The Psychology of Work and Unemployment in Australia Today

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SUMMARY

1. Paid work is typically a major part of life for adults in Western society. Reliable and secure access to work potentially offers a number of benefits, including an income (which in turn provides access to desired activities, goods and services), structured activity, a sense of purposefulness and personal worth, and social contact.

2. Many traditional ideas about ‘work’ and ‘non-work’ are culture-bound. In Western cultural contexts the determination of one’s daily activities is accompanied by a sense of one’s “value” as income earner, provider and responsible - and successful - member of society.

3. Many ideas about what is work are also gender bound. Despite their increasing involvement in the workforce, women also usually carry the greater burden of work in the home; such work is clearly essential but traditionally undervalued. Unpaid work in the home is not counted as part of the Gross National Product while the same work, if paid (e.g., cleaning or cooking), is counted.

4. Employed people enjoy better mental health than do unemployed people, and longitudinal research findings support the conclusion that this is because employment status affects mental health. However, whether the experience of work is beneficial or detrimental depends on the quality of the work experience. The claim that even bad jobs are better for psychological well-being than unemployment is not supported by research.

5. The provision and nature of work are undergoing marked changes which are modifying the impact of work so as to reduce or negate its potentially beneficial effects. There are proportionally fewer full-time and more part-time jobs, and increasing casual and contract labour, often resulting in adverse impacts on the
family, on the nature of work experience and on career paths. Job growth has mainly been at the two ends of the skill spectrum, either professional level jobs or labouring and service jobs. Downsizing, as well as being emotionally and economically damaging to retrenched workers, often results in increasing workloads for remaining workers, with adverse effects on health, psychological well-being, and productivity.

6. Job loss in middle age has been shown to be even more damaging than unemployment for the young. Retirement can be beneficial or deleterious, depending on several factors, particularly health, financial security, and the individual’s perceived control over the decision. Attitudes towards retirement are now contradictory, with governmental encouragement for delayed retirement standing alongside community pressure to leave work to make room for younger workers.

7. The nature and availability of work, and therefore the impact of the work experience and the role work plays in life, are inevitably changing and will continue to do so. At present, these changes are often occurring in ways that are detrimental to many individuals and to the Australian community. This paper focuses in detail on the psychological aspects of these changes and their effects, but the solutions to most of the problems raised will necessarily involve social, economic and political action.
1. INTRODUCTION

Paid work is a major activity throughout most of life for most adults in western society. Full time work occupies a major part of our waking hours. A traditional notion of work has been that of activity that produces material products or provides services, activity for which workers usually but not always expect to be paid. Such simple notions, focussing as they do on the economically productive functions of work, have always been an inadequate account of the possible functions of work for the worker. The experience of work has the capacity to be beneficial or detrimental, both directly and indirectly. Work can provide a sense of achievement, of purpose, of fulfilment, of personal and social worth, and the earnings from work provide access to other needed or desired resources, support and experiences. Obligatory activity that offers few or none of these benefits (‘labour’) may be largely detrimental despite providing monetary access to other desirable resources.

The experience of seeking and not obtaining work is typically detrimental, often seriously so; the experience of ceasing work may be beneficial, as in planned retirement, but is also often detrimental. The experience of unemployment, in one form or another, is currently all that is realistically available to a sizeable minority of our community. Another sizeable minority is involved in unpaid work as carers of children, people with disabilities and people with age related disabilities. Most of this unpaid caring work is done by women, often in addition to part time or full time paid work.

To add further complexity to the experiences of work, unemployment and retirement, the nature of work is undergoing radical and rapid change, particularly in response to changing technology and globalisation of industry. The majority of new jobs are being created at the two ends of the range of complexity, either highly skilled, professional level jobs or unskilled labouring and service jobs. The former require not only a highly trained workforce but one which is able continually to update its skills. The latter
offer work that is more akin to ‘labour’, as defined above, offering little positive benefit other than an income. These changes will inevitably modify the impact of work, or the lack of it, on psychological well-being and health, with again the potential to be beneficial or detrimental.

Psychologists have a strong interest in individual and societal well-being and are thus drawn to the study of the psychological impact of work and of the lack or loss of work. The aim of this discussion paper is to summarise the research into the psychological effects of work, unemployment and retirement, and to consider strategies for optimising the potential benefits and minimising potential harm.

2. CULTURAL AND CROSS-CULTURAL ASPECTS OF WORK

Many of our traditional ideas about ‘work’ and ‘nonwork’ are culture-bound. Westerners live in largely industrialised societies and cultures where there is a clearly demarcated domain of ‘work’ or ‘gainful employment’ which is highly valued, which can dramatically impact on individual identity and status, which largely determines residential location and often education, and which takes up a large part of people’s lives. The other side of this Western institutionalisation of work and the work ethic is that not to ‘have work’ is to see oneself as a failure, to have an indeterminate identity and status, to be perceived as ‘carried’ by the work of others, to be dependent, and to have an uncertain future. While it can and has been argued that ‘work’ itself simply differs from culture to culture, with different types of economies, the reality in terms of cultural assumptions and meaning systems is that the very construct of ‘work’ differs profoundly from culture to culture.

Even in Western European cultures, which are superficially homogenous, work values differ markedly (e.g., Hofstede, 1980). The domain of work and cultural values is of particular interest in Australia, given the cultural heterogeneity of the population, including indigenous people and immigrants, given the high work aspirations of
migrants, and given a popular conception of Australia overseas to the effect that, in Australia, people “work to live” as distinct from America and parts of Europe, where people basically “live to work”. There are also differences across generations, with Australia’s young people occupying a different cultural space from their parents, and often having different values with respect to self, life and nature and importance of work (Frydenberg, 1994).

We need to keep in mind that Western cultural value stances and assumptions are in part responsible for a number of unfavourable stereotypes with respect to differing rates of paid employment in other cultural contexts. For example, high rates of unemployment in Aboriginal communities are regularly cited as negative social indicators, yet these reflect both pervasive structural inequalities as well as a cultural value system which is simply very different. While there has been some limited research on ‘work values’ among indigenous Australians, it has been almost always in the context of non-Aboriginal and largely Western cultural assumptions and in the context of community development initiatives aimed at providing an ‘economic base’ and ‘self-sufficiency’, based on values often alien to their culture.

In Western cultures we have tended to isolate and reify ‘work’ as a thing in itself, as a self-defining life context, as the subject of intellectual and popular discussions, as part and product of a motivational and economic engine that drives society and progress. We work at ‘work’ and work at home; it’s what we ‘do’ for a ‘living’. While many are questioning increasing incompatibilities between having a life and having a career, what drives and defines the cultural ideal in Australia is a self-defining, self-satisfying ‘job’. These are relatively strange and alien notions in many non-Western cultures, where ‘work’ is a more integral part of living and being and is not a reflective object of consideration, study, and cultural elaboration.

A cross-cultural perspective allows us some intellectual purchase on where and how what we identify as ‘work’ impacts on people’s lives. This is particularly valuable at
a time when cultures and, indeed, the nature of self and society (e.g., Gergen, 1991; Sampson, 1989) are changing rapidly. It is true at both ends of the generational continuum, with many older persons bridging a further generational divide and living far past the age of ‘retirement’. Such a perspective cautions us against seeing alternative life styles as necessarily problematic, while at the same time understanding the self-defining, esteem-providing, and dignity-enhancing dividends that culturally valued ‘work’ can provide in particular cultural contexts. We clearly need some different ways of understanding and thinking about ‘work’. We are entering a millennium in which ‘work’ may become a less central part of who and what people are. We need to accommodate better new cultural understandings of personhood, and connections, and of meaning and self-fulfilment. The experience of other cultures allows us to broaden, redefine and reconstrue (e.g., Davidson & Reser, 1996) the nature of ‘work’ and its relation to life satisfaction and quality of life.

3. WOMEN AND WORK

There is an established literature, much of it based in women’s studies, on the effects of women entering the paid work force in increasing numbers over the last twenty to thirty years. (e.g., Bryson, 1994; Mumford, 1989; Ryan & Conlon, 1989). By 1992 women made up more than 40 percent of the Australian workforce and 75 percent of the part time work force. (ABS, 1993). So widespread and usual is women’s participation in the paid work force that unless otherwise specified, this paper applies to both male and female workers and male and female unemployed people. However, because women are a clear majority of part time and casual workers, many of the psychologically stressful effects of low paid unskilled work disproportionately impact on women workers. Most women work in the service sector, in jobs that are often treated as “natural extensions of their domestic roles and therefore devalued” (Bryson, 1994).
There are additional issues relevant to women, particularly those women who are carers of children, of disabled spouses and elderly parents (in-law). Despite the large increase in the number of women in the workforce, they are still likely to carry the burden of work at home, and are more likely than their partners to be caring for sick and/or ageing relatives. Although men are more likely to acknowledge the desirability of sharing domestic work, this increasing acknowledgment achieves at best partial expression in practice (Goodnow & Bowes, 1994), with the consequence that women may often have to cope with two or three jobs, with even less time for other activities, including self-care. Family structures themselves are diversifying, with more households comprising a female parent and child(ren) only or other structures which differ from the traditional nuclear family. Work-family conflict and family-work conflict can interact reciprocally to the detriment of activities in both areas as well as to the worker caught between competing demands (Fallon, 1997). Employers often do not recognise the possibility of work performance being diminished when problems at home are ignored. There is also commonly a lack of recognition of cultural differences in such areas as observance of family obligations.

The related effect of over-demanding work hours is to limit the paid work possibilities for those who are expected also to carry the main burden of work at home, especially of child-rearing. Once again the effect of this can be that primary care-givers, predominantly but not exclusively women, tend to be excluded from better quality work and restricted to work, such as piece work or outwork, that may demand longer hours to meet quotas, but is unreliable in supply. Work that does allow for commitment to the family often does not offer career progression (Poole & Langan-Fox, 1997).

**Emotional work**

Emotional work refers to all the time- and energy-consuming activities which help others to regulate their emotional states (e.g., peace-keeping and social skills training
with children, negotiation of needs for dependent ageing relatives, building cohesion in family and workplace units). When women engage in such activities they are usually unpaid, although such work is vital to the harmony and effective psychological functioning of many communities and their individual members (Strazdins, 2000).

Until the age of 60 women outnumber men as carers, reaching a peak in numbers about age 50 (Phillipson, 1982). Most of these, if no longer caring for children now grown up, care for spouses, ageing parents or handicapped relatives. Overall, women are more likely to be carers than men, but after age 60 caring for partners predominates, with slightly more men than women likely to be the “principal resident carers” (Fallon, 1997; McCallum & Geiselhart, 1996). The work of caring for disabled relatives can be isolating and burdensome. Greater recognition from professional carers, and more training and support resources, are some of the policy initiatives which might increase family caregivers’ satisfaction from this work (Winefield, H., 2000).

Except in rare instances (such as the payment of a ‘stipend’ by a husband to a wife) work in the home is not regarded as paid work in the same way as is outsourced domestic labour (e.g., housekeeper, cleaning service). The latter is included in estimates of Gross National Product (GNP), whereas the former is not. Although much work in the home is tedious, repetitive, and laborious (in spite of technological innovations), much familial work involves elements of benefit to others, interpersonal “caring” and reciprocity that are not demanded to the same extent by any other workplace (Goodnow & Bowes, 1994).

Surveys in Australia (Bittman, 1991, 1994) indicate that women spend more time on work in and about the home than men, in some studies more than four times as much as men. A common pattern often reported is the division of household work into ‘outside’ (car, garden, repairs) and ‘inside’ (everything else), with occasional sharing of shopping and child-care. The patterns of engagement by men and women in
household work are, however, changing (Bittman, 1994). Women are cutting back on time spent in the kitchen and laundry and are contributing more of their time to traditional male “outside” duties. Men are spending less time in unpaid tasks than women still do, but are spending more time on child care.

Research has shown that Australian couples who share housework and were prepared to change conventional work roles attributed their success to flexibility, appropriate styles of ‘talk’, and ability to negotiate and ‘see another’s point of view’ (Goodnow & Bowes, 1994). Equity, sharing, and turning a united face to the world were common values enunciated by the partners.

4. PSYCHOLOGICAL AND HEALTH BENEFITS OF HAVING WORK

Young people

Middle-aged people

Retired people

Having reliable and secure access to paid work is potentially very beneficial. The beneficial effects of work are most clearly demonstrated by considering the deleterious effects of not having work. The mental health of unemployed people is poorer than the mental health of people in paid employment, and longitudinal research suggests that unemployment is the cause (Winefield, 1995).

Whether the adverse psychological impact of unemployment is due solely to its financial consequences or whether it also depends on the loss of the other potential benefits of work is not yet clear. As well as providing income, work structures the day, provides social contact, a sense of purposefulness, identity and status, and enforces activity (Jahoda, 1981). On the one hand, studies in the USA have reported that the consequent financial strain is the only factor affecting psychological health in
unemployed people (Kessler, Turner, & House, 1987) and similar results have been reported in the UK (Rodgers, 1991) and in the Netherlands (Schaufeli & Van Yperen, 1992). On the other hand, research in Sweden has shown considerable psychological and health strains associated with job loss, even though job losers receive a benefit of 90% of their previous net income during the first year of unemployment (Kieselbach & Svensson, 1988).

An important reservation regarding the impact of work concerns the quality of the experience of work. Although it has been claimed that even bad jobs are preferable to unemployment (e.g., Jahoda, 1981), this claim is not supported by relevant research evidence (Feather, 1990; Warr, 1987; Winefield, Tiggemann, Winefield, & Goldney, 1993). On the contrary, there is now convincing evidence that, particularly for young people, unsatisfactory employment is no better than unemployment. Moreover, studies of mature-age job losers have shown that, although 90% of retrenched workers report a decline in mental or physical health, the remaining 10% report an improvement. The improvement is usually associated with leaving a job that was extremely stressful, mentally or physically (Warr & Jackson, 1987).

Fryer and Winefield (1998) have suggested that unemployment may be regarded as equivalent to highly stressful employment: “Unemployed people can…be regarded as involuntary, poorly paid, low status, insecure, public service workers with virtually no negotiating rights, whose work (persistent hopeless search for nonexistent jobs, managing households on inadequate resources and participating in humiliating bureaucratic rituals) carries massive risk of occupational strain” (p.3). Occupational stress is discussed further in the next section.

In considering the importance of work throughout the lifespan, it is important to recognise broader understandings of ‘work’ which build and foster a natural continuum from adolescence to adulthood to senior citizenship, in which work, in its broadest sense, plays an integral role. Family and community involvements may provide many
of the psychological benefits of work, where those responsibilities are freely chosen and appropriately valued as essential to the functioning of society.

**Young people**

For young people, the gaining of employment, particularly in a position which is valued and involving, symbolically represents entry into a mature, adult world of responsibilities, freedom, and respect. Entry into this adult world is more difficult for those who have not been able to make this symbolic transition to paid work and the adult world it represents.

Several Australian longitudinal studies have looked at the psychological effects of failing to find employment in school leavers (Feather & O’Brien, 1986; Gurney, 1980; Patton & Noller, 1990; Winefield et al., 1993). Because young people, particularly school leavers, are usually no worse off financially than they were at school, they offer the possibility of studying the effects of failure to find work without the confounding effects of loss of previous income.

The main effect is that those who leave school and find satisfactory employment show a marked psychological improvement, whereas those who leave school and fail to find satisfactory employment show no change. The negative effects of unemployment on the psychological health of young people have been well documented in the USA (Prause & Dooley, 1997), the UK (Patterson, 1997), Spain (Garcia Rodriguez, 1997), the Netherlands (Schaufeli, 1997), Ireland (Hannan, O’Riain & Whelan, 1997), and Sweden (Hammarström & Janlert, 1997). The most reasonable inference from all these longitudinal studies is that a causal link exists between youth unemployment and psychological ill-health.

There is evidence that the way young people use their spare time can moderate the negative effects of unemployment and unsatisfactory employment. Leisure activities
that involve interacting with other people in some purposeful activity have psychological benefits for young people who are unemployed or employed in unsatisfactory jobs (Winefield, Tiggemann & Winefield, 1992). However, leisure activities are not associated with psychological well-being in young people who are engaged in full time study (secondary or tertiary) or those employed in satisfactory jobs. A recently commissioned study has shown that participation in Work for the Dole projects had some ongoing psychological benefits, although it had no apparent effect on self-esteem or work involvement (Winefield, 1999).

Middle-aged people

Job loss in middle or later age has been found to be more damaging than unemployment for the young in two Australian studies, both of which made direct comparisons (Broomhall & Winefield, 1990; Rowley & Feather, 1987). In the first of these studies, the younger and older groups were matched for unemployment duration so this factor was eliminated as a possible confounding variable. The greater impact of unemployment in middle age is thought to be because of its much greater effect on lifestyle, finances, and health (Barling, 1990).

Even the anticipation of possible job loss, a common experience within organisations undergoing rationalisation or downsizing, can be so debilitating for some that it may be masking some of the impact of actual job loss (Kasl & Cobb, 1979). By the time a worker is actually retrenched, much of the damage may already have been done and the certainty of job loss may be a relief compared to long-term uncertainty. Organisations engaged in downsizing need to take more realistic account of the costs of the demoralisation of workers, even those who eventually retain their jobs (Cascio, 1995).


Retired people

Retirement is not necessarily a deleterious experience, particularly when it is voluntary and the retiree has been able to achieve reasonable financial security and retain good health (Beehr, 1986; Talaga & Beehr, 1989). Retirement has been shown to have negative psychological effects only when it is involuntary (Swan, Dame, & Carmelli, 1991). Forced redundancy for people who, because of age, are unlikely to obtain work again, is typically deleterious. Retirees without adequate financial support, particularly those totally dependent on government pensions, are at risk of the effects of poverty.

People in less rewarding, more onerous employment may look forward to the ‘liberation’ of retirement years but may find themselves with fewer resources, material, social and psychological, with which to enjoy it (Phillipson, 1982). Involvement in a new interest such as hobbies or travel, or even the narrowing and simplification of previous life patterns, may result in disappointment in the face of increasing infirmity or ill health in the retiree or a partner (Birren, 1996; Phillipson, 1982).

Family relationships may be disrupted or changed when one partner, typically the man, moves into retirement (Birren, 1996). Many women may be pressured out of employment they enjoy by partners in retirement who, on average, are older and want their companionship at home, in travel or other recreation. If the partner does not adapt to retirement, he may interfere with and dominate domestic routines. An enforced increase in intimacy may unsettle the relationship. Some factors which have an impact on adjustment in retirement include people’s previous adjustment at various stages in their relationship, past coping styles as individuals and in concert with others, and the benefits of retirement for the individual and for a couple relationship, such as more shared activities and less stress from competing commitments (Ferguson, 1997). Some retired men spend more time out of the home and seek the
companionship of peers in clubs or with former workmates. Others may increasingly share or take on many of the domestic duties, especially if their partner is becoming frail, or remains in employment.

Retirement may pose different challenges for women than for men. These include income security and the threat of poverty, the lack of retirement planning, the expectation of caring, and the greater stress of life events, including loss of partner through death or divorce (Secombe & Lee, 1986; Szinovacz & Washo, 1992). These issues may underlie the finding that compared to working men, women in paid employment were more resistant to retirement. More recent American research (e.g., Deitch, 1996) indicates that many older women simply cannot afford to retire, especially those who have remained ‘uncoupled’.

A study of high achieving women found little evidence of low work commitment among women approaching retirement years (Onyx & Benton, 1995). Already reaching their sixties, these women acknowledged that they had not thought about or planned, or been able adequately to provide for, financial security in retirement. Very few women, even among the ‘high flyers’ could afford to retire completely.

The majority of women in Australia are now part-time workers and many entered or reentered the work-force after raising children to school age in the home. The age disparity (on average, women are five years younger than their spouses) may mean that women in their fifties who are reaching their peak in effectiveness, productivity, and earning capacity may find themselves pressured to retire prematurely with their retiring spouses. Such disparities are now being recognised by abolition of a compulsory retirement age for both men and women.

There are contradictions in present retirement policy. “It appears. . . that older people are coming under increasing pressure both to continue working in order to be self sufficient (hence the removal of mandatory retirement), and to stop working in
order to make room for younger cohorts. In the case of high profile, high paid older women, the pressure is to work enormous hours under stressful conditions, and simultaneously, to get out of the workforce altogether” (Onyx & Benton, 1995, p. 79).

5. PSYCHOLOGICAL AND HEALTH COSTS OF HAVING WORK TODAY: THE CHANGING NATURE OF WORK

Changes in the workplace
Income inequality
Work-related risks to health and family functioning
Coping with organisational change

There are major changes occurring today in various aspects of work, all of which are modifying the impact of the work experience. First, the workforce is increasing in diversity and complexity. The domination of the workforce by men is declining, and there is an increase in the proportion of women and people from ethnic minorities in the workforce. The Australian population is becoming increasingly educated. School retention rates have increased dramatically within the last two decades. Second, there is a relative decrease in the number of full-time jobs and a relative increase in the number of part-time jobs available. There is also an increasing reliance upon casual and contract labour. Third, the increased number of women participating in the workforce means there are also many more dual-career couples. And fourth, those employed full-time are working longer hours, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics. It remains to be seen whether this trend can be reversed in France, the world’s fourth largest economy, where the government recently enacted laws restricting the working week to 35 hours. (Even if the French succeed, it is difficult to see how overworked professionals whose working hours are not recorded might benefit.)

There is a shrinking supply of paid work compared to the growing numbers of people seeking it. There appears to be inevitable environmental limits to the growth of
national and global economics. Economic growth occurs fitfully and unreliably, and does not always result in a proliferation of job opportunities. It has been some time since traditionally defined full time and permanent jobs are available for all who want them.

**Changes in the workplace**

The nature of the workplace is changing. Technological advance has introduced computers, telecommunication systems, robotics, and flexible manufacturing operations. There is a decreasing reliance on direct human labour while at the same time productivity is increasing. Routine tasks are increasingly being performed by automation, freeing employees to take on more varied and challenging tasks. This means that employees’ skills are becoming obsolete more quickly, necessitating an increasing focus on continuing training and education.

Ironically, technological change in the workplace often means that there is an increasing amount of poor quality work – ‘work not fit for a machine to do’ – available for human workers. This is ‘labour’, work that is unsatisfying, offering low pay and low job security, with variable and unreliable hours. Often it is this work – such as house-cleaning, waitressing and casual clerical work - which is predominantly undertaken by women and cultural minorities. Many jobs in the fast-expanding service sector require workers to adopt a smiling and friendly manner to consumers which makes demands similar to those involved in ‘emotional work’ (see Section 3, Women and Work).

Under the influence of economic rationalism, work force numbers have been reduced, although the amount of work to be done often has not. The resulting increases in workload and in job insecurity have deleterious effects on both the remaining workers and the organisation. The stress of overwork can lead to psychological problems, including depression, burnout and breakdowns, to health problems, including heart attacks and hypertension, and to organisational problems, including workplace
violence or accidents (Quick, Quick, Nelson, & Hurrell, 1997). All of these problems can result in increased costs to the organisation which cancel out the short-term cost-savings made by downsizing, resulting in no real improvement in long-term profitability (Cascio, 1995).

**Income inequality**

Associated with the growing gap between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ jobs has been an increase in income inequality. Wilkinson (1996) has argued from international epidemiological statistics that increased income inequality has negative health consequences (reduced life expectancy) for all members of society – both rich and poor - and he proposes that the underlying mechanism for this is the breakdown of social cohesion which characterises “healthy egalitarian societies”. In such societies, according to Wilkinson, there is “a strong community life”; and “people are more likely to be involved in social and voluntary activities outside the home” (p. 4).

Wilkinson’s conclusions have been criticised by Catalano (1998) who argues that the epidemiological case is weak and that the main cause of concern should be growing economic insecurity, even among the more affluent. (He points out that a 1996 US survey found that 37% of American households reported that they were ‘economically insecure’ and 43% with an annual income of more than $50,000 feared that one of their members would be laid off in the next three years.) Another criticism of Wilkinson’s thesis is that he puts forward no evidence, other than anecdotal, to support the view that increased income inequality leads to a breakdown in social cohesion.

**Work-related risks to health and family functioning**

The increased costs of occupational stress in the form of absenteeism, reduced productivity, compensation claims, health insurance and medical expenses has led to a
growing interest by researchers into its causes, both in Australia and internationally (e.g. Cooper & Payne, 1988; Cotton, 1995; Dollard & Winefield, 1996; 1998; Quick, Murphy & Hurrell, 1992). Even jobs traditionally regarded as relatively stress-free, such as university teaching, are becoming increasingly stressful (Winefield, A., 2000).

Two apparently opposite trends in work practices seem to have similarly deleterious health effects. Many people in full-time employment are under pressure to work increasingly longer hours. Many people in part-time or casual employment are obliged to accept reduced work hours and conditions. Japanese researchers found that men who worked 11 hours a day had around 2.5 times greater risk of a heart attack than men working an 8 hour day, while men working less than 6 hours a day had nearly three times the risk of a heart attack compared to those working an 8 hour day (Sokejima & Kagamimori, 1998). It is possible those working low hours were doing so because they were already suffering from the stress of too high a work load, but underemployment brings its own stresses.

Both men and women in paid work are finding less time available for their relationships, for their families, and for recreational or social activities. Even those who have quality jobs may be losing much of the potential benefit because of the greater demands of work and the resulting imbalance in lifestyle.

**Coping with organisational change**

The increasing globalisation of the Australian economy means that we are more economically exposed to events taking place in other countries. Globalisation has meant increased competition and opportunity for Australian business. Successful businesses are the ones that can best adapt in response to competition. Being able to adapt means relying on a flexible workforce that manages change successfully. Yet people are generally more comfortable continuing to work in accustomed ways. People have an understandable need for job security and, because of the fear of job
loss, tend to resist rationalisation, new technologies, and new procedures. Organisations may resist change because of group inertia and the threat that change poses to established modes of decision making. Negative reactions to change, especially imposed change, include distress in the form of anxiety and depression, decreased job satisfaction, decreased organisational commitment, resistance to change, deterioration in organisational morale, reduced job performance, increased voluntary resignations, and absenteeism (Collins, 1998).

There is now abundant evidence identifying the key role played by open communication in successfully managing organisational and workplace changes. Traditional management preferences for hierarchical and secretive decision-making create an environment for gossip and rumour-mongering, which have demoralising effects on workers. Informing workers openly and fully, even of problems facing an organisation, facilitates their participation in solving those problems and coming to terms with necessary changes (Gowing, Kraft, & Quick, 1997). There is little evidence however of an increase in open communication surrounding workplace change. In recent highly public workplace changes (the 1998 waterfront dispute for example), there has been a continued use of secretive and autocratic decision making. The increasingly global economy may increase this trend as decisions about workplace closures are made outside of the plant or section that is to be closed.

The continually changing face and nature of work today requires adaptive coping strategies which allow for easier and anticipated transitions from one type of work to another, in a context of life-long learning and change. This may entail less dependence on defining who one is exclusively in terms of what one does “for a living”.

The traditional practice of obtaining one job for life is disappearing and it is increasingly the pattern of employment for one person to have a sequence of jobs, which may differ in skill requirements, with possible periods of unemployment in between. There is, therefore, a need for young people to learn work-related skills, but these are increasingly likely to be generic skills rather than preparation for a particular
job. These skills would require them to view change as an inevitable part of life. This would entail seeing job security as a readiness and an ability to adapt rather than expecting to learn a certain set of skills which will guarantee life-long employment.

The nature of employment in Australia in the future will require a readiness on the part of employees to manage change both while in the workforce and when moving in and out of employment. Research has revealed several factors that influence people’s ability to cope with change. Different styles of coping are required as a function of situation, time and person - that is, what works in one situation may not work in another. A distinction is often made between problem-focussed coping and emotion-focussed coping (Kinicki, McKee, & Wade, 1996). Persons employing problem-focussed coping are likely to deal with the stressful situation by taking action that directly helps to find a solution to the problem being faced. For a person who is unemployed, this might mean taking steps to re-skill or to apply for new positions. A person employing emotion-focussed coping is likely to deal with personal feelings and reactions to the problem and may avoid solving it. The second strategy may be less adaptive in an unstable employment market and is more likely to lead to related health problems. However, emotion-focussed coping may be more effective than problem-focussed coping when a situation cannot be changed, such as a bereavement. For some job-seekers, this may be a realistic assessment of the employment market.

Research has suggested that those who are more likely to use problem-focussed coping are characterised by a greater sense of optimism and sense of mastery (Armstrong-Stassen, 1994). Optimism can be defined as a generalised expectancy that good things will happen. Sense of mastery can be described as having a belief that one’s life chances are under one’s own control in contrast to being determined by fate. A person with a strong sense of mastery and high level of optimism is likely to approach change in a positive way. In addition, employees with these characteristics are likely to exhibit a high level of work commitment, even in the face of uncertainty.
Is it possible to increase the level of optimism and sense of mastery that people possess? An individual’s attitude to life and work, in particular, is influenced by personal upbringing, dispositional traits, life experiences and cultural factors. Research has shown that children whose disposition tends towards the pessimistic can be guided into thinking more optimistically (Seligman, 1997). However, the development of such an optimistic stance requires some opportunity to experience a sense of mastery. Our young people have a basic right to reasonable levels of respect, support and security within which a realistic “can-do” attitude can be fostered, particularly during transitional periods such as leaving school.

Finally, one way for the Australian Psychological Society to encourage organisations to reduce workplace stress might be to follow the lead of the New Jersey Psychological Association (NJPA) which, in 1999, initiated a “Psychologically Healthy Workplace Award” scheme (Chamberlin, 1999). NJPA looked for companies that offered:

- programs that enable employees to provide feedback and evaluate job satisfaction;
- options such as flexible time, child care and leave time for family health needs;
- professional development opportunities, tuition reimbursement or career counselling;
- programs on topics such as workplace violence, substance use and grief counselling.
6. UNPAID WORK

Leisure and recreational activities

The boundaries between ‘work’ and ‘leisure’ are becoming blurred. Paid work is not available for many who want it and the nature of work is changing for many, due to the shorter working hours in new contractual arrangements, reflecting the increase in part-time and casual work. For many people leisure time has increased due to these changes in work, the impact of domestic technologies, and flexibility in retirement ages. Consequently, the relative importance of leisure in people’s lives is likely to increase (Gershuny, 1994).

To what extent can leisure pursuits substitute for work? Winefield et al. (1992), as noted earlier, found that those who cope best with unemployment are those engaged in purposeful activity and who maintain regular contact with people outside the nuclear family. The purposeful use of spare time may play a buffering role in coping with the stresses of both unemployment and unsatisfactory employment. Unemployed people who spend time in active leisure pursuits or voluntary work outside the home or on work-related activities such as training and education have better mental health than unemployed people who do not engage in these activities (Creed, Hicks, & Machin, 1996; Fryer, 1986; Kilpatrick & Trew, 1985; Muller, Delahaye, Winocur, & Hicks, 1996).

Although these studies emphasise the positive effects of activity on mental health, they do not indicate that other activities are a substitute for work. Rather, they are highlighting the positive relationship between activity and mental health. Some, however, consider that serious leisure activities can substitute for work, in that they offer the opportunity to individuals to express their abilities, fulfil their potential, and identify themselves as unique human beings (Stebbins, 1982).
Serious leisure pursuits include amateur activities in art, science, sport or entertainment, hobbyist pursuits including collecting, making things or tinkering, participating in activities such as bodybuilding, surfing, fishing, or playing sports or games, or carer volunteering as in community projects and services. The education system should teach people how to be amateurs, hobbyists, or volunteers, as well as how to fill jobs, because they will need these skills in our post-industrial society (Stebbins, 1982).

Voluntary work

Health and satisfaction are affected by volunteer activity for both men and women (Dorfman & Rubenstein, 1993; Metzer et al, 1997). In retirement years, for example, many women, especially those who have been employed in the home throughout marriage, continue a range of volunteer activity. But a significant number of men also do voluntary work. Given the research support for the association between active and purposeful use of time and positive mental health, people should be encouraged to prepare for and value unpaid activities. Whether unpaid activity can be a substitute for work or whether work should be redefined to include some socially useful unpaid activity is still being debated. However, lack of money to engage in and plan for purposeful and meaningful leisure activities is a major problem for unemployed people and consequently, unless policies for encouragement of such activities are developed, they may be denied access to the positive mental health outcomes associated with participation in such activities (Fryer & Fagan, 1993).

Such considerations are becoming part of Government policy in Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom. In its interim report on welfare reform (Participation Support for a More Equitable Society, March 2000), a reference group set up by the Australian Federal Department of Family and Community Services outlined a system for encouraging recipients of Disability Support Benefit and Parenting Support Benefit to take part in either paid work or unpaid community activities. The report
uses a framework of “Mutual Obligation” to expand on how incentives and disincentives might be used to increase participation in the paid or voluntary labour markets. Incentives include a range of financial incentives and more personalised assistance with accessing opportunities for paid or voluntary work. Disincentives include reduction or cessation of benefits. A central feature of the proposed reforms is the mandatory nature of participation and associated tests and activities. There has been widespread debate about the potential impact of making participation mandatory, but as yet little or no outcome research for individuals, groups and the community.

7. WORK IN THE FUTURE

Australians today are faced with a number of difficult questions, with far-reaching consequences, regarding the nature, provision and expectations of work in our society. Under the prevailing ethos of economic rationalism, there has been an increasingly narrow focus on the economically productive role of work, to the neglect and even at the cost of the other potential benefits of the experience of work. If the supply of paid work continues to be shared inequitably, a large number of people have little or no access to it and therefore to its potential benefits. Some people are offered work, potentially the better quality of work, but in ways that negate its possible benefits. Others are offered work that is mostly ‘labour’, with little or no benefit other than an income, and it is offered in ways that do not provide work security or the possibility of a career.

If the supply of economically productive work is already insufficient to provide full-time work for all who want it, and if that discrepancy is likely to grow rather than shrink, society needs to make considered decisions regarding the distribution of economically productive work. If we provide it in full-time jobs to a fortunate section of society, we create and maintain an unfortunate section who will experience unemployment or underemployment, frequently or permanently. Given the
established adverse effects of unwanted unemployment reviewed in this paper, do we then take steps to protect the unemployed from those effects and the whole of society from the wider adverse effects?

Should schools be asked to teach young people to cope with unemployment and/or underemployment and a consequential low-income life-style? Teachers have generally resisted such efforts as stereotyping and encouraging low expectations, yet skills relevant to productive and psychologically satisfying life without major paid work may be required.

If economically productive work is shared more equitably, meaning more job-seekers are given access to less than full-time work, several further questions arise. Do we accept a consequent lowering of expectations of standards of living because of lowering incomes? This would be very much at odds with the ethos of a consumerist society. And how do we provide working conditions offering a degree of security conducive to the ‘great Australian dream’ of home ownership, or consistent with pressures to take out private health insurance or superannuation for financial independence in retirement?

If work has been a major source of other than economically productive benefits – the benefits of purposeful activity, achievement, personal and social worth – and the supply of work is to be rationed, do we take steps to make available other means of obtaining those additional benefits? This would involve a re-evaluation of recreational activities and better preparation for successful, life-long participation in them.

If the technology of work is changing, do we revise our preparation for work to have a greater focus on generic skills, especially interpersonal skills and the skills and attitudes for coping with change? If career expectations are increasingly of a series of jobs, perhaps punctuated by periods of unemployment, do we take steps to prepare young people for such a career pattern as a positive expectation? How do we
reconcile such expectations with invitations to take a lifespan responsibility for one’s income provisions through periods of work, non-work and in the transitions?

Psychologists, with their expertise in mental health measurement and statistical and research design issues, together with their understanding of organisational behaviour and the psychological effects of unemployment and occupational stress, have an important role to play in advising policy-makers on how to promote a psychologically healthy and productive work (and non-work) environment for all Australians.
REFERENCES


