
Job Loss and the Couple Experience of Coping La perte d'emploi et l'expérience d'adaptation psychologique chez le couple

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ABSTRACT

The couple experience of job loss and unemployment was explored using an existential-phenomenological approach. Through individual and couple interviews, married participants described psychological challenges, relationship barriers, and communication difficulties. Coping strategies—including practical interventions, relationship variables, and cultivating hope—were also explored. Participants described after-effects, including ongoing vulnerability as well as new appreciation and meaning. A discussion of the results, study limitations, and suggestions for counselling and further research is provided.

RÉSUMÉ

On a eu recours à une approche existentielle-phénoménologique pour étudier l'expérience vécue par le couple en situation de perte d'emploi et de chômage. Dans le cadre d'entrevues individuelles et de couple, les participants mariés ont décrit les défis psychologiques, les obstacles relationnels, et les difficultés de communication. De plus, on a exploré les stratégies d'adaptation psychologique, notamment les interventions pratiques, les variables relationnelles, et la cultivation de l'espoir. Les participants ont décrit des effets secondaires, dont une vulnérabilité constante, ainsi qu'une nouvelle appréciation et un sens renouvelé. L'article propose une discussion des résultats, une analyse des limites de l'étude, et des suggestions pour le counseling et les recherches ultérieures.

The communal life of human beings had, therefore, a two-fold foundation: the compulsion to work, which was created by external necessity, and the power of love. (Freud, 1963, p. 38)

Critical life events, such as job loss, often create tension in people's lives (Bobek & Robbins, 2005; Skar, 2004). Freud (1963) made a connection between relationships and vocation when he insisted that love and work both play an essential role in human development. Many researchers have examined this connection, including how work influences intimate relationships and, conversely, how the status of intimate relationships can impact work production (Gorman, 2000; Roberts & Levinson, 2001). For the past several years, Canadians have encountered economic uncertainty and waves of job losses. Many unemployed workers are faced with the challenge of finding work in an unstable environment and the potential impact this may have on the ones they love. This study focuses on the connections between work and love by exploring the couple experience of job

displacement. More specifically, it examines the experience of involuntary job loss, the impact this has on the marriage partnership, and the role that both partners take in the coping process.

IMPACT ON INDIVIDUALS

Involuntary job loss has been conceptualized as one of the most stressful events a person can encounter (Holmes & Rahe, 1967). Over the past century, many different investigators have explored the impact of job loss on the individual. Both Jahoda (1982) and Bakke (1940) examined communities impacted by the Great Depression and reported the challenges of losing work and experiencing unemployment. Other researchers studied the emotional processes involved with job displacement, including experiences of grief and corresponding depression symptoms (Borgen & Amundson, 1987; Kaufman, 1982). More recent research reinforces how job loss has the potential to negatively impact an individual's mental and physical health, self-concept, and financial resources (Mckee-Ryan, Song, Wanberg, & Kinicki, 2005; Paul & Moser, 2009). This involves the negative impact of job loss on other people connected to displaced workers, including family members and even those still left at the previous place of employment (Amundson, Borgen, Jordan, & Erlebach, 2004; Christofferson, 2000; Price, 1992). There is a growing body of literature demonstrating that job loss not only impacts displaced workers but also their intimate relationships.

IMPACT ON INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS

Several studies have concluded that spouses of displaced workers are often equally susceptible to emotional concerns during times of unemployment (Marcus, 2013; Mendolia, 2014). Overall, the literature supports the finding that job loss increases the probability of relationship distress and even divorce (Charles & Stevens, 2004; Eliason, 2012; Kraft, 2001). This relates to the ways in which job loss creates common stressors for both members in the relationship. Howe, Levy, and Caplan (2004) found that partners experience job loss in common ways, and that common stressors were connected to depression in both companions. Howe et al. (2004) showed that common stressors are associated with increased criticism and conflict between partners. One of the stressors more broadly studied is financial strain.

Many investigators examined the specific stressor of financial strain and its connection to relationship disturbance. Vinokur, Price, and Caplan (1996) provided an explanation for the impact of job loss on couple relationships, arguing that economic hardship leads to depression in both partners and subsequent decreased social support for each other. They proposed that depression contributes to increased social undermining and reduced relationship satisfaction. Conger, Rueter, and Elder (1999) confirmed that economic hardship was connected to marital distress. However, they claimed that partner support and problem-solving skills

moderated this relationship. In other words, couples that are mutually supportive are more likely to reduce overall tension in their lives, and those with strong problem-solving abilities are less likely to experience marital conflict despite economic stressors. Moreover, Charles and Stevens (2004) brought into question the connection between financial strain and marital disruption and concluded that conflict and divorce had more to do with “the partner’s fitness as a mate” than economic pressures (p. 519). Using the United States Panel Study of Income Dynamics, they illustrated how couples experiencing disability of one partner were not at risk for divorce in contrast to couples encountering job loss. Charles and Stevens concluded that spouses were more likely to perceive their partners negatively after being fired or laid off and that this perception is what leads to conflict. It appears financial strain is an important and complex variable associated with job loss and relationship challenges.

More recent research has focused on specific characteristics of couples involved in job loss, unemployment, and other related variables. Luhmann, Weiss, Hosoya, and Eid (2014) found that both partners are often impacted by job loss to varying degrees. This longitudinal research provides insight into more specific variables potentially connected to the life satisfaction of couples after job loss. For example, Luhmann et al. discovered that partners react more negatively in families with children and concluded that displaced male workers were more likely to react negatively compared to female workers, although there were no gender differences in how the nondisplaced partners reacted in the study.

Haid and Seiffge-Krenke (2013) found that young couples in which one partner was unemployed encountered higher stress and lower life satisfaction compared to couples where both partners were working. They noted that male partner pessimism was a significant moderating variable associated with the male partner regaining employment and female partner life satisfaction. These results highlight potential differences in couples that may influence the experience of and coping after job loss.

COPING WITH JOB LOSS AND UNEMPLOYMENT

The majority of the coping literature centres on how individuals cope with job loss. Most coping models focus on individual appraisal and coping responses while describing family influence in social support terms (Gowan, Riordan, & Gatewood, 1999; Latack, Kinicki, & Prussia, 1995; Waters, 2000). However, some research highlights how job loss impacts the entire family system (Howe et al., 2004). Very few models focus on how couples cope with job loss and unemployment.

Howe, Caplan, Foster, Lockshin, and McGrath (1995) proposed a model to guide research and interventions related to couples coping with job loss. They acknowledged that job loss involved an asymmetry of roles as one partner is usually more responsible for seeking and finding employment. Based on previous coping research, the model included appraisals of both partners in the relationship. Howe

et al. (1995) argued that promoting the value and esteem of each partner, maintaining openness, engaging in effective problem solving, and upholding a climate of hope were important factors in the success of couples coping with job loss. They described important moderator variables such as gender, level of traditionalism, and financial hardship that may contribute to different experiences of job loss and subsequently a different coping response. While this model was proposed two decades ago, there has yet to be a comprehensive article or chapter validating its efficacy and applicability to couple-focused interventions. Although much of the model satisfies face validity, there seems to be limited research supporting its development. However, it does provide a working model that accounts for the appraisals, transactions, and moderating factors that contribute to the mental health of both partners, as well as the job-seeking behaviour of the displaced worker.

Another perspective that appears to address the couple experience of job loss is the dyadic coping theory (Bodenmann, 2005). Bodenmann (2005) defined *dyadic stress* as “a specific stressful encounter that affects both partners either directly or indirectly and triggers the coping efforts of both partners within a defined time frame and a defined geographic location” (p. 33). He argued that couples encounter dyadic stress and proposed that couples cope with common stressors based on individual and shared appraisals, mutual goals, and resources. Although not directly related to job loss and unemployment, this model can be used to understand the individual and shared attempts to adapt to stress related to job loss and unemployment. Research on dyadic coping indicates that it relates positively to marital functioning and satisfaction (Bodenmann, 2005). Other research illustrates that dyadic coping predicts relationship stability over time (Bodenmann & Cina, 2006). This theory provides a framework for understanding how committed couples cope with the stressful job loss experience.

METHOD

The purpose of this study was to describe the lived experiences of couples in which one member encountered job loss and to explore the role that both partners take in the coping process. For this reason, an existential-phenomenological methodology was employed, as described by Colaizzi (1978), Osborne (1990), Valle, King, and Halling (1989), and Giorgi (1997). Existential phenomenology focuses on the meaning of lived experiences. When applied to psychological sciences, it becomes an approach “which seeks to explicate the *essence, structure, or form* of both human experience and human behavior as revealed through essentially *descriptive* techniques including disciplined reflection” (Valle et al., 1989, p. 6). The objective was to provide a rich description of job loss from the perspectives of both couple members. The research question asked, “What is the experience of coping with involuntary job loss from the perspectives of both members in a marital relationship?”

Participants

Married participants who experienced involuntary job loss were recruited through newspapers, Internet sites, community centres, job placement programs, and counselling agency advertising. Some agreed to participate in the study after hearing about it through word of mouth. To be included in the study, the displaced worker had to have been unemployed for at least three months. The reason for this condition was to ensure a notable unemployment experience as opposed to having participants who were unemployed for a very short period of time. Further, the workers had to be re-employed at the time of inclusion in the study. The intent was to decrease the probability of participants experiencing notable distress at the time of the interviews. It was hoped that the displaced workers and their partners would be more equipped to reflect on their job loss and unemployment experience while being in a position of increased stability. All of the participants in the study fit the criteria.

In total, 5 of the 7 displaced workers were male. The mean age of the participants was 37 years with a range of 25–58 years. On average, the initial interviews took place 6 months after the job loss experience with a range between 4 and 13 months. The average family income was around \$65,000 per year with a range of \$40,000 to \$88,000 per year. The average time unemployed was more than four months, with a range of 3 to 7 months. Marriage duration ranged from 9 months to 29 years, with an average of 10 years. All of the couples except one still had children living with them. See Table 1 for more information.

Data Collection and Analysis

The researcher conducted both individual and couple interviews, which is consistent with previous phenomenological studies designed to examine the lived experience of couples (Casoni & Campbell, 2004; Macknee, 2002; Sayre, Lambo, & Navarre, 2006). The first interview involved only the participant who experienced involuntary job loss in order to gain an individual understanding of the experience. The second interview included only the spouse and focused on his or her experience. In the final interview, both partners were interviewed together to gain the couple perspective of the experience. The length of interviews ranged from 30 to 90 minutes. Some sample questions included the following:

- What did it mean for you as a couple for one of you to lose a job?
- What was your relationship like before the job loss experience?
- How did this experience impact your relationship?
- What did you do as a couple to cope with this experience?
- What helped you cope with this experience as a couple?
- What hindered you from coping with this experience as a couple?
- What else could you say that would help me to better understand your experience?

The following is a description of the data analysis conducted based on the steps outlined by Giorgi (1997) and Colaizzi (1978). The first step involved transcribing and rereading the transcripts to gain a global perspective on the data. Next, the researcher read through each section in a process of “extracting significant statements” (Colaizzi, 1978, p. 59). This involved highlighting relevant comments and selecting verbatim quotes from participants to anchor thematic analysis in the participant descriptions. Next, a structural description of each individual protocol was developed, which involved forming the consistent themes from each participant’s experience. A fundamental description was then established that involved transforming the individual descriptions into a common story or fundamental structure based on themes consistent with all protocols. In the

Table 1
Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Role	Sex	Age	Un-employed (time)	Previous occupation	New occupation	Annual income (\$)
Marcel	Displaced	M	49	4 mths	Plumber	Labourer	60,000
Jayne	Spouse	F	51	N/A	N/A	Pharm tech/ cashier	28,000
Bob	Displaced	M	34	3 mths	Salesman	Account executive (sales)	40,000
Lynn	Spouse	F	30	N/A	N/A	Mom	N/A
Seth	Displaced	M	33	3 mths	Welder	Welder	70,000
Megan	Spouse	F	29	N/A	N/A	Mom/airport worker	15,000
Arthur	Displaced	M	35	3 mths	Welder helper	Order picker	45,000
Ginger	Spouse	F	35	N/A	N/A	Homemaker	N/A
Chrissy	Displaced	F	28	6 mths	Family support worker	Child and youth care worker	38,000
Max	Spouse	M	35	7 mths	Department supervisor	Executive director	35,000
Kim	Displaced	F	25	4.5 mths	Research assistant	Corrosion engineer	45,000
Sam	Spouse	M	26	N/A	Student	Student	25,000
Bill	Displaced	M	58	3 mths	Carpenter	Carpenter	50,000
Sally	Spouse	F	56	N/A	N/A	House cleaner/ caregiver	1,200

final step, the fundamental structure was validated to ensure that it represented the original protocols. This involved returning to participants in person or via phone interviews, and speaking with them for 15 to 40 minutes to determine if the themes best captured the meaning of their experiences. Through this process, discrepancies were discussed and corrections made to ensure that the description accurately reflected the experience of the participants (Colaizzi, 1978).

Existential-phenomenological researchers assume an attitude of reduction, which involves epoche, or bracketing. The researcher attempts to describe predispositions and biases through constant reflection (Osborne, 1990). Bracketing for this study became a process integrated throughout the course of the entire research project. Before the study, the researcher engaged in intentional self-reflection related to the phenomenon. The following are examples of the preconceived notions and common assumptions considered in this process:

- The work role is central to self-concept and is of notable importance considering cultural emphasis and total time spent in this life role.
- Intimate relationships also shape self-concept. People establish identity in relation to others.
- When a person experiences job loss, it will have some impact on the relationship and family system.
- Couples with greater support systems are more likely to cope successfully with job loss.
- Suffering can produce meaning and significance in people's lives, and thus difficult situations can lead to positive outcomes.

Overall, the tone of bracketing was similar to that described by LeVasseur (2003). The researcher attempted to experience the interviews and data analysis with a state of perpetual self-awareness and curiosity to best capture the participants' experiences.

Ethics

The study was submitted and cleared for ethics review through the University of Calgary. Several measures were taken to ensure confidentiality, including storing data in a locked filing cabinet, using participant pseudonyms, and securing data on a password-protected computer. Considering the emotional nature of the study, participants were debriefed about their experiences and provided with community counselling resource information.

RESULTS

The participants were asked to report on their collective experience of job loss and unemployment. The following sections highlight the main themes from these interviews.

Stress and Depression Symptoms

Both the displaced workers and the partners described their experience of heightened stress because of the job loss experience. When the couples were interviewed together, they all reported increased pressure on their relationships. Most reported remarkable relationship stress. Seth mentioned the following: “There was so much pressure on us; we don’t know how to get beyond that. The pressure on her working so much and the pressure on me ... I am doing the best I can.” Both job loss participants and their partners described depression symptoms. Lynn noted, for example, “I was quite sad about it, I mean, upset and very concerned.” Ginger said, “Yeah, no, I was in a deep depression and I am prone to depression anyway, so I kind of was ready for it maybe more so but it’s still not any easier.” Megan described the difficulty of getting out of bed, but noted the motivation of taking care of her children. Chrissy described her experience of depression, noting difficulties with mood. She reported “feeling grouchy all the time” and explained that “I was wanting to just hide in a hole and sleep all day, and because I thought then I wouldn’t have to deal with what was going on and it would be easier to do that.”

Increased Marital Conflict and Erosion of the Marital Friendship

All of the couples reported that job loss and unemployment contributed to increased marital conflict and reduced positive interactions. Megan said the following:

It’s impacted intimacy, friendship, trust, basically everything ... we’re doing a lot better now, obviously. We don’t still see a lot of each other, but still I find that if we spend more than a couple of days together, we are at each other’s throats.

Megan’s husband, Seth, reflected on the heightened conflict in their relationship and the loss of marital friendship as a result of the period of unemployment. He said,

It’s like when you go to bed you might as well put up a concrete wall between us. When you come home, when you’re both home together there ... it would be nitpicking or bickering or fighting ... It was tough ... Like there was no laughter, no fun ... Our friendship got lost along the way. Our priorities—our kids are number 1—but we did not make time for ourselves.

Re-evaluating the Relationship

All of the couples reported that they spent time re-evaluating their relationships during unemployment, with most contemplating the future of their marriages. Megan stated, “In some ways the reason I wanted to leave was because I wasn’t feeling taken care of and I know in his mind that was what he wanted to do ... in my mind, that wasn’t what was happening.”

Lynn and Bob chose to separate for a period of time due to stress from his prolonged unemployment. Similarly, Chrissy mentioned the following:

Well, basically because [I] felt like maybe Max would be better off having someone who could provide for him. I know we did talk about separating, divorcing, because ... we had a lot of issues and we talked around a lot of that ... a lot of marriage troubles at that point.

Sally said, "When you go through a lot of hardships, like losing jobs, you make the choice at the time ... okay, am I just going to pack up and leave, or are we going to stick this out?"

Difficulty Communicating

The couples described various communication barriers related to their job loss experience. Some of the displaced workers mentioned wanting to avoid communicating their stress in an attempt to protect their partners, or due to embarrassment. The job-displaced participants described increased isolation due to their unemployment. Seth kept his feelings from his wife, stating, "I almost was protecting her because I didn't want to hurt her or stress her out anymore." Similarly, Chrissy noted, "I didn't want to worry (my family) and I didn't want to share with them like you know this is what's going on." Bob said, "For me, the biggest factor is embarrassment. So I didn't really want to talk to my wife about it because it's embarrassing. I'd really rather just fix the problem." It appears that feelings such as guilt, shame, and embarrassment led to spending more time alone.

Many of the partners claimed to "not be on the same page" as their spouses. The partners struggled with feelings of anger and difficulty being supportive when trying to cope with their own stress reactions. Megan mentioned, "I think the biggest things was just to try and be supportive even when I didn't want to be ... to be loving even though I didn't want to be." The partners reported that their emotional reactions led to communication challenges. Lynn said, "I was quite upset ... like frustrated, angry, hurt, and tearful at times.... It was probably more the way I handled it. I could have been calmer and more relaxed and used better words."

Balance of Support and Motivation

The partners struggled with finding the right times to support and motivate their spouses. Some reported adding too much pressure on their unemployed spouses. Megan stated, "It wasn't a safe place ... I know that all that energy was hard to put into him some days." Overall, most described the importance of finding a balance between pushing and stepping back. Ginger described this challenge:

I'd be thinking, how can I motivate without being nasty? You know you don't want to be the bad person, but you know that you sometimes need to kick them in the butt to keep them going. So, there are just two different personalities. He can be a totally different person. It feels like you're just trying to match the two sometimes ... and I didn't want to be bossy ... I don't want him running loose. I just want to be half and half. Sometimes he doesn't want that, so I got to know when.... It's like any marriage though ... balancing.

The displaced workers described the experience of receiving both support and motivation from their partners. There were a variety of perspectives on this topic. Some described the motivating as nagging, while others recognized the value of having a partner that held them accountable and continuously motivated and encouraged them. For example, Bob said,

An understanding wife can almost help the husband who's looking for the job to just accept the fact that there is no job there for him.... I could see that she would try to be supportive and quiet and then like if I didn't respond after a while, then it would be more confrontational ... and like we were talking about—I felt some shame and you know, like were saying—it's not always good to be coddled 'cause it kind of keeps you in a rut. Right, so I think it's better to give me a kick in the ass instead of "that's okay."

Conversely, Bill mentioned the challenge of his spouse trying to motivate him. He said, "She was always harping on my case. I just need to process things, you know.... What's my next move going to be, should I phone this person up, sitting here meditating maybe ... and just thinking."

Bill acknowledged, however, the value of having his wife motivate him when he was getting discouraged and becoming depressed:

She gets upset and especially if I get into a depression or want to get into a depression ... a depression wants to settle on me.... "Come on now," she would say, or "let's keep looking here." Well, I think it was very helpful. Because I do need that, I need that encouragement, you know, and whether it comes across positive or negative, I needed to get up off my butt ... it spurred me on. I would say okay, yeah, we can do this, you know, and because I know if I just sit I am not going to amount to anything.

Overall, there was consistent discussion related to this theme of support and motivation. All of the partners seemed to wrestle with how to best balance between supporting and motivating the displaced workers.

Couple Coping

All of the couples were asked to reflect on the aspects of their experiences that enabled them to cope with job loss and unemployment. The following illustrates the main factors that facilitated this process.

Practical support and employment. The couples noted the value of receiving practical support during unemployment. This included family support, conserving and cutting back financially, and gaining employment. Most of the couples noted the importance of receiving practical support from family. For some, this meant receiving financial assistance to help cover essential needs, such as food, the mortgage, and bills. All of the couples noted that they engaged in different financial coping strategies. For most, this involved finding ways to save money. Many described different resourceful methods of cutting costs. Ginger, for example, mentioned the following:

Just knowing that you can live minimalistic a lot more and you know you don't necessarily have to run and get take-out or you don't need a cell phone. We downgraded our Internet and cable and took the long distance off our phone and didn't even miss it.

All of the participants described the importance of the displaced partner finding employment. Although many of the participants returned to lower-paying jobs, employment seemed to provide a sense of predictability and renewed structure to the family. Re-employment seemed to quell the anxiety that accompanied uncertainty related to unemployment. It helped re-establish the displaced workers' important work routines. Chrissy mentioned that this gave her more needed time away from home and a greater sense of control in her life and her relationship.

Relationship resiliency. The couples described several relationship variables that were important in the coping process. These included determination to make the partnership work, intentional communication, avoiding criticism, positive relationship interactions, and strength in numbers. Most of the couples attributed their ability to cope with job loss and unemployment to sheer determination to make their relationships work. Many participants thought that staying in the relationship had the potential to bring greater benefits than costs. Megan said the following:

You really don't know how hard it is until you can really touch it. For me, at the end of the day I still want to be married and I want to have a husband and a friend, a family. It just really hit home on how much you really have to work on your marriage and you could be, like we said, we were each other's best friends and I think at the end of the day we missed that the most.

Her husband, Seth, commented,

When I said my vows, it was for better or for worse and I said no matter how hard it is, no matter what you're going through, stick it out and stay together.... You have to take sometimes the bad with the bad, if you know what I mean. But it will pass.

Sally claimed, "We just stick together ... don't pull apart ... through the thick and thin."

As described, many of the couples encountered difficulty communicating during the period of unemployment. However, most were able to find ways to communicate more effectively, particularly after the displaced worker was able to find work. Many brought up the importance of intentional communication related to their job loss experience. Ginger said,

When we need to have a talk and we both can sit down and set aside time rather than try to convince him ... you have got to set time and then you can both be in the ring at the same time and go through some issues.

Her partner, Arthur, reiterated, "Yes, you definitely have to sit and talk things out and understand what your situation is and you have clear perspective on, you know, what you have to do to fix the problem." Lynn differentiated between "regular communication" and the level of discourse needed to work through the stress of job loss and unemployment. She emphasized the importance of recognizing her partner's feelings, stating, "Not just communication, but always be aware of the other person's feelings and trusting that they love you and care about you."

Most participants described the temptation to think and speak negatively about their partners at times during the unemployment process. However, many described the value of refraining from being critical to help keep the marital partnership intact. Jayne explained, "We haven't really blamed each other for any of it." Likewise, Lynn mentioned,

Well, like I told you I could have every right.... I can be frustrated.... I think I had a reason to be frustrated because I wanted our kids to be provided for and I wanted to feel that I was provided for but, watching what you say, how you say it, [and] thinking more about it, you know all that kind of stuff has made it a lot better.

Most of the couples mentioned the value of being purposeful about working on their relationship despite stress and reduced finances. For some, this involved couples counselling, while others described the importance of engaging in simple positive activities together. Bill and Sally discussed their attempts to connect by spending time together in nature. Bill mentioned that this brought them together and enabled them to reflect on shared spirituality. Megan described the value of getting away with her husband for shared time alone. Max discussed the value of getting time alone with his wife. He said, "I think another thing that has helped is we have been able to find a babysitter so we are able to get out once in a while."

Many of the participating couples reported the importance of working through their stressful experience as a team. Chrissy described the importance of working together toward a common goal, like finding a different place to live. Kim and Sam mentioned the strength of working as a team and supporting each other. Kim noted, "If I were alone at that time it would have been much more difficult because at the back of my mind his support was always there. That definitely gave me a lot of comfort, that's for sure." Similarly, Sally discussed the assurance of knowing that she had a partner to lean on during the unemployment experience. She stated, "at least two people can deal with it, you've got support on each other, you can lean upon each other.... I think going through those times that each time we would go through it and you're sticking together."

Hope and looking to the future. Both displaced workers and their partners acknowledged the importance of staying positive and remaining hopeful. They expressed a sense of confidence that they would be able to survive the challenges connected to job loss and regain employment. Similarly, the couples shared the importance of remaining hopeful about their relationships. Megan stated,

I am really looking forward to even next month.... We will be each other's best friend at the end of the day and you know we will survive it and we'll be just stronger at the end of the day, but it's going to take some time and work.

Hope was described in many different ways, but consistently noted as an essential aspect of coping with job loss and unemployment.

After Effects

All of the couples reflected on how job loss and unemployment influenced them even after re-employment. The following involves the main themes related to the meaning and impact of the experience.

Vulnerability. Despite all of the displaced workers finding work again, there were ongoing relationship issues after re-employment. It seemed that the damage done during unemployment had a carryover effect into re-employment. This was evident to varying degrees with the different couples. Many described the sense that there was still a sort of personal and marital vulnerability from the unemployment experience. Megan said,

I think it is almost like a wound. You are still very fragile and very vulnerable.... We need that time to heal ... at any moment if anything ever happened and the carpet was pulled from underneath us again, it would be devastating.

New appreciation. All of the couples described a renewed appreciation for what they had and for each other. This appeared true in a financial and material sense, but also in a familial sense. The displaced workers described increased appreciation for their partners and the support received during unemployment. Furthermore, many of the partners noted feeling grateful for having their spouses despite the unemployment experience. All of the participants shared a keen sense of gratitude for employment and seemed to develop a new perspective on their lives. This involved a renewed appreciation for aspects previously taken for granted, including material possessions and family relationships.

Strength through struggle. Despite lingering effects from the unemployment experience, most of the couples described increased relationship strength as a result of overcoming job loss and unemployment. For some, it appeared that they were able to eventually achieve increased confidence in their ability to overcome future stressful situations. Megan said,

I am looking forward.... I'm not saying I am looking forward to the next crises 'cause I'm not. I'm so looking forward to this one being done ... but I know we will be stronger the next time and we'll kind of know how to handle it better the next time because I know that there always will be crises and there always will be stresses but the next big one I really believe we'll be stronger.

Likewise, Sally described increased relationship maturity as a result of overcoming the unemployment situation. She noted how "going through thick and thin" led to a "genuine steadfast love." Sam described the value of experiencing tough

times in their relationship because of the potential strength building effects. He said, "To strengthen your relationship is to bring your real self to the surface. Tough times should come in one's life. I believe in this philosophy and I realize certain potential in us that I might have not done before."

Many described becoming closer after overcoming the job loss experience. Jayne said, "Well, I think maybe we have gotten a little closer, because I think before that we took a lot more for granted." Similarly, Lynn stated,

On the other side of it was that we grew closer together, because, I mean hunker together. We are probably stronger together because of that.... It kind of brought us closer together to get through another battle that we had gone through.

DISCUSSION

One of the most salient results of this study was the extent to which job loss impacted the marital relationship. All of the couples described loss of the marital friendship, and most contemplated ending their relationships. Research indicates that losing a job increases the probability of relationship distress and divorce (Eliason, 2012; Kraft, 2001). Many of the couples considered this option, with one couple even taking action and actually separating for a short time. All of the couples in the study described fewer positive interactions during unemployment. Most researchers agree that satisfying marriages involve a strong marital friendship based on positive interchanges (Gottman, Driver, & Tabares, 2002). Gottman (1999) highlighted the importance of positivity in relationships and provided understanding as to why many of the couples in this study reported increased marital turmoil and contemplation of separation. There may be several other factors related to why couples encountering job loss consider separation, including pre-existing marital concerns, finances, and even changes in perceptions of one another after job loss (Charles & Stevens, 2004; Conger et al., 1999).

On a more specific level, the theme of communication between partners was thoroughly represented. Many of the displaced workers described wanting to avoid communicating their personal concerns in an attempt to protect their partners or to avoid embarrassment. Their partners struggled with sharing stresses, fearing that this would add to the displaced worker's already stress-filled existence. In addition, they had to determine whether to be supportive or motivational with their job-displaced partners. This challenge was complicated by differences among displaced workers, some of whom preferred a more demanding approach from their partners, for instance. Most of the couples reported informally that they were surprised to hear about their partner's experiences during the interviews, as some of the material was never discussed between the two of them. Ledermann, Bodenmann, Rudaz, and Bradbury (2010) concluded that "improvements in marital communication and reduction of the perceived relationship stress in both partners can prevent deterioration of marital harmony" (p. 204). Bodenmann

(2005) explained that positive dyadic coping can create a sense of stability for both partners. However, he acknowledged that negative dyadic coping, such as criticizing and disingenuous support, can have a detrimental effect. Participants in the study reported that issues about unemployment were not sufficiently processed. It seems reasonable to conclude that balanced levels of support and motivation combined with intentional communication promoted better understanding and reduced marital discord for the participants in this study.

Fowers (2001) provided a rationale for exploring the role of virtues in communication skills. He argued that character strengths (e.g., self-restraint, honesty, generosity, fidelity, judgement) play an important role in the development of positive communication. This perspective may help to explain the resilient nature of the couples in this study. For example, partners exhibited self-restraint in criticism and, through honesty and generosity, were able to navigate relationship challenges. Overall, there was an overriding sense of fidelity with all couples that led to stability and strength through struggle. It may be these character strengths that enabled couples to work through the challenges of job loss. Fowers provided a more in-depth perspective on the underlying character features of communication that may explain some of the marital interactions discussed in this study.

All of the couples in this study acknowledged that they continued to experience ongoing challenges even after the displaced partner found employment. This may relate to ongoing financial concerns. As mentioned, many of the participants reported underemployment and lower wages after regaining employment and associated financial stressors. In fact, research has demonstrated that unemployed persons often take years to regain lost wages from job loss (Pries, 2004). Perhaps there is another explanation. Many of the participants, particularly the partners, expressed concern about a lingering vulnerability with respect to their relationships. This seemed especially true for the couples that had experienced unemployment in the past. In fact, many acknowledged fear that they may not be able to survive another job loss, especially one in the near future. It is almost as if the couples had a certain capacity for stress tolerance that needed to be built up again with the stability of re-employment. If this is the case, then couples encountering consecutive job losses are possibly more at risk for marital difficulties.

Implications for Counselling Practice

The participants described similar emotional reactions, and thus the results of this study could be used to normalize affective experience. In fact, several displaced workers reflected on their own experiences of reading the themes during the validation interviews and mentioned that it felt reassuring that other people were struggling with similar issues. The partners of displaced workers could benefit from normalizing their emotional experiences. This relates especially to feelings of anger and resentment, and challenges when it comes to being supportive. A part of this process could involve teaching stress management skills in order to minimize the impact of stress (Folke, Parling, & Melin, 2012). In light of the emotional experiences discussed in this study, a thorough assessment of mental

health concerns (Popadiuk, 2013) is prudent, as many noted symptoms of depression during the interviews. This includes assessing for motivation as it relates to the job search process as well as suicidal ideation, as unemployment has been discussed as a potential risk factor for self-harm (Luo, Florence, Quispe-Agnoli, Ouyang, & Crosby, 2011).

There are several considerations for couples counselling. Very few approaches conceptualize couples-focused career counselling for job loss and unemployment. Based on the results of this study, it is important to assess the level of marital conflict after job loss and encourage discussions related to the future of the relationship, if warranted. Couples would likely benefit from normalization efforts, especially related to fewer positive interactions and difficulty communicating. Many of the couples discussed an elevated level of relationship vulnerability after re-employment. It may be prudent to help clients prepare for ongoing concerns after finding work. What was discovered in this study is that couples did not explicitly discuss their expectations about the job search. As a result, more intentional career conversations could remedy this concern (Bodenmann, 2005). Therapists could also explore and address character strengths in counselling to facilitate better communication and resiliency for couples faced with job loss (Fowers, 2001).

All of the couples in the study described issues with specific life stressors during unemployment. Practical stressor management interventions may be helpful near the start of counselling. For example, therapy could involve education related to financial planning and brainstorming for increased financial resourcefulness. Providing appropriate referral information to local government assistance programs would serve to increase the probability of job search success and address some of the financial concerns of clients. Couples counselling should involve brainstorming ways in which partners work together to minimize each other's stress levels. Bodenmann (2005) provided insight and intervention to help couples cope with stress together. Similarly, Gottman and Gottman's (2008) interventions may help couples increase positive interactions through purposeful activities, such as soothing and relaxation exercises.

The utility of hope has been extensively discussed and researched in relation to the workplace as well as within the context of therapy (Froman, 2010; Larsen, Edey, & LeMay, 2007; Yeasting & Jung, 2010). Most of the participants described benefiting from some level of hope that their situations and lives would one day change. This belief seemed to give both displaced workers and their partners the energy to endure the challenges of unemployment.

Couples talked about hope within their relationships and the belief that they could survive the challenges of their situation. It would be helpful to explore couple optimism for the future, and use language and questioning to enable clients to instill greater hope for themselves and their relationships (Yeasting & Jung, 2010). Worthington et al. (1997) presented research on what they called *strategic hope-focused relationship-enrichment counselling*. Their interventions focused on creating hope in relationships through enhancing the love for and value of each partner, increasing faith and confidence between partners, promoting work toward

mutually determined goals for the future, and increasing effort and motivation to enhance the partner relationship.

More recently, Ward and Wampler (2010) explored a grounded theory analysis of hope and provided insight into the process that couples and therapists experience when developing hope in counselling. This may be useful when working with couples encountering job loss. The couples in the study were able to cope through tolerating stress and making intentional attempts to improve their relationships. This information could be shared with couples in counselling to facilitate hope and help couples cope with job loss and unemployment.

If there is to be an enhanced focus on personal and relationship concerns in the context of job loss and career planning, there may need to be changes in the educational requirements for practitioners who assist the unemployed. It seems prudent that employment specialists, educators, counsellors, and psychologists who work with displaced workers should have some knowledge to assess the mental health aspects of this experience, even for referral purposes. This fits with a more systematic perspective on career counselling (Patton & McMahon, 2014; Popadiuk, 2013). Moreover, training related to relationship dynamics could be useful in assisting with relationship challenges in susceptible unemployed workers. Ideally, practitioners who are able to assess and address the career, mental health, and relationship domains would be best suited to help these individuals. Examining related training curricula would assist in determining potential gaps and ways to supplement trainee competencies.

Limitations

One limitation of this study involves participants' ability to recapture past experiences due to the self-reported nature of this research. For example, participants may have had trouble remembering certain aspects of their experiences or struggled with finding the right words to express their thoughts and feelings during the interview. However, all of the participants were given the opportunity to reflect on the study themes during the validation process, which likely minimized this limitation. The length of unemployment could also be considered a limitation, as the experience may have been different for participants unemployed for longer periods of time.

In terms of methodological limitations, existential-phenomenological researchers claim that there are common structures to shared experiences (Valle et al., 1989). However, the researcher is less concerned with finding universal essences, and is more focused on general and contextual structures (Giorgi, 2000). As such, it can be argued that the structure of coping with job loss was described in this study within the context of the participants' experiences. Although there was variance within the participants' encounters, the themes in this study illustrate a general structure of the lived experience of the participants. The process of bracketing was employed, but it is commonly understood that complete reduction of presuppositions is not possible or achievable. Through the bracketing process, the researcher predicted marital challenges and individual struggles. However, the

specific communication challenges and depth of impact on the marital relationship were not anticipated, thus giving credence to the bracketing process.

Future Research

Considering the shared couple experiences discussed in this study, it may be particularly relevant to extend more research in the area of couple career counseling involving both partners. One of the questions posed in this article relates to the significance of having a strong relationship prior to experiencing job loss. Due to the design of this study, these variables were not explicitly explored and could be further examined in future studies. Several of the themes focused on marital communication, and this needs to be explored in more detail. A deeper investigation into the processes of how couples re-evaluate relationships, make decisions during stress, and communicate this with each other would provide valuable insight for researchers and practitioners. It would also be helpful to further explore the theme of underemployment, especially as it relates to the influence of relationship pressures and related implications.

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