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Precarious Stability: Jobless Families in the New Millennium

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Abstract

This paper characterises the condition of jobless families today as one of 'precarious stability' and argues that an outcome of policy changes is the fragmentation of the lives of jobless families, especially in regional communities. Their lived experience is illustrated and compared with the Great Depression. While jobless families now enjoy some stability at the level of basic survival, they experience their condition in isolation, and need to supplement their benefits by precarious employment. Because of the stigma associated with income support, it is hidden from public view, often locking its recipients into a privatised nightmare from which the increasingly part-time, casualised labour market offers little relief.

Introduction

The social commentator Hugh Mackay (2001) identifies the paradox underlying the currently fashionable communitarian discourse. That is, that in focusing on a desire for more 'community', certain groups of citizens may progressively turn inwards and isolationist, in order to preserve a sense of security. This can result in disengagement from society at large and leads at worst to intolerance and a denial of those excluded from the 'community'. As Mackay (2001) says, 'the desire for a more communitarian approach to life among residents of affluent, polite and comfortable suburbs coexists with a steady rise in the number of alienated, poor and homeless elsewhere'.

That these less fortunate citizens are perhaps ignored facilitates the persistence of the egalitarian myth in middle Australia and provides a foundation for the new attention being paid to communitarianism. It is important, therefore, not only to review the premises upon which the communitarian turn is based and the broader context which has given it some impetus, but also to bring into the light of day those hidden lives which are either popularly supposed to hardly exist or thought to be the consequence solely of moral failings (as exemplified by Abbott's (2000) comments on poverty; see also Johnson & Taylor 2000).

This paper attempts to provide a small aperture through which to view these lives and seeks to understand the impact of joblessness on families in regional NSW. It will be argued that the Great Depression was characterised by absolute poverty for the unemployed and was a highly visible mass phenomenon for the working class, though shame drove many to hide their personal suffering. This latter aspect bears similarities to the nature of contemporary joblessness, which is an equivocal and privatised matter. Jobless families, now more than during the Depression, inhabit a shadow world where precarious employment provides a facade which obscures the need to

rely on income support, thereby rendering their predicament invisible to mainstream society. These circumstances create repercussions which may in some ways parallel the damage wrought on those who endured the Great Depression. Firstly, though, it is necessary to briefly review some pertinent features of contemporary society in order to contextualise the experiences of jobless families today.

Capitalism Now

The term globalisation, though often contested, is now in common usage to describe the well-documented changes which have occurred in capitalist economies over the last 2-3 decades. Indeed it is generally believed that capitalism has assumed ascendancy over nearly all other social and economic arrangements worldwide, its defining property being market relations (Kennedy 1998). The compression of space and time made possible by the 'Information Revolution' has led, not only to greater cultural interchange, but also to the almost unrestricted movement of capital across national boundaries such that local economies are vulnerable to the international vagaries of these capital flows (Harvey 1989). A negative effect of these movements is the polarisation of wealth. Those most badly affected live mainly in developing countries, but there is recognition that some groups resident in wealthy nations do not share in the affluence (Kennedy 1998). One can arguably include welfare recipients and the working poor amongst this group alongside the more obvious candidates such as indigenous peoples.

Globalisation is contemporaneous with other phenomena which have contributed to a changing social order. Among those relevant to our discussion are the predominance of neo-liberal rationalities which have prevailed for the last 20 years in English-speaking democracies even where the government is nominally from the left of the political spectrum, as the Hawke and Keating governments attest (Beeson & Firth 1998). This has entailed a systematic programme of deregulation and privatisation in line with the neoliberal ideology of minimalist government and the philosophy of individual responsibility. Such an ethic legitimises changes like labour market deregulation which has a deleterious impact on individuals (and families), while simultaneously diminishing government and corporate responsibility. Applied to welfare policy, it can justify spending less and a punitive approach to the unemployed.

Giddens (1994) has argued that the social changes which have been experienced globally since the latter half of the 20th century can be understood as 'reflexive modernisation', that is the replacement of a traditional, fixed social order with greater freedom of choice for individuals. That this should be so is both a function of capitalist economies' need to create new markets[1] through encroaching commodification of previously non-market areas of life, as well as the outcome of the ideological commitment to freedom and individuality. The focus on individual identity is dissolving understandings of the world based on rigid social structures and replacing it with an emphasis on modes of subjectivity. Thus, for example, it is the

[1] This is similar to Harvey's (1994) notion of creative destruction, an idea which encapsulates the dynamic of capitalism as well as the constant change which it entails and with it, ensuing uncertainty.

degree of intimacy, rather than the institution of marriage itself which may determine the length of a conjugal relationship in post-traditional society; and individuals are now free to redefine the concept of family (Giddens 1992).

However, the agency which the new array of choices confers upon individuals carries with it also a degree of responsibility and uncertainty about the future which can be experienced as burdensome rather than liberating. Moreover this post-traditional society coexists simultaneously with significant vestiges of a more traditional order which is fiercely defended by conservative groups. Giddens (1994) asserts that fundamentalist movements of all kinds are a response to the uncertainty unleashed by post-traditional society. The events of September 11 and beyond can be seen as lending force to this argument.

The Communitarian Turn

It is easy to understand the new craving for belonging that this state of affairs engenders. The terms social capital, mutualism and Third Way often appear in association with communitarianism, and while each has a different emphasis, all share the conviction that answers to current social and political dilemmas can be resolved by an appeal to a romanticised notion of what constitutes community. Communitarianism[2] is a response to the extension of market relations by neoliberal rationalities to all types of social relations and institutions. Social democrat and neoliberal alike are perceived as being unable to provide solutions to social, economic and environmental problems because of their monolithic, centralised nature. Mark Latham, an enthusiastic advocate of the Third Way believes that

> public policy needs to build a virtuous circle in public life - striking the right balance between the market economy, the role of the state and the strength of civil society…for some time this balance has been moving against society...market forces have thrived and the size of government has grown (and) networks of community and the trust between people have been lost (Latham 2000)

Communitarianism thus appeals to a kind of 'social glue' which binds individuals in a community together somehow, providing a sense of security and belonging as well as tangible solutions to problems through devolution and grassroots action. However while the focus is on restoring trust, the social glue may turn out to be nothing more than a variant of the much older 'shame game', where compliance to community norms was enforced by public humiliation or social exclusion for infringements. Gwyther (2000) cites several cases where this has already occurred. Seen in this light, communitarianism potentially has a much uglier face than the one presented in Third Way manifestos.

An apposite illustration of the less desirable possibilities of communitarianism is the concept of mutual obligation espoused by communitarian enthusiasts. As currently applied by the Howard government, mutual obligation elaborates the responsibilities of the unemployed and other jobless welfare recipients and renders them accountable for their activities in a way that is not reciprocated by the other so-called stakeholders in society, government and business. This approach has led to greater stringency in

[2] The term is used here in a general sense to cover the common features between mutualism, Third Way, social capital and civil society.

enforcing new rules resulting in more than 250,000 welfare recipients having payments reduced or cancelled during the 12 months to November 2000 (Stavropoulos 2000), more than double the figure for 1997-98 (Head 2000) and a saving for the government of $17.4 million a week (Stavropoulos 2000). A recent Australian Council of Social Services (ACOSS 2000) report found that 67 percent of relief agencies reported an increase in demand for services in the previous six months, with 33 percent of agencies citing the government's income support policies as the reason for the increased demand.

Communitarianism's appeal thus appears to exist in a theoretical vacuum divorced from the reality of its practical application. Those most likely to feel the effects of its deployment, for example in the form of mutual obligation requirements, are the casualties of changes to the labour market. It is to these changes that attention is now turned.

The Changing Labour Market

Neoliberal governments have been eager to deregulate the labour market in line with the belief that wealth creation involves the freeing up of capital for new investments, and the ideological commitment to individual freedom to pursue one's best interests at the expense of communal solidarity. The consequence of this policy has been the attenuation of trade union power, attrition of full-time work and the creation of a dual labour market. Casual work increased by 60 percent between 1988 and 1998 and 27 percent of the labour force is now comprised of casual employees, most of them part-time (ABS 1999). Where families cannot obtain secure work they depend on income support to supplement their precarious earnings. Understandings of the work/unemployment divide thus become nebulous and contingent in such a context. Moreover, government initiatives in welfare policy such as work-for-the-dole and other mutual obligation requirements accentuate the tenuousness of definitions of unemployment as Gilmour, Hartman & Jennings (2000) have noted. It is against this backdrop, then, that jobless families in regional Australia are positioned as they attempt to blend with the dominant tenor of their communities.

Jobless Families and their Lives: An Overview

A qualitative study examined the lives of so-called jobless families in three areas of regional NSW in 2000-2001. Two of the areas are in north-eastern NSW and the third is on the south western fringe of Sydney, all areas of high unemployment. The researcher interviewed members of these families who responded to advertisements in the free press and posters placed in Job Network agencies.

Participants were of working age with dependents and had been in receipt of income support for twelve months or more. The type and amount of income support was not prescriptive because of the difficulty noted above in defining unemployment and the fact that the recent welfare reforms are moving towards the standardisation of welfare payments and the extension of mutual obligation to most types of working-age income support, in line with the recommendations of the McLure Reports (2000, 2000A).

Further, evidence is emerging that there are many persons receiving income support types other than Newstart because unemployment is intractable, particularly in regional economies (Argyrous & Neale 2000; Gregory 1999). Of the 15 families who have so far participated in the research, eight receive Newstart and seven receive Sole Parenting Payment.

The term jobless family has been adopted from the McLure Reports (2000, 2000A) however it is misleading, because of the 15 families studied, eight are in fact living on a combination of income support and precarious employment. Five of those families receive residual Newstart payment. Others have had periods of casual employment. That this is not an isolated phenomenon is borne out by Henman (2000) and Landt & Pech's (2000) quantitative research, which found that the person living solely on government benefit for years at a time was relatively rare.

Furthermore, many of the families are also involved in voluntary or community work, even those who are precariously employed. One 2-parent family works on community projects as well as one parent having a part-time job 25 hours a week. Another family combined on-going job search with single parenthood and voluntary youth work, whilst a third participates in municipal projects in addition to undertaking a course of study. It can be readily seen that the public profile of these persons in the community is not what is commonly portrayed by media depictions of 'dole bludgers'.

The following profile is an attempt to portray the major elements which constitute the lived reality of jobless families. There are necessarily omissions due to space limitations, however the major themes which are emerging from data analysis are presented.

Jobless Families and Their Lives: An Intimate View

We have seen that many jobless families are, by the criteria of participation in community affairs, active citizens. There may be no outward sign of difference or distress because these families do not wish to receive such an unfavourable label. They may appear for duty at the school canteen, they may attend community meetings or write letters to the local newspaper; they may attend TAFE or university and they may even be visible in workplaces as peripheral workers but (for the families who participated in this study) they do not discuss their personal circumstances or invite anyone to their homes. This is because home is where the differences are revealed.

Home is where the dearth is

Eighty percent of the families in this study inhabit unsuitable or unconventional accommodation. One lives in a shed, two sole parent families share rented premises with unrelated persons, while another was living temporarily with relatives. A fifth occupies a housing commission dwelling whose inner walls are punctured by large holes and cracks, while four other families live in dilapidated houses on the edge of regional towns. Another family built their home from recycled building materials. The son and pubescent daughter of yet another sole parent family are obliged to share a bedroom.

Some of the participants, by buying run-down housing, are able to afford small mortgages - ironically because of the security of their income support payments - but this increases their housing costs, since they then do not qualify for rent assistance and have the added burden of rates and maintenance. As is already well known, housing consumes a large proportion of a low-income family's budget (ACOSS 2000), to which the cost of running a car comes a close second. In regional Australia the lack of public transport makes a car a necessity and jobless families face a never-ending struggle to keep a car, however decrepit, on the road. Newstart recipients are the worst off in this respect, since they do not qualify for free car registration, as do sole parent and disability pensioners.

'Treading water, going nowhere'

The combination of housing and car costs results in relative poverty, unless the family has substantial resources to call upon, such as personal savings or financial assistance from relatives (and these resources dwindle over time). The families frequent opportunity shops and discount stores for their clothing, footwear and manchester needs; they eat the cheapest food, sometimes going without; they rarely go out and their social events usually consist of family gatherings; Christmas and birthdays cannot usually be financed with borrowing money; furnishings and whitegoods are generally sparse and decidedly shabby. A child's sporting activity stretches the family budget to the limit or is foregone. One family had no telephone, another had a phone bar which only allowed incoming calls. Recurrent bills are an endless cycle of payments by instalments. Ed, an unemployed blue collar worker explains his economic strategy:

> I've got a book. All of them wanna get paid…so I pay a bit to him, a bit to him, a bit to him and a bit to him - I just keep doing that. I sit there and work out how much I got comin' in each week, so - work out the milko (and so on).

And Kay a sole parent, manages thus:

> Now I have a fantastic budget - every fine detail is accounted for and I just stick to it. …. I have $20 a week for petrol which is never enough, so money comes from the food budget to pay for a bit more petrol. Whatever I do I have to juggle it. I can't just keep going to the bank and getting more money out because that's how I get into trouble.

Despite this, Kay somehow manages to pay $10 week into a dedicated bank account which will assist with the costs of her daughter's education. Annie's diet consists only of toast and cereal during periods of financial stress, but she has managed to pay off a second-hand computer for her adolescent child; Adele and Rico only have one pair of worn-out shoes each so they can afford to buy quality food for their toddler.

It is clear these families exercise initiative, resourcefulness, thrift and discipline - qualities which do not tally with popular imaginings of 'dole bludgers'. And at the same time it is also obvious that their lives are especially austere when compared to mainstream society. Several participants described their situation as metaphorically stationary, using phrases such as 'treading water' 'head above water' and 'going nowhere'. How do they manage this circumstance?

Consolations

In the first instance, many of the participants expressed the belief that they came to some kind of acceptance of their situation. Though they continue to nurture hopes and dreams, they have ceased to believe their condition is a temporary aberration. Some have reached the point of resignation and even depression, while others call upon spiritual resources. Many participants have reflected at length upon their circumstances and come to look for what virtue may be found; statements such as, 'we're not destroying the earth consuming all that junk like people with money do', or 'we spend time with our children, not like couples who are always working' are common. Indeed, in the absence of competing claims on their loyalties, the parenting or caring role is supreme, creating meaning and giving structure to daily life.

Secondly, nearly two thirds of the participants or their partners use, misuse or have in the past misused substances such as alcohol and marijuana, or indulge in a degree of gambling. As one participant said, 'there's a lot of self-medication going on'. The cost of these consolations is managed in various ways so that they do not destroy the delicate financial juggling act, but most are aware of negative impacts of these practices, which include health, legal and financial effects and strained relationships. Sometimes this recognition prompts the abandonment of the destructive habit.

Two further impacts of long term income support have serious implications both for the families themselves and for society in general: these are the nature of authority relations between jobless families and those institutions with whom they come in contact, and the drawing in - the implosion, almost - of families upon themselves, so that the threat of an alienated underclass so long predicted by social observers appears to have some chance of developing.

'Just cop it sweet'

Of the total number of families who have participated in the study to date, all but one have expressed negative or even hostile attitudes towards government agencies. Centrelink is singled out for the most criticism, because of the apparent capriciousness of its decision making with potentially devastating impact, but participants also display distrust and suspicion towards Job Network agencies who administer job-finding activities for them. Bill says 'most of the people (at a Job Network Agency) are good but you can't trust them all'. When asked what they could do, he replied, 'Breach me - report me to Centrelink - then I'd lose three quarters of my dole'. Barbara, the wife of Michael who works part-time and receives a residual Newstart payment laments, 'We hate it (Centrelink); we'd rather not get money off them but we do need their money'.

In fact those who work have the most reason to feel this way. Jobs involve additional expense such as transport and clothing, but the net gain from precarious employment - though needed - is minimal. Newstart recipients who work are required to regularly provide updates of their earnings, meaning adjustments in their residual payment which are difficult to monitor. Michael recounted how he repaid an alleged overpayment without demur; after previous encounters which left him the worse for wear, he felt it was better to 'cop it sweet' in spite of his belief that he had not in fact been overpaid. In addition these workers are still required to look for and be available

for full-time work and feel themselves to be at the mercy of Job Network agencies who may require them to take 'suitable full-time employment'. This may involve expensive travel and may not last, leaving them without even the precarious security of their former part-time work. Obtaining reliable information from Centrelink is felt to be fraught with difficulties, involving endless calls and visits. One participant felt so strongly that she produced a written analysis of her dealings with Centrelink, detailing contradictory rulings, reversals and varying interpretations of policy as the family's income fluctuated due to the variable hours worked in casual employment[3].

Participants fall into two groups in their attitude towards authority more generally; those who 'cop it sweet', and a minority whose attitudes have hardened into something like class consciousness. George was aware that rates of pay for low-paid occupations had not changed significantly in more than a decade saying 'it's all shot to shit…now they want you to do twice the hours for less money and twice the work'. And on the same issue Lenny had this to say: 'It's the gap between the wages - the people who work hard and the people who get a lot of money; the harder you work, the less money you get…that's what makes me angry.'

'A place where you can be yourself'

Whether angry or anxious, jobless families usually share some of the aspirations of their more affluent fellow citizens and do not wish to be stigmatised. However because their lifestyle is financially constrained, they cannot avoid this if they advertise their dependence on income support. So, notwithstanding their involvement in some areas of the life of the community, their own social networks are limited, often consisting of family members and perhaps one or two friends, or other jobless families. Families, it is felt, comprise loving and supportive relationships. This does not always mean blood relatives; often participants included non-kin as family members; and some kin were excluded because they did not provide this support. When asked about their networks of social support, only a few close relationships were mentioned. Phrases such as 'I don't like other people', 'I've always been a bit of a loner' and 'I prefer my own company' occur with great frequency, a phenomenon which lends support to McDonald's (2000) research on the diminishment of social ties among the socially disadvantaged.

Jobless families are also aware that the general community is resentful of the payments jobless families receive. Thus, although they perform voluntary work, study and even work or play sport, their lives are fragmented into distinct segments in order to protect their vulnerability. Goffman's (1971) work on social actors is confirmed: they appear in the world in various roles, playing to the script. Bill, a Newstart recipient, describes how he keeps the different areas of his life in separate compartments:

> I: Your friends are not to do with Job Network?
>
> B: I keep them absolutely separate. My friends at (a sport) - I don't see them outside the (sport venue). Hanno knows (about long term income support) but he thinks it's a joke - he never puts me down. Reg stereotypes people on the dole.

[3] The Working Credit Scheme, to be introduced in April 2003, may go some way towards alleviating this problem.

I: What about your friends at church?
B: Yes, I don't tell them a lot - they're very conservative.

Emma is certain it is a bad idea ever to mention dependence on income support while working at the school canteen with other parents - when asked about oneself it is sensible to place the focus on another role, such as that of student or community volunteer. Income support recipients in this situation cannot participate in conversations about private health insurance, holidays, superannuation or the acquisition of consumer goods without drawing opprobrium upon themselves or making their more affluent co-volunteers feel uncomfortable. In these face-to-face interactions lies the key to the sense of exclusion that many members of jobless families expressed and in time may mean withdrawal from activities which occasion this degree of discomfort.

The family becomes a retreat. It may experience hardship or conflict, its members may be dispersed, it may be divided or intact, conventional or alternative: but, in the words of one participant, who grounds her understanding of family firmly in spatial reality, it is a refuge from the strain of presenting the public persona: it is, she says, 'a place where you can be yourself'.

It will be seen from the preceding discussion that the families in this study are usually able to maintain a standard of living which provides basic necessities and even allows a facade of apparent normality to be presented to the outside world, as long as the privacy of the home is not breached. Hence, rather than unemployment leading to family breakdown as is popularly believed, among the families studied joblessness - with its consequent poverty and stigma - seems instead to lead to a gathering in of the family (self-defined) upon itself. A measure of stability is provided by the security of income support payments which is often supplemented by precarious employment. Thus to this extent income support is meeting one of the primary aims of the welfare state. But it also appears to produce a sense of alienation from the mainstream and a perception that the administrative arms of welfare policy are coercive and punitive rather than assistive. It may now be instructive to compare this state of affairs with the experiences of those who endured the Great Depression.

Comparison with The Great Depression

The lives of jobless families today are comfortable in comparison with their predecessors. Australia was badly affected, having the dubious distinction of being second only to Germany in the level of official unemployment throughout the 1930s (Lowenstein 1981; Kewley 1973; Roe 1985). Poverty was absolute. Single men took to the roads in search of survival because (as distinct from married men) they could not receive the dole if they lived with their families. Camps consisting entirely of unemployed people existed on the edge of towns. Clothes were made from flour bags and hessian sacks often served as blankets. The dole was meagre and harshly administered. Work for the dole programmes existed then as now. Many people lived in huts they made from whatever materials they could scrounge. Evictions were common. Large families suffered from malnutrition; farmers simply walked off their indebted properties. The experience was so scarifying for some that they never recovered a sense of confidence, self-esteem or security. Evidence from oral histories

shows that many unemployed people blamed themselves for their predicament. Those who could hid their situation from the world, just as income support recipients do today, expressing the same sense of stigma (Lowenstein 1981).
Clearly this is not a state of affairs that anyone would ever wish to be repeated and it should not be forgotten that this terrible experience profoundly influenced the development of Australia's modern welfare state. Thus, though there are similarities, the lives of jobless families now exhibit a number of differences to those of the Depression.

In the first instance, families now tend to have less children. Along with new technology in all fields this has contributed to a rise in the standard of living of the general population except among indigenous communities. New consumer durables have resulted in less exertion and time saved in the execution of housework. The existence of dishwashers and automatic washing machines lead us to forget that many households in the 1930s did not even have the luxury of a cold water tap, let alone unlimited hot water.

But the great hardship which the people of the Depression suffered was in part compensated by strong social bonds for a significant proportion of those affected. Because unemployment was so widespread there was a much greater degree of militancy. Socialism and communism enjoyed some popularity and unemployed workers unions sprang up. Among other activities, they organised rallies, returned evicted families to their homes and provided support for their members. Work for the dole participants went on strike to obtain better rates of pay. The militancy spilled into violence on many occasions. Consciousness of a collective interest pervaded these developments and cemented the already strong presence of unions in working class life (Lowenstein 1981).

Capitalism relies to a significant degree on the extension of consumption in order to thrive. This, along with the increased emphasis on individualism, means that jobless families today are both materially better off and more isolated. They exist as discrete units scattered among the general population. Solidarity may be possible when 30 percent of the working age population is unemployed, but when it is 7 percent it is far more difficult, particularly in terms of gaining any public sympathy[4]. Furthermore should the jobless person also blame him or herself for their position this will also discourage any attempt at collective action. Finally, precarious employment blunts the sharp edge of poverty but it also entrenches income support as a way of life. The question we are left to ask, in an environment when the welfare state is being remodelled along lines not dissimilar in some respects to those of 70 years ago, is - is this as good as it gets?

Conclusion

In a post-traditional society where uncertainty about almost every facet of life makes an appeal to communitarianism inviting, individuals are disengaging from citizenship in its widest meaning in an effort to foster a sense of security. Those unable to be assimilated into this model are to a large extent invisible, confirming Johnson & Taylor's (2000) research on the invisibility of Australian poverty. However it has been seen that income support does at least stabilise a precarious situation.

[4] Though as we have already noted the unemployment rate belies the true number of jobless families.

An attempt has been made to reveal the lives of jobless families as they live in regional NSW today within a greater context of post-modernisation and globalisation. In the sense that they are subject to stigma and relative poverty, they share something in common with their forebears who lived through the Great Depression and thus may suffer some of the same harm, though it may be on the psychic more than the material level. This is accentuated by greater social isolation and the apparent permanence of this way of life.

Nevertheless, there are still those who believe that the human condition can and should be improved in spite of economic determinism and moralistic resignation. Therefore, just as we honour the memory of people who lost their lives in war for the sake of those not yet born, so should we not let the misery and the brutality of the Great Depression be a waste of human endeavour by allowing its echoes to continue to resonate today. Policy making needs not only to heed the voices of those it purports to serve, but also to reflect the wisdom acquired by contemplation of historical precedent in order to avoid the repetition of past mistakes.

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