



## Editorial

Unemployment in the time of COVID-19: A research agenda<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

This essay represents the collective vision of a group of scholars in vocational psychology who have sought to develop a research agenda in response to the massive global unemployment crisis that has been evoked by the COVID-19 pandemic. The research agenda includes exploring how this unemployment crisis may differ from previous unemployment periods; examining the nature of the grief evoked by the parallel loss of work and loss of life; recognizing and addressing the privilege of scholars; examining the inequality that underlies the disproportionate impact of the crisis on poor and working class communities; developing a framework for evidence-based interventions for unemployed individuals; and examining the work-family interface and unemployment among youth.

This essay reflects the collective input from members of a community of vocational psychologists who share an interest in psychology of working theory and related social-justice oriented perspectives (Blustein, 2019; Duffy, Blustein, Diemer, & Autin, 2016). Each author of this article has contributed a specific set of ideas, which individually and collectively reflect some promising directions for research about the rampant unemployment that sadly defines this COVID-19 crisis.

Our efforts cohere along several assumptions and values. First, we share a view that unemployment has devastating effects on the psychological, economic, and social well-being of individuals and communities (Blustein, 2019). Second, we seek to build on the exemplary research on unemployment that has documented its impact on mental health (Paul & Moser, 2009; Wanberg, 2012) and its equally pernicious impact on communities (International Labor Organization, 2020b). Third, we hope that this contribution charts a research agenda that will inform practice at individual and systemic levels to support and sustain people as they grapple with the daunting challenge of seeking work and recovering from the psychological and vocational fallout of this pandemic.

The advent of this period of global unemployment is connected causally and temporally to considerable loss of life and illness, which is creating an intense level of grief and trauma for many people. The first step in developing a research agenda for unemployment during the COVID-19 era is to describe the nature of this process of loss in so many critical sectors of life. A major research question, therefore, is to what extent does this unemployment crisis vary from previous bouts of unemployment which were linked to economic fluctuations? In addition, exploring the role of loss and trauma during this crisis should yield research findings that can inform psychological and vocational interventions as well as policy guidance to support people via civic institutions and communities.

### 1. Recognizing and channeling our own privilege

In Joe Pinker's (2020) Atlantic essay entitled, "*The Pandemic Will Cleave America in Two*", he highlights two distinct experiences of the pandemic. One is an experience felt by those with high levels of education in stable jobs where telework is possible. Lives are now more stressful, work has been turned upside down, childcare is challenging, and leaving the house feels ominous. The other is an experience felt by the rest of the working public – those who cannot work from home and thus are putting themselves at risk every day, whose jobs have been either lost or downsized, and who are wondering not only if they will catch the virus but whether they have the means and resources to survive. As psychologists and professors, the vast majority of "us" (those writing this essay and those

<sup>☆</sup> The order of authorship for authors two through six was determined randomly; each of these authors contributed equally to this paper.

reading it) are extremely fortunate to be in the first group. The pandemic has only served to exacerbate the extent of this privilege.

Given our relative position of power, what are ways we can change our research to be more meaningful and impactful to those outside of our bubble? We propose that the recent work on radical healing in communities of color – where the research is often done in collaboration with the participants and building participant agency is an explicit goal – can inform our path forward (French et al., 2020; Mosley et al., 2020). Work has always been a domain where individuals experience distress and marginalization. However, in the current pandemic and into the unforeseeable future, this will only exponentially increase. Sure, we can do surveys about people's experiences and provide incentives for their time. And of course qualitative work will allow us to more directly connect with participants and hear their voices. But what is most needed is research where participants receive tangible benefits to improve their work lives. We, as privileged scholars, need to think about how we can use our expertise in studying work to infuse our studies with real world benefits. We see this as occurring on a spectrum in terms of scholars' time and resources available – from information sharing about resources to providing job-seeking or work-related interventions. In our view, now is the time to truly commit to using work-related research not just as a way to build scholarly knowledge, but as a way to improve lives.

## 2. Inequality and unemployment

Focusing research efforts on real-world benefits means acknowledging how the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed and exacerbated existing inequities in the labor market. Millions of workers in the U.S. have precarious jobs that are uncertain in the continuity and amount of work, do not pay a living wage, do not give workers power to advocate for their needs, or do not provide access to basic benefits (Kalleberg, 2009). Power and privilege are major determinants of who is at risk for precarious work, with historically marginalized communities being disproportionately vulnerable to these job conditions (International Labor Organization, 2020a). In turn, people with precarious work experience chronic stress and uncertainty, putting them at risk for mental health, physical, and relational problems (Blustein, 2019). These risk factors may further worsen the effects of the COVID-19 crisis while simultaneously exposing inequities that existed before the crises.

The COVID-19 pandemic is an opportunity for researchers to define and describe how precarious work creates physical, relational, behavioral, psychological, economic, and emotional vulnerabilities that worsen outcomes from crises like the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., unemployment, psychological distress). For example, longitudinal studies can examine how precarious work creates vulnerabilities in different domains, which in turn predict outcomes of the COVID-19 pandemic, including unemployment and mental health. This may include larger scale cohort studies that examine how the COVID-19 crisis has created a generation of precarity among people undergoing the school-to-work transition. Researchers can also study how governmental and nonprofit interventions reduce vulnerability and buffer the relations between precarious work and various outcomes. For example, direct cash assistance is becoming increasingly popular as an efficient way to help people in poverty (Evans & Popova, 2014). However, dominant social narratives (e.g., the myth of meritocracy, the American dream) blame people with poor quality work for their situations. Psychologists have a critical role in (a) documenting false social narratives, (b) studying interventions to provide accurate counter narratives (e.g., people who receive direct cash assistance do not spend money on alcohol or drugs; most people who need assistance are working; Evans & Popova, 2014), and (c) studying how to effectively change attitudes among the public to create support for effective interventions.

## 3. Work-family interface

Investigating the work-family interface during unemployment may appear contradictory. It can be argued that because there is no paid work, the work-family interface does not exist. But 'work' is an integral part of people's lives, even during unemployment; for example, working to find a job is a daunting task that is usually done from home. Thus, the work-family interface also exists during unemployment, but our knowledge about this is limited. Our current knowledge on the work-family interface primarily focuses on people who work full-time and usually among working parents with young children (Cinamon, 2018). As such, focusing on the work-family interface during periods of unemployment represents a needed research agenda that can inform public policy and scholarship in work-family relationships.

The rise in unemployment due to COVID-19 relates not only to the unemployed, but also to other family members. Important research questions to consider are how are positive and negative feelings and thoughts about the absence of work conveyed and co-constructed by family members? What family behaviors and dynamics promote and serve as social capital for the unemployed and for the other members of the family? Do job search behaviors serve as a form of modeling for other family members? What are the experiences of unemployed spouses and children, and how do these experiences shape their own career development? These issues can be discerned among unemployed people of different ages, communities, and cultures.

Several research methods can promote this agenda. Participatory action research can enable vocational researchers to be proactive and involved in increasing social solidarity. This approach requires mutual collaboration between the researcher and families wherein one of the parents is unemployed. By giving them voice to describe their experiences, thoughts, ideas, and suggested solutions, we affirm inclusion of the individuals living through the new reality, thereby conveying respect and acknowledgment. At the same time, we can bring ideas, knowledge, and social connections to the families that can serve as social capital. In addition, longitudinal quantitative studies among unemployed families that explore some of the issues noted above would be important as a means of exploring how the new unemployment experience is shaping both work and relationships. We also advocate that meaningful incentives be offered to participants in all of these studies, such as online job search workshops and career education interventions for adolescents.

#### 4. Strategies for dealing with unemployment in the pandemic of 2020

Forward-looking governments and organizations (such as universities) should begin thinking about how to deal with the immediate and long-term consequences of the economic crisis created by COVID-19, especially in the area of unemployment. Creating meaningful interventions to assist the newly unemployed will be difficult because of the unprecedented number of individuals and families that are affected and because of the diverse contextual and personal factors that characterize this new population. Because of this diversity of contextual and personal factors, different interventions will be required for different patterns of individual/contextual characteristics (Ferreira et al., 2015).

In broad outline, a research program to address the diversity of issues identified above could be envisioned to consist of several distinct phases: First, it would be necessary to carefully assess the external circumstances of the unemployed individual's job loss, including the probability of re-employment, financial condition, family composition, and living conditions, among others. Second, an assessment should be made of the individual's strengths and growth edges, particularly as they impact the current situation. These assessments could be performed via paper or online questionnaire. Based on these initial assessments, the third phase would involve using statistical analyses such as cluster analysis to form distinct groups of unemployed individuals, perhaps based in part on the probability of re-employment following the pandemic. The fourth phase would focus on determining the types (and/or combinations) of intervention most appropriate for each group (e.g., temporary government assistance; emotional support counseling; retraining for better future job prospects; relocation, etc.). Because access to specific types of assistance is frequently a serious challenge, especially for underprivileged individuals, the fifth phase should emphasize facilitating individuals' access to the specific assistance they need. Finally, the sixth phase of research should evaluate the efficacy of this approach, although designing such a large research program in a crisis situation requires ongoing process evaluation throughout the design and implementation stages of the research program.

#### 5. Unemployment among youth

As reflected in a recent [International Labor Organization \(2020a\)](#) report on the impact of the COVID-19 crisis, youth were already vulnerable within the workforce prior to the crisis; the recent advent of massive job losses and growing precarity of work is having particularly painful impacts on young people across the globe. The COVID-19 economic crisis with vast increases in unemployment (and competition between workers) and the probable growth of digitalization may result in a major dislocation of young workers from the labor market for some time ([International Labor Organization, 2020b](#)). To provide knowledge to meet this daunting challenge, researchers should develop an agenda focusing on two major components—the first is a participatory mode of understanding the experience of youth and the second is the development of evidence-based interventions that are derived from this research process.

The data gathering aspect of this research agenda optimally should focus on understanding unemployed youths' perception of their situation (opportunities, barriers, fears, and intentions) and of the new labor market. We propose that research is needed to unpack how youth are constructing this new reality, their relationship to society, to others, and to the world. This crisis may have changed their priorities, the meaning of work, and their lifestyle. For example, this crisis may have led to an awareness of the necessity of developing more environmentally responsible behaviors (Cohen-Scali et al., 2018). These new life styles could result in skills development and increased autonomy and adaptability among young people. In addition, the focus on understanding youths' experience, which can encompass qualitative and quantitative methods, should also include explorations of shifts in youths' sense of identity and purpose, which may be dramatically affected by the crisis. The young people who are without work should be involved at each step of the research process in order to improve their capacities, knowledge, and agency and to ensure that the research is designed from their lived experiences.

Building on these research efforts, interventions may be designed that include individual counseling strategies as well as systemic interventions based on analyses of the communities in which young people are involved (for example, families and couples and not only individuals). In addition, we need more research to learn about the process of collective empowerment and critical consciousness development, which can inform youths' advocacy efforts and serve as a buffer in their career development (Blustein, 2019).

#### 6. Conclusion

The research ideas presented in this contribution have been offered as a means of stimulating needed scholarship, program development, and advocacy efforts. Naturally, these ideas are not intended to be exhaustive. We hope that readers will find ideas and perspectives in our essay that may stimulate a broad-based research agenda for our field, optimally informing transformative interventions and needed policy interventions for individuals and communities suffering from the loss of work (and loss of loved ones in this pandemic). A common thread in our essay is the recommendation that research efforts be constructed from the lived experiences of the individuals who are now out of work. As we have noted here, their experiences may not be similar to other periods of extensive unemployment, which argues strongly for experience-near, participatory research. We are also advocating for the use of rigorous quantitative methods to develop new understanding of the nature of unemployment during this period and to develop and assess interventions. In addition, we would like to advocate that the collective scholarly efforts of our community include incentives and outcomes that support unemployed individuals. For example, online workshops and resources can be shared with participants and other communities as a way of not just dignifying their participation, but of also providing tangible support during a crisis.

In closing, we are humbled by the stories that we hear from our communities about the job loss of this pandemic period. Our

authorship team shares a deep commitment to research that matters; in this context, we believe that our work now matters more than we can imagine.

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