

Occupationless Health

“We get on each other’s nerves”: unemployment and the family

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Less than 5% of Britons live in the storybook family with two dependent children, a father who is working, and a wife who stays at home,^{1,2} but most of us continue to live with other people, and the unemployment of one family member can affect all the others and the functioning of the whole. Hypotheses and anecdotes abound on how unemployment may damage, or rarely enhance, family life, but good research and hard evidence are less common. The whole subject of unemployment and health is under-researched, but the particular topic of the effect of unemployment on family life and health may be the most poorly researched of all—despite unemployment and family life both being at the centre of the political stage. Or, maybe it is *because* they are so politicised that we know so little about them. But we do know something, and it is also important to define what we do not know.

Numbers and conditions of unemployed families

In May 1983 about 1.2 million British children were growing up in families where the main breadwinner was unemployed.³ Even at the time this must have been an underestimate, and unemployment has increased substantially since then (19 October, p 1107). More than half of all unemployed men (53%) are aged between 18 and 34, the ages when most start their families, and among the 801 000 men who have been unemployed for over a year the proportion rises to 61%—486 000 men.⁴ In 1982, according to the General Household Survey, just under half (49%) of unemployed men were married, and almost a third (29%) had dependent children: 9% had one child, 11% had two, and 5% had three.⁵ In 1980 among those employed for over a year and aged between 25 and 44 almost two thirds (64%) had dependent children, and in December 1982, 622 000 long term unemployed claimants were responsible for almost half a million children.³ It must be remembered, too, that many families contain dependents who are not children. One small survey in the north east showed that there were more carers (almost always women) looking after elderly, frail, and handicapped relatives than mothers looking after children under 16.³

How many wives and mothers are unemployed is hard to say because of the difficulty of interpreting the unemployment figures for women: many do not register as unemployed because they are not entitled to benefits or are seeking only part time work (19 October, p 1107). Many more who might like a job might not even consider looking for one—either because they don’t think they would get one or because “there are people more deserving of one.” Women are under increasing pressure to stay at home. Nevertheless, many cannot stay at home either because the woman working is the only way to keep a two parent family out of poverty or because the woman has no partner: more than one in eight families is headed by only one person, and in almost 90% of cases this is a woman.²

This difficulty in classifying the employment status of women is

My wife, she don’t respect me any more. My son, Abdul, asked me so many times for a push bike, and I said, “Son, as soon as I get a job I will buy a bike, and please don’t play with the neighbour’s push bike.” I can’t maintain, can’t buy presents for my son. I couldn’t bring presents for my son Haru’s birthday. I can’t buy shoes, as I am expected. My wife’s sister came from Pakistan, and I am unable to take them to Blackpool, to show the seaside. They spent a lot of money to come down here, they pay the milk bills. This makes me feel bad. I am happier that they return, because I don’t feel shame, because they spend their money. Indira treats me differently. If I ask her to do a job before, she does it. Nowadays, she says she will do it later on. She criticises me, she thinks I’m responsible. If I don’t get a job she says, “Why didn’t you get it?” So I say, “It’s not my fault.” When I first lost my job she said I was unlucky. She was praying that I get a job. Children were also sad, because I couldn’t pay for things. When I was working, Indira and the children and me used to go out shopping together. Now I go on my own for the groceries.

An unemployed Asian man, who had been a leading hand and shop steward in a factory making washing machines, quoted in *The Forsaken Families* by Leonard Fagin and Martin Little.

one of the main reasons for the inadequacy of the research into the effects of unemployment on women. (Many feminists would argue that sexism in research is just as important.) An example of the difficulties of classification is provided by the important Office of Population Censuses and Surveys longitudinal study of unemployment and mortality. Women were excluded because those who described themselves as “seeking work” were a small and select group, and 38% of the women in the sample aged 15-59 were “placed in the inactive category to which housewives were allocated.”⁶ Another study published in the same year illustrates further the confusion over women and employment as well as showing how health researchers are still more preoccupied with the harmful effects of work rather than of its absence.⁷ Although they do not say so specifically, Murphy *et al* were clearly primarily interested in whether paid employment might be bad for pregnant women. They looked at 20 613 married women who had their first babies in Cardiff, Barry, or Penarth between 1965 and 1979—79% were employed during pregnancy, and the other 21% were classed as non-employed. The non-employed are not classified further, however, and presumably include two very different groups: women who wanted work but could not get a job, and women who may have chosen not to work—perhaps for the benefit of their unborn baby. It is thus hard to make sense of the findings that the perinatal outcome was significantly better among the employed women and that the non-employed women were more likely than the employed to be at the extremes of maternal age, to have a history of medical problems and previous abortions, and to attend less often

for antenatal care. Unemployment among the non-employed women may well have caused or contributed to their poorer outcomes, and in that context it is interesting that women in social classes I and II were at greater risk than those in lower social classes.

One factor that emerged from this Welsh study was that non-employed women were more likely than employed women to be married to unemployed men. This fits with other evidence from the General Household Survey that unemployment is concentrated in the same families, which goes not only for husbands and wives but also for children.³ A government survey from 1977 showed that one in seven unemployed people had fathers out of work and 20% had an unemployed brother or sister,³ and a small scale survey in 1982 of participants in the community industry scheme found that almost a third of unemployed young people had one or both parents unemployed.⁸

Poverty in unemployed families

In its first report in 1982 the Social Security Advisory Committee said that unemployed claimants with dependent children "must include people who are among the worst off of all supplementary benefit claimants. Families are found to encounter all sorts of pressing needs for additional spending after spending a year on benefit."⁹ Poverty is most acute among the long term unemployed because unemployment benefit stops after a year and the unemployed are not eligible for the long term supplementary benefit rate (2 November, p 1263). The advisory committee in its second report said: "It is manifestly wrong to us that they [the unemployed] should be expected to live on some £10·60 a week (£9·00 at autumn 1985 prices) less than pensioner couples . . . when they are already at a level of income where differences of pence, let alone pounds, can matter deeply."¹⁰

The average couple with two children spent about £149 a week on everything except housing in 1983, and at the same time rates of benefits for a family of the same size were £59·20.¹¹ Unemployed families complain more about financial difficulties than anything else, and there is much evidence of parents going without so that their children can be adequately clothed and fed.^{3 12 13} The mother of one unemployed family told a researcher: "We've made do with a piece of toast, we've always had our main meal at night, always. We've never gone without that have we, even if it's only egg and chips. but perhaps we've had a piece of toast dinner time instead of having a normal meal so the children can have theirs. We usually find that at the end of the fortnight."¹³

Marriage and birth

Economic factors are important in determining marriage and birth rates, and during recessions both marriages and births tend to decline. During the 1930s in Britain and Australia crude marriage rates fell, and the average age of both men and women at first marriage rose.^{14 15} The same picture has emerged in the recent recession.^{3 16} Birth rates tend naturally to vary with marriage rates, and they have fallen during the recent recession—as they did in the 1930s.^{5 16} Windschuttle has looked at the Australian data and declared himself satisfied that unemployment and recession are having an important effect on the Australian family, but I know of no statistical studies correlating unemployment with marriage and birth rates. We cannot be confident that unemployment in itself, and particularly prolonged unemployment, leads to reductions in births and marriages.

The contradictions in how unemployment may affect marriage and reproduction emerge in small descriptive studies. Popay quotes a 19 year old Liverpoolian who had been unemployed since leaving school as saying that because he had no job he couldn't contemplate having a girlfriend, getting married, and raising a family—and he didn't think that he would ever get a job.³ He would never have a "normal family life." Campbell, in contrast, notes that "unemployed girls who've never experienced economic independence are doing the only thing they can—having babies, either getting

married or not. . . . They never consider an abortion, often don't use contraception. They want children. Of course they do."¹⁷ Beale and Nethercott noticed a significant rise in the pregnancy rate compared with controls among women laid off when the sausage factory in Beale's practice in Calne, Wiltshire, closed (personal communication).

Burgoyne surveyed 100 married couples in which the man was unemployed and found that 70% said unemployment made no difference to their decisions on starting or adding to their families while 23% said it had put them off and 7% said it had encouraged them.¹⁸ In her intensive study of 17 young families McKee found that for most of them the husband's employment status was of little or no consequence in the decision when to start a family.¹³ Many pregnancies happened accidentally, and more important than the man's employment was the age of the mother, the existing family size, the mother's employment status, the age and sex of existing children, and the duration of the marriage. These factors are, of course, those that are important in employed families, and McKee concludes that families want to do what seems "normal" to them. One woman said: "People say to me you shouldn't have children in this industrial climate, but I don't think that way. And I'd like another even now, even if I'm out of work, 'cause if the unemployed stopped reproducing . . . you'd have workers having children and unemployed not."

Deciding whether or not to become pregnant and then whether to go forward with the pregnancy is complex, and many factors are important. Nevertheless, a man's unemployment may play a crucial if not decisive part in the decision—as one woman's story illustrates. She became pregnant soon after her husband had lost his job: "It really depressed me . . . it all seemed to come together, being pregnant, people getting at Paul [her husband], and it took it out of me. I went to the doctor, I was on tranquillisers. I got so depressed. I suppose it was having three other children and then having Kay, 'cos she wasn't planned. I went to have an abortion. The thing was with Paul being on the dole there was no way we could afford another baby. And I went to the hospital and couldn't go through with it."¹³

Destruction of precious relationships and domestic violence

Unemployment can destroy relationships just as it destroys individuals. The deterioration in the mental health of the unemployed person—be it the father, the mother, or a child—affects his or her relationships with the rest of the family. And in this time of misery the family are likely to be thrown together more, usually in financially reduced circumstances, and sooner or later something may snap.

Divorce rates have surged in Britain since 1971, when the Divorce Law Reform Act came into force, and so it is hard to sort out longitudinally the influence of unemployment on marital breakdown. But cross sectional data show that the divorce rate in 1979 among unemployed men aged 16-59 was 34 per 1000 while among all men of that age it was 15.¹⁹ For all age groups the divorce rate of the unemployed was double that of the national average. These figures do not, of course, prove that unemployment is causing marital breakdown, but they are very suggestive. Burgoyne found that a third of her 100 couples had reported a deterioration in their relationship compared with only 3% of matched control couples.¹⁸ About half of the couples reported an increase in arguments, and in a third one or other partner had either contemplated leaving or had left temporarily.

Wife battering and child abuse have come much more into the public eye during the same time that unemployment has increased, and many people and politicians have assumed that they are therefore cause and effect. Similar assumptions have been made about unemployment causing drug taking, street violence, and crime, but it is wrong to move from correlations to assumptions about causation—after all, the number of colour television sets in Britain has also increased considerably in the past ten years. Yet it seems likely that there might be a link between unemployment and domestic violence.



Unemployed families in the 1930s and 1970s (both pictures copyright BBC Hulton Picture Library).

A study of 100 cases of wife battering published in 1975, when male unemployment in Britain was about 5%, found that 48% of the husbands or cohabitants had been unemployed at some time and 29% were frequently or mostly unemployed.²⁰ Other factors that were associated with the battering included heavy drinking, gambling, and a prison record. Similar results have emerged in Australia, where 45% of the husbands of women presenting to the Elsie Women's Refuge, Sydney, in 1975 were unemployed—a rate 26 times higher than the Australian average at the time.¹⁵ The Australian Royal Commission on Human Relationships in 1976 invited battered wives to "phone in," and among the 56 women who gave their husband's employment status 13 (23%) had husbands who were unemployed.¹⁵ Windschuttle attributes the differences in the results to the socioeconomic variation in the two groups: most of the callers to the royal commission were from higher social groups, among whom unemployment was lower. One woman who rang the commission said: "When he lost his job he went absolutely bonkers. He changed completely. He became depressed and snappy. Frustrated."¹⁵

The British study reported an association between wife battering and child abuse, and the parallelism of the curves showing an

increase in unemployment and prevalence of child abuse has struck researchers. The figures of the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children show that the rate of physically injured children began to rise dramatically in 1979 and increased by half over the next three years.²¹ The factors most often mentioned as precipitating the abuse to 6532 children registered with the society between 1 January 1977 and 31 December 1982 were unemployment, marital discord, debts, and parents' lack of self esteem.²¹ Unemployment itself leads to debts (2 November, p 1263), lack of self esteem (9 November, p 1338), and marital discord.

Fathers of children notified to the society in 1976 had an unemployment rate six times that of the general population,^{22 23} and a study in Dundee found that almost a third of the fathers of abused children were out of work.²⁴ A nationwide American study found that the fathers and mothers of abused children had poor employment records, and at the time of the incident 12% of the fathers were unemployed—three times the national rate at the time.²⁵ Steinberg *et al* have moved on from these cross sectional studies to do an aggregate longitudinal study over 30 months in two distinct metropolitan communities. They showed that increases in child abuse were preceded by periods of high job loss, and they were confident that the two were cause and effect.²⁶

Children taken into care—not all of whom are abused—are also likely to have unemployed parents: in one small study in 1976 almost half of the parents of children taken into care were unemployed.²⁷

Perinatal and infant mortality

The health of the children of the unemployed may be harmed in ways other than by violence or neglect, and some evidence points to higher mortality rates. Infant and neonatal mortality declined in the 1930s (although maternal mortality increased) and perinatal mortality has

declined since 1976, which inclines politicians towards the view that unemployment in particular and recession in general cannot have much effect on infant deaths (26 October, p 1191).²⁸ The latest figures for Scotland, however, show a small increase in perinatal mortality,²⁹ and specific studies have suggested an association between unemployment and perinatal and infant mortality.²⁸

An analysis of data from the 1971 census showed a positive association between death rates of children aged 0 to 4 years and unemployment rate, low socioeconomic status, and inadequate and overcrowded housing, and the unemployment rate seemed to have an effect independent of class.³⁰ Deaths in children aged 5-14 years were not associated with unemployment. Only one study has used data from the 1981 census, finding a strong association in 30 postal districts of Glasgow between unemployment and admission rates of children to hospital.³¹

The survey of all births in one week in April 1971 has been used to look for associations between unemployment and outcome of pregnancy as questions were asked in the initial survey about the employment status of both the mother and the father; questions were also asked about intervening employment in the follow up in 1975.³² A study of 15 000 singleton pregnancies showed that within

each class women married to unemployed men compared with women whose husbands had jobs made less use of contraceptives, had had more babies, attended fewer antenatal clinics and classes, smoked more, and were less likely to breast feed. All of these are risk factors associated with a poor outcome for the pregnancy, but although there was a 50% excess risk of perinatal death among the babies born to unemployed fathers the increase did not reach statistical significance.²⁸ This may well have been because of the small size of the study and the low rate of unemployment, and the study cries out to be repeated today when unemployment is so much higher.

Growth of children of the unemployed

A study of 655 Glasgow babies showed that after adjusting for other factors the mean birthweight of those with unemployed fathers was 150 g less than that of those with employed fathers.³³ A longitudinal study of 107 babies from either a richer or a poorer area showed that the 2.6% deficit in growth in the first year in those from the poorer area was completely explained by adjusting for length at 1 month, father's height, and whether the father was employed.³³ A study of 20600 Dublin babies showed that those born to unemployed fathers had a mean birthweight 20 g lower than those born into social class V and 80 g lower than those born into social class IV.³⁴ The Glasgow researchers suggested that their study had produced some evidence that unemployment among men was causally related to growth faltering in their babies, and said that it was important that a national study of trends in birthweight during the years of rapid increase in unemployment be done. It hasn't yet and probably never can be—because the years of rapid rise are over.

Two national studies of child growth since 1972 have shown that the children of the unemployed tend to be shorter than those whose fathers are in work, and this effect is greatest in the children of the long term unemployed.^{35 36} The preschool growth study has also found that at the age of 2 the children of the unemployed are significantly more likely to fail developmental tests; this was not so at age 1.^{28 37-39}

Health of older children and other family members

We know remarkably little about how the unemployment of a male breadwinner affects the general health of a family, and we know even less about the effect of unemployment on a wife when the husband is still in work. Moser *et al* have shown from the OPCS longitudinal study an increase in the mortality of wives of unemployed men,⁶ and Beale and Nethercott have shown a significant increase in both the consultation rates and referral rates to hospital of whole families when redundancy threatens.⁴⁰ Fagin and Little in their small uncontrolled study found that some wives became depressed, especially if they were not working and were dependent on their husband's working image, and they also found in the children of three of their families an increase after the father's job loss of disturbances in feeding habits, minor gastrointestinal complaints, sleeping difficulties, proneness to accidents, and behaviour disorders.⁴¹ A study just as small—but controlled—from North Carolina found in the 18 children of workers made redundant a significantly higher incidence of episodes of illness and days sick with all the infectious illnesses than among the 13 children of retained workers.⁴²

Conclusion

This is not an impressive haul of evidence, and if I stop to think of the amount published on, for instance, hypertension or cancer of the colon I can only conclude that doctors and medical researchers

have shamefully neglected the study of how unemployment harms the health of families. For it seems wholly likely that family life is shaken by unemployment—often unto disintegration—and we have evidence that points towards possible increases in divorce, domestic violence, abortions and unwanted pregnancies, perinatal and infant mortality, and morbidity in wives and children as well as evidence of failure of growth in children. Although none of the evidence provides us with the degree of proof that reluctant politicians demand before they will take action, almost all of it points in the direction of unemployment seriously harming families as well as individuals.

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