured from, and they enjoyed a sense of security. The members in this group, regardless of how negative their initial

displacement experience might have been, have had a positive outcome leading to sustaining new work.

The “vulnerable” group included those participants who have had several part-time or full-time positions since displacement. The experiences of individuals in this group can be described as transitory, precarious, and unstable, where social and financial expectations have not been met and where there exists a sense of unfulfilled expectations. While precariously attached to the labour market, there still exists a sense of hope and a sense that they are on the threshold of stability. However, this minimal state means that even minor setbacks can have profound consequences, potentially sending an individual spiralling down into social and professional exclusion.

The “excluded” group is comprised of participants who remained unemployed at the time of their second interview and have become increasingly “excluded” from the workforce and, possibly, the broader social milieu. These individuals have either not worked since displacement but wish to, have worked but have been displaced again, or have otherwise been unable to maintain stable and fulfilling employment. Often the jobs they have been able to acquire, though not able to keep, are contingent and fleeting. This group experience a sense of frustration and occasionally the abandonment of hope for re-employment.

What Happened to Beth, Amanda, Ed and William

In the end, Beth did not end up bouncing from job to job as she feared. Like 9 others out of the 24 who participated in the second round of interviews, she “reintegrated” successfully back into the labour market and regained a sense of security in her life. After working for so long in a large corporate setting, Beth is much happier now working in a small, family owned company where she feels valued. During her fifteen months of unemployment, she upgraded her skills through a myriad of computer courses and only began actively seeking employment when she felt the urge to work. As she explains, *“I was fortunate, too, because I had full pay for one year, so that’s why I took advantage of courses...I wasn’t in a bind where I had to go out and get a job”*.

Interestingly, Amanda, who was so sure that her displacement was both desirable and necessary, has ended up in what we called the “vulnerable” category along with 10 of the 24 participants. Despite her optimism, in the two years since the initial displacement Amanda has found out the hard way that the story of unemployment has many unforeseen plot twists. First, her previous company went bankrupt ending her severance pay prematurely and then the relationship with her common-law husband broke down, thus leaving Amanda with much less security than she was previously counting on. She now works three sporadic contract jobs, attends university courses at night, and admits freely that her income is now *“dramatically less”* than before her displacement.

So you know, you don't have new clothes, you don't buy new stuff all the time, you don't go out...So your budget is limited, your entertainment budget is limited, you don't have a regular income coming in necessarily in terms of a biweekly salary so you have to plan ahead, you always have to have some savings or something because you never know how your work is going to be scheduled.

Amanda notes the obstacles she has faced in accessing government support during her unemployment experience:

[B]ecause I chose to go back to school, because I was not fully qualified and all that stuff, Employment Insurance won't pay you because you are not actively looking for a job everyday, so there is no government assistance available...So if you are taking the opportunity to go back to school and to retrain and stuff, employment insurance is pretty much useless to you, you know? I haven't had a whole lot of success with them, so they don't rank really high on my list, considering they have a however many million dollar surplus in their budget.

Amanda is joined in the “vulnerable” category by Ed, the truck driver from Vancouver. Having been displaced twice due to restructuring since the original layoff, he has been forced to take jobs that are not meeting the financial needs of his family. Like Amanda, Ed is frustrated with an Employment Insurance system which has deemed him employable and therefore ineligible for funds to help upgrade his education.

Unfortunately for William, the compassionate union boss so upset by the closure of his plant, sometimes a helpful word or loving spouse is not enough. After two years, four short contract positions, and much frustration, William was once again unemployed and facing a bleak financial future. William is one of five participants we have deemed “excluded” and also stuck in a perpetual cycle of layoffs and unemployment.

Other Experiences

Somewhere to Go, Someone to Help

Like Beth, the reintegrated participant we met previously, Peter moved into a better paying job where he feels he is better off overall than before. With a solid severance package, savings, and his wife's income to pad his fall, he did not panic when laid-off. Rather, Peter tried to approach the labour market carefully and thoughtfully. As a credit manager, he knew he lacked a university degree and some computers skills but believed

that a four-year program for credit managing and his work experience would put him in good stead.

Peter described the outplacement services which were part of his severance package: *“They helped me, plus I always had somewhere to go everyday so that was very important, to be able to go somewhere other than staying at home, you know what I mean, while I went through that transition period. So that’s very important”. “[T]he positive thing was to meet people who were willing to help in that transition period. There were a lot of people that were looking out for me...”*. In regaining full-time employment as a credit manager, Peter reports that the experience started off as a *“negative and turned into a positive”*.

Fortunate Position

After more than twenty years with an international bank, Helmut lost his job but he too rebounded nicely. With a wealth of upper-management experience and the security of an extremely wealthy severance package, plenty of savings, and diversified assets, he was able to start up his own management consulting business and now works from home where he enjoys more free time than before.

Well, I was sort of in the fortunate position that financially I was not in any hardship, and of course that makes it different. Needless to say I had that job for over twenty-one years, I should have some pain associated with it [the job loss]. Even so I knew that many changes would be forthcoming, but it did happen and it’s not the nicest thing to go through.

Hope They Keep Me

All Mira wants is just a little financial security. Married, with two dependent children, she was originally laid off after eleven years from an automotive assembly plant when the company decided to move production to Mexico. In contrast to those we have already met, she calls her severance package *“peanuts”*, and with her husband getting only seasonal work in construction and a rapidly dwindling savings account, the initial layoff took its toll on Mira and her marriage. Speaking of the desperation to find work when feeling financially unstable, she says:

[Y]ou get very depressed, I feel like crying all the time, and you don’t know what to do with yourself...At first he [her husband] was very understanding, but right now he is running a little scared because he sees what I am going through, that it is really hard to get a job.

When she finally did get a job, it was far from a secure situation:

Well, I had another job for three weeks and then they laid me off for another three weeks. And then I worked another week and a half and then I quit because I couldn't work like that, one week you work and the next day you don't know if you have a job. So I said to myself I need a steady job, work everyday, forty hours a week, and that's it. So I looked somewhere else.

Even when she finally found a steadier job, which she is grateful for and happy with, she has had to make sacrifices—taking shift work instead of steady days—and deal with more real and potential displacement:

I have been working for a year and a half [with the new company]. I got laid off and then they called me back. But I have been working for a couple of months again...I am really happy where I am and I hope they keep me as long as they can, until I retire, hopefully.

Very Disillusioned

Andrea, at 52 years of age, is one of the five excluded individuals, and faces the labour market alone as she struggles to take care of her two elderly, disabled parents. Let go from a public corporation, she received a severance package which she can only access at age sixty-five, and few outplacement services. Compounding her problems, the EI system factored in the inaccessible severance and therefore forced her to wait an extended period before providing support. Two years after her initial layoff, Andrea has had two short-lived jobs but is still looking for something secure and meaningful.

I had savings, I was always good like that but I was always withdrawing money [while unemployed] instead of putting it in and I thought, "Why should I be using my own money, you know, what kind of system is this after you work seventeen years and even the UI [sic] doesn't kick in for a long time and then that money [the severance] you can't touch?" So I was very disillusioned.

I don't think there is any help out there, now. It isn't like before when you go to the UI [sic] office...You know, I am not living off anything at all, you know I have never been on welfare in all my life, but I remember one time when you were out of a job they did everything to help you, place you. But now it's just, you know, you got to punch in the computer thing and if there is any jobs just go for them, it's the same thing as looking at the newspaper, so why bother going down there...It's just totally changed.

The Groups and the Outcomes

In categorising the participants, the most striking feature was that almost two-thirds of the participants were still “vulnerable” or worse two years after their initial layoff. Within each group, little homogeneity existed in terms of marital status, pre-displacement income and job tenure, number of dependants, ethnic background, or age. However, a number of commonalities do exist in each group and these begin to provide some hints as to outcomes and triggers of marginalization and social exclusion.

Of the nine individuals in the “reintegrated” group, as many were single as were married, one individual made \$28,000 while another made \$200,000. Some had spent their entire career at one job while others had less than four years experience with their former company. What they did share was a high level of education with all but one possessing, if not a bachelor’s degree or master’s degree, then at least some post-secondary schooling. Two-thirds male and all working in white-collar jobs, the average age was 48, the median of pre-displacement income was \$48,000, pre-displacement tenure had a median of 9 years, two-thirds had no dependents, most spent no more than 12 months unemployed, and all but two had held only one job since losing the original.

The “vulnerable” group of ten individuals was predominantly female, averaging forty-eight years of age with over eleven years of pre-layoff job tenure. With a pre-displacement income of approximately \$36,000, the “vulnerable” group included two people who did not finish high school but also two individuals who held bachelor degrees and three more who had some university or college education. Also, over half of the participants had held two jobs or more since the initial displacement with one individual having bounced through a total of four different jobs.

The “excluded” group of five individuals exists on the margins of Canada’s labour market, still unable to find steady employment. While fairly well-educated, the two individuals with the highest education levels live with disabilities. Both believe that their respective disabilities have been significant barriers to their re-employment. Individuals within the “excluded” group actually had more pre-displacement tenure (a median of fourteen years) and more pre-displacement income (median of \$50,000) than the reintegrated group, reported good social support, and most were in stable relationships, all but one was married.

Factors Affecting Re-employment

Notions that outcomes are based on personal resiliency were not supported in this study. Of the 15 participants in the vulnerable and excluded groups, only one, an older male with a disability, ever gave up looking for work. Granted, those who reintegrated more quickly and with more satisfying results may have had better access to professional

networks and, being white-collar workers, more labour capital in the current market, yet this paints only a partial picture of the complex interrelationship of factors leading to desirable or undesirable reemployment outcomes.

For one, higher levels of education have long been associated with more positive reemployment outcomes (Statistics Canada, 1999). The high level of education shared by those who reintegrated successfully is certainly significant, yet this does not mean that those who were vulnerable or excluded were “un”educated or poorly skilled. In fact, ten out of the fifteen in the two groups have either a university degree or some post-secondary schooling.

All but one of the reintegrated participants remained in the same industry/business sector from which they had been displaced. As Addison and Portugal point out, seeking employment in the same industry or occupation can have “profound” (1989: 282) results in preventing a reduction in future wages for displaced workers. We see this phenomenon at work with almost 70% of reintegrated workers earning the same or greater income at their new job. However, while seven of ten vulnerable participants remained in their original industry, over half were making less money than in their pre-displacement job.

The issue of gender is also key to reemployment outcomes. Unlike the reintegrated group which is predominantly male, the other two categories are disproportionately female. Women are less vulnerable to full-time restructuring because they are underrepresented in this form of employment. However, once restructured women are less likely to successfully reintegrate than men and have higher rates of part-time jobs and labour market exits (Silver, Wilson and Shields, 2004).

An interesting phenomenon, one that runs counter to prevailing wisdom (Ruhm, 1994), is that almost none of the reintegrated individuals were given warning of their impending displacement yet many ended up with higher subsequent earnings. In a further contradiction, almost three-quarters of the members of the vulnerable and excluded groups had advanced warning of displacement yet, as noted above, most ended up earning significantly less money. As mentioned previously, the ability to remain within the same industry may have had some influence on preventing potential earning losses or other negative repercussions.

However, it would appear that the quality of severance packages and outplacement services received by the reintegrated participants, acting as a sort of privatized safety-net, are more critical elements in explaining positive employment outcomes. As evidence, not one participant from the reintegrated group complained about severance,

with the majority feeling that their packages had exceeded their expectation. In contrast, two-thirds of the vulnerable and excluded felt that the severance package they received was just average or below. One-third received no outplacement services at all, and another five felt that their outplacement services were inadequate. This conclusion is substantiated by Ruhm (1994) who finds that the behavior of individual firms, when offering job-search counseling, skill retraining, supplemental unemployment insurance, or outplacement services, is just as important as advanced warning.

Private support such as severance and outplacement services, or the lack thereof, are key themes tying together virtually all participants' stories. Within the Canadian context, public resources for the unemployed, euphemistically renamed "employment" insurance have slowly been withdrawn over the last few decades. This steady retrenchment of the welfare state has meant that private resources are becoming pivotal for not only the unemployed, who must increasingly depend on private and firm-specific resources like severance, but also the employed who, with less guaranteed support during unemployment, combined with less full-time job creation, have out of anxiety voluntarily reduced their mobility (Picot and Heisz, 2000b).

For restructured workers, not only is the length of time spent unemployed a "potent source of reduced earnings" (Addison and Portugal, 1989: 282) but as their jobless spell lengthens their reemployment rates continue to fall (Swaim and Podgursky, 1991). Some are lucky enough to find meaningful work, others never do, and still others enter into a string of jobs which are not suitable, do not pay enough, are a mismatch in terms of employer needs and/or culture, or are in highly unstable sectors.

Stevens finds multiple displacements a "common" (1997: 167) and important part of workers' post-layoff experiences, noting that an "investigation of which workers are most likely to face multiple job losses finds this phenomenon to be relatively evenly spread across the population of recently displaced workers" (187). Additionally, these "multiple displacements occur for workers with a variety of characteristics and emerge as an important factor behind the persistence of displacement-induced earnings and wage reductions" (67). As Room described earlier, while social exclusion is a complex process that transcends simple financial indicators, financial resources are nonetheless vital in "triggering and perpetuating social exclusion[...], since a whole range of deprivations and hardships are associated with lack of such resources" (1995: 235).

From research here and elsewhere, it is becoming clear that policy shifts have meant that displaced workers will increasingly be forced to depend on private resources, the goodwill of the company that has just let them go, and more than a little luck. The unemployment rate may be down, but this number tells us little about the vulnerability that Canadians experience and feel. There is a sense that if we are to avoid a rise in

social exclusion, and maintain national cohesion, employers and policy makers must ensure steps are taken to provide displaced workers with the resources necessary for a quick return to stable, fulfilling employment.

Conclusions

The Descent into Employment Vulnerability and Exclusion

What does our qualitative study suggest about the contemporary Canadian labour market and the risk of job restructuring? First of all it informs us that those in previously stable full-time jobs, with good education and job experience, are vulnerable to employment restructuring. Furthermore, the pathway to successful reintegration in the labour market is a precarious one with few guarantees. Being male, university educated, with white collar job experience, are positively related to better transitions from unemployment to full employment, but many workers laid-off with such attributes continue to experience significant employment dislocation. Being female, lacking higher education, possessing a disability and blue collar employment have traditionally been considered risk factors for restructuring, and this was confirmed in our study as well.

The ‘lived experience’ of our sample illustrates the emotional and material turmoil of layoff and the stresses it places on individuals, families and social networks. All those affected by job termination enjoyed a strong attachment to the paid labour market as they previously held permanent standard employment. Most expressed their feelings of anger and even of loss of esteem associated with the challenge to their identities as “productive” employed members of society. A sizable minority (38%) were able to reestablish themselves within a year or so to positions of paid employment comparable to or even better than to the jobs they lost. For the remainder of the sample, however, the transition from full-time paid work, to layoff, to the search for a sustaining employment relationship has been a difficult one. A significant number (21%) remained unemployed a year or more after the layoff with little prospect for successful reintegration in the labour market. The largest group (42%) did find work over time but it was significantly inferior in quality to their previously held jobs. This group exists in a very vulnerable position, one that could lead at one extreme to full exclusion, or indefinite vulnerability, or conversely, full reintegration.

Policy Considerations

Neoliberal understandings of social inclusion, based on a model of active engagement with the labour market, fails to take account of the quality of employment which laid-off workers are actually able to secure. Many individuals restructured out of standard

employment relationships are simply unable to find secure paid work in a labour market marked by relatively high levels of unemployment, greater employment contingency, and a high volume of poorly compensated work. In a labour market rich with highly educated and experienced job seekers employers enjoy a considerable competitive advantage over workers. The neoliberal emphasis on the importance of human capital assets and individual motivation for positive job outcomes assumes a labour market where employer demand outstrips supply for quality workers. The actual structural realities of our restructured labour market are simply ignored in this analysis. In short, there are too many job seekers for job openings, especially with respect to better forms of employment (International Labour Organization, 2004: Chapter 5).

Moreover, guided by neoliberal policy directions, the social safety net has been reshaped and shrunk, including unemployment services and income supports to the laid-off. As our study shows, these supports have been important in helping restructured workers successfully reintegrate back into paid work. The fact that those workers who enjoyed good severance packages (private sources of unemployment assistance) had the best employment outcomes after layoff in our sample suggests that these types of supports do play an important role in reintegration. Since a majority of workers do not have access to adequate levels of private severance packages, adequate universal social and employment supports should be a focus of public investment.

The experiences of our sample clearly suggest a number of policy initiatives that could “re-route” the structurally unemployed away from vulnerability and exclusion. Specifically, policies that strengthen the power of labour, enhance the economic security of the unemployed and create more sustaining “good” jobs, would go a long way toward combating pathways of vulnerability and exclusion. While a true socialist agenda would tackle these issues in a more fundamental manner, interim measures may seem the more feasible in this political climate.

Based on the experiences of our sample, a number of interim measures can be identified. First and most important is the issue of economic sustainability during periods of unemployment. Employment assistance programs must be structured in a manner that provide individuals and families with a reasonable standard of living through periods of unemployment and economic downturns. Such social programming can create decommodified spaces, or temporary ‘safe havens’, outside the market proper, for the restructured and marginalized. Additionally, re-training, educational upgrading and job search services need to be expanded. These measures, when focused on developing worker capacity, assist the unemployed in remaining productively attached to the labour market. Unfortunately neoliberal public policy around ‘human capital’ has centered on minimal public investments and maximum use of ‘active labour market’ requirements as

disciplinary tools to disenfranchise workers from benefits/supports and enforce raw market regulation of employment markets (see McBride, 2000).

As long as we continue to “blame” labour for their circumstances, “serial” corporate restructuring remains unchallenged, as does the deliberate and systematic process of turning the stock of sustaining employment into an ever growing pile of precarious jobs. Structural job loss, in and of itself, is not a “cause” of marginalization and exclusion, especially if the context is one of a labour market with adequate sustaining employment opportunities. Unfortunately in the current neoliberal climate, the ‘race to the bottom’ types of labour market strategies continue unabated and bring with them pathways that render Canadian workers vulnerable and excluded.

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