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## INTERVENTION

### **Understanding The Unemployment Experience of Low-Wage Workers: Implications for Ethnographic Research**

Philip Harvey

#### **The unemployment experience of low-wage workers**

One characteristic of low-wage work that is particularly important to the ethnographic research reported in this volume is its insecurity. As shown in Figure 1, average unemployment rates for persons with fewer than four years of high school are more than four times as high as corresponding rates for persons with four or more years of college. This means that even in periods of relative prosperity, low-wage workers experience levels of unemployment normally associated with recessions; while during recessions, their unemployment rises to depression levels.

[FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE (see p. 30)]

The negative personal effects of this joblessness on individual workers is likely to be significant. Unemployment is associated with increased poverty rates (Sawhill 1988; Hakim 1982, Marmor, Mashaw & Harvey 1990), a wide range of adverse physical and mental health effects (Brenner & Mooney 1983; Liem and Rayman 1982; Burchell 1994), the corrosion of family life and personal relationships (Jahoda 1982; Kelvin & Jarrett 1985; O'Brien 1986), and

increased criminal activity (Hakim 1982; Britt 1994; Smith, Devine and Sheley 1992; Box 1987).

Ethnographic research is well suited for studying these adverse effects, and particularly for exploring how the experience of being unemployed (or being affected by the unemployment of others) is subjectively felt and understood. When unemployment is wide-spread, as it was in the United States during the 1930s, the experience can shape the identity of an entire generation. When particular population groups experience unemployment in concentrated doses, as racial minorities and the poor regularly do, it can have equally significant effects on the way members of the group view themselves and are viewed by others. Being unemployed can inspire self-pity, self-loathing or rage at society, depending upon how the experience is understood. Similarly, the unemployment of others may inspire the public's sympathy or the public's contempt, depending on whether members of the affected group are perceived as victims of circumstance or of their own behavioral shortcomings. Ethnographic research provides an excellent window for observing how these varied responses emerge and interact with other factors shaping the life experience, attitudes, and behavior of different population groups.

Since unemployment and the social problems that attend it are an important public policy concern, insights drawn from this type of research can provide useful data for policy debate. To properly assess this data, however, it is important to understand the ways in which the experiences of individuals or discrete groups of individuals can mislead as well as enlighten us. The fallacy of composition -- *the mistake of assuming that what is true for the individual members comprising a population is necessarily true for the*

*population as a whole* – is an ever-present danger when public policies are devised based on the teachings of individual experience. *Just because each and every person attending a concert could see better if they were to stand up doesn't mean the entire audience would see better if everyone were encouraged to stand up. Does the unemployment experience of individuals—either our own or that of people we observe—provide a good vantage point for understanding the causes of the problem and its remedies? The answer to that question is surprisingly complex. The purpose of this Intervention is to explore that complexity in order to better understand the policy implications of the research reported in this volume.*

### **Perceptions of job availability and public policy**

Perceptions of job availability play an important role in shaping public attitudes and public policy towards jobless individuals. Both unemployment and low rates of labor force participation (i.e, joblessness broadly defined) have been identified as primary sources of poverty in the United States, but with unemployment rates descending during the late 1990s to their lowest level in a generation, involuntary unemployment is not perceived as playing much role in

giving rise to the poverty of low-wage workers. Instead, public debate about the economic circumstances of these workers tends to focus on the *quality* of the jobs they hold and whether these jobs allow them to escape poverty.

I do not question the importance of this debate over job *quality* in assessing the effectiveness of work-based anti-poverty strategies. A full-time, minimum-wage job pays substantially less than the Census Bureau's poverty line for a family of three (the average size of families receiving Temporary Assistance to Need Families (TANF) benefits); and a more refined poverty measure proposed in recent years by a National Academy of Sciences panel would establish substantially higher poverty thresholds, especially for families with employed members (Citro & Michael 1995; Garner et al. 1998). *In 1997, there were 2.3 million full-time, year-round workers in the United States with incomes below the federal government's official poverty line (Dalaker and Mary Naifeh 1998:17, table 3).*

*Nevertheless, the issue of job availability—the availability of any jobs, not just “good” jobs—also warrants attention in discussions of the causes and remedies for poverty among able-bodied adults. Does the American economy generate enough jobs of any description to employ everyone the American public expects to work? If there is a shortage of jobs relative to the number of people seeking work, as I shall argue there is, what are the policy implications of the shortage? Finally, if a job shortage does exist, why are perceptions of ready job availability so widespread in the United States—possibly including perceptions by unemployed workers themselves—and what does the dissonance between these perceptions and actual labor—*

market conditions mean for the way in which the public views low-wage work and low-wage workers?

In other work (Harvey 1999, 2000) I have analyzed the development of public policy responses to joblessness in the United States and described the origins of these responses in three competing views of job availability. According to the first view, jobs are presumed to be plentiful, and joblessness is attributed to the failure of jobless individuals to seek and accept work on available terms. I call this view “behavioralist” because it attributes joblessness to the behavior of jobless individuals themselves. Policies based on the behaviorist view tend to put pressure on jobless individuals to seek and accept presumptively available jobs. Providing jobless individuals with income assistance is considered counterproductive because it encourages dependency rather than self-reliance. Humanitarian considerations may dictate that public assistance be provided to the able-bodied poor, but the aid offered should be both minimal and temporary so as not to discourage job-search activity. This approach dominated social welfare policy in the United States prior to the 1930s, and in recent years it has enjoyed a resurgence in popularity among conservative policy advocates. Welfare-reform legislation enacted in recent years at both the federal and state level has been strongly influenced by this view.

According to the second view, joblessness is caused by a failure on the part of the economy to generate enough jobs to employ everyone who wants to work. This view, which I call the “job-shortage” approach,

dominated the American public policy response to joblessness during the “New Deal” era in the 1930s, and it continues to influence public policy responses to jobless individuals during recessions. Policies based on the job-shortage approach seek to close the economy’s perceived job gap either by increasing the total number of jobs available or by decreasing the total number of people seeking work. Examples of these policies include the New Deal’s massive public employment programs and the establishment of publicly funded pensions programs (i.e., Old Age Assistance and Social Security) to make it easier for older workers to retire from the active labor force.

The third view of job availability, which I term “structuralist,” assumes that access to work is a problem only for certain population groups. According to this view, job shortages are not a problem in general, but barriers to equal employment opportunity limit the ability of certain groups to compete for available jobs. These barriers include employment discrimination, unequal access to job-training and educational opportunities, and geographic mismatches between the location of available jobs and the communities where certain groups of unemployed workers live.

Structuralist analyses of joblessness may concede or even emphasize that the behavior of jobless individuals diminishes their employment prospects, but these behavioral tendencies are attributed to social conditions rather than to individual preferences or character defects.

The structuralist view of joblessness inspired major reforms in American employment and social welfare law during the 1960s and early 1970s, and it has tended to dominate liberal policy positions since that time. Structuralist policies seek to eliminate perceived barriers to equal employment opportunity while providing compensating public assistance to individuals whose access to work has been limited. Reforms based on this approach include anti-discrimination legislation, educational assistance programs for disadvantaged populations, and economic-development initiatives targeting low-income communities.

#### ***Empirical evidence concerning job availability***

Given the importance of differing views of job availability in shaping social-welfare-policy preferences, it is important to get the facts straight. Unfortunately, this is not an easy task, in part, because the empirical evidence can be interpreted in more than one way, but the main source of the problem is that job availability is not a well-defined concept in policy discourse. In particular, perceptions of whether there are “enough” jobs depend significantly on whether attention is focused on job vacancies or job turnovers.

#### ***Job vacancy data***

A wealth of data concerning both the employed and unemployed segments of the American labor force is regularly collected and reported. A similar abundance of data is available describing the number and characteristics of occupied jobs in the economy. Surprisingly little data is

available, however, concerning the number and characteristics of vacant jobs. The result is that we know how many people are looking for work and a great deal about their personal characteristics, but we don't know very much about how many jobs employers are seeking to fill at any point in time, nor the characteristics of those jobs. When job vacancy surveys are conducted, however, they tell a consistent story concerning job availability in the United States. Briefly stated, the American economy does not produce enough jobs to employ its entire labor force. The size of the economy's job gap varies across the business cycle, but in periods of relative prosperity as well as during recessions, there are more people seeking work than there are jobs available for them to fill (Abraham 1983; Holzer 1988, 1995; Employment and Training Institute 1993-2000). Moreover, that this data suggests that virtually all measured unemployment in the United States--above a frictional floor of 2-3 percent--is attributable to this aggregate job shortage (Harvey 2000). In other words, neither structural nor behavioral factors appear to play much role in determining the amount of unemployment that is experienced in the United States economy at any point in time. The job shortage explanation alone suffices to explain that level.

### *Job turnover data*

A somewhat different picture is presented by job turnover data, the proportion of all jobs that are newly created or become vacant over a

period of time. The higher the job turnover rate, the greater the number of job vacancies employers will fill over a given period of time.

The effect of job-turnover rates on job availability can be illustrated with a description of two different games of musical chairs. In both games there are ten players and only nine chairs. The first game is played in the normal way. Everyone is required to stand up when the music begins, and all ten players circle the nine empty chairs until the music stops. Then everyone scrambles to find a vacant chair. In the second game, however, only one player stands up when the music begins and circles the one empty chair along with the player who had no chair to begin with. When the music stops, these two players scramble to sit down in that one vacant chair.

In both games, one person is left without a chair at the end of each round of play. In other words, the rate of “chairlessness” measured at that point in time is 10 percent in both games, and that rate is wholly determined by the number of chairs in the game, as compared to the total number of players. Still, seatless players have a better chance of finding a seat in the first game than they do in the second. In the first game, a seatless player has a 90 percent chance of finding a vacant seat, but that chance is reduced to 50 percent in the second game. A high job-turnover rate affects job availability in the same way. It increases the number of jobs available during a given period of time, relative to the number of people

seeking work, even though the economy's aggregate job gap remains the same.

Job-turnover rates in the United States are quite high. In one recent survey of both public- and private-sector employers in four major metropolitan areas, the average job-vacancy rate (the proportion of all jobs vacant at any given point in time) was found to be only 2.7 percent, compared to unemployment rates in the 5 percent to 11 percent range. On the other hand, the gross hiring rate (the proportion of all employees hired within the preceding twelve-month period) was found to be 25.7 percent (Holzer 1996: Fig. 1.1 and Table B.3). Moreover, the latter figure understates the total number of job vacancies filled during the course of a year, as it does not account for jobs that may have been vacated and filled more than once, or jobs that were filled and then eliminated.

Thus, despite the fact that the number of job seekers always exceeded the number of job vacancies, the number of jobs openings for which job seekers theoretically could apply was quite large over time. The Depression-era refrain that "Nobody's hiring" does not apply to the American labor market, even though there are not enough jobs to go around.

Does this mean that jobs are plentiful despite the economy's job gap? That depends on the way job availability is conceived and on our choice of policy goals. If we think that adequate job availability means that there are enough jobs for everyone who wants to work, then clearly there is a job shortage in the American economy. If our standard of adequacy merely requires that the number of job vacancies be sufficient to ensure that job seekers do not have to wait too long to find a job when they are out of work, then job-turnover rates may be high enough, at least in theory, to provide the needed vacancies.

### *Is it the level or the distribution of joblessness that matters?*

*Understanding the different ways in which job availability can be defined helps us to understand the lack of attention paid to issues of aggregate job availability in contemporary social-welfare-policy debates. Structuralist and behavioralist factors may play little role in determining the aggregate level of unemployment in the economy, but they play a very important role in determining who will suffer that unemployment. Stated differently, the economy's aggregate job shortage determines the amount of joblessness that will be experienced in the economy, while structuralist and behavioralist factors determine the way in which joblessness will be distributed within the labor force.*

*First, population growth and economic growth tend to be uneven across regions and communities, so the distribution of joblessness among population groups depends, in part, on where different groups of job-seekers live as compared to where employers are creating jobs.<sup>ii</sup> Second, given the strong association between an individual's level of education and the likelihood the individual will be unemployed (see Figure 1), differences in the quantity and quality of educational opportunities available to different population groups is also likely to have a significant effect on the group's unemployment rate. Third, there is strong evidence that illegal employment discrimination still imposes significant handicaps on certain population groups, thereby increasing their exposure to unemployment (Fix*

& Struyk, 1993; Holzer, 1996). Finally, it is generally conceded that behavioral traits that are typical of certain population groups also influence their unemployment experience, although substantial disagreement exists as to whether these traits can be attributed to individual choice (as behavioralists argue) or are adaptive to social forces beyond individual control (as structuralists argue). (Compare Mead 1992; Wilson 1996).

Contemporary policy debates may ignore issues of aggregate job availability simply because they are concerned with the *distribution* of joblessness among different population groups rather than with the total amount of joblessness experienced in the economy as a whole. The job-shortage explanation of joblessness tells us how many people are fated to suffer unemployment at any point in time, but it does not tell us why some individuals and groups suffer more unemployment than others. If joblessness is a concern only because its burdens are unequally distributed, then it is understandable why policy debate would focus on structuralist and behavioralist, factors rather than on the economy's aggregate job shortage.

During recessions, the total amount of joblessness suffered in the economy is a matter of considerable public concern, and policy debate tends to focus on the economy's job shortage. At other times, however, joblessness is more likely to be perceived as a distributional problem, with policy debate focusing on the question of the way to eliminate differences in the amount of joblessness suffered by different population groups, rather than on the

way to reduce the total amount of joblessness suffered in the economy. If everyone lost just three weeks of work a year (an equal distribution of a 6 percent unemployment rate), joblessness would not cause very much poverty. Similarly, if minority groups suffered no more unemployment than whites, joblessness would not appear to perpetuate racial injustices.

If contemporary worries about joblessness during non-recessionary periods are limited to concerns that its burdens are unequally shared, it may not be thought important whether there are enough jobs available to provide work for all job seekers. All that matters is the quality of available jobs and whether enough of them are available to permit strategies for equalizing unemployment rates to work.

Understood in these terms, the neglect of the job-shortage view of joblessness in contemporary social-welfare policy debates appears perfectly understandable. Even if the amount of joblessness suffered in the economy is almost wholly determined by the size of the economy's job gap, the distribution of that joblessness depends primarily upon the structural and behavioral factors that are the focus of contemporary policy debate.

Nevertheless, it may be a mistake to discount the importance of job-shortage concerns, even if our primary goal is to equalize unemployment rates among population groups. Consider the following parable (Harvey 2000: 683):

*There once was an island with a population of 100 dogs. Every day a plane flew overhead and dropped 95 bones onto the*

*island. It was a dog paradise, except for the fact that every day 5 dogs went hungry. Hearing about the problem, a group of social scientists was sent to assess the situation and recommend remedies. The social scientists ran a series of regressions and determined that bonelessness in the dog population was associated with lower levels of bone-seeking effort and that boneless dogs also lacked important skills in fighting for bones. As a remedy for the problem, some of the social scientists proposed that boneless dogs needed a good kick in the side to get them moving, while others proposed that boneless dogs be provided special training in bone-fighting skills. A bitter controversy ensued over which of these two strategies ought to be pursued. Over time, both strategies were tried, and both reported limited success in helping individual dogs overcome their bonelessness—but despite this success, the bonelessness problem on the island never lessened in the aggregate. Every day, there were still five dogs who went hungry.*

The social scientists in this parable approached the bonelessness problem much as social scientists approach the problem of joblessness in contemporary social-welfare-policy debates. They focused their attention exclusively on the distributional aspect of the problem--why some dogs suffered more bonelessness than other dogs--and proposed measures designed to equalize the dog population's access to bones. In doing so,

however, they missed something important. The reason there was a bonelessness problem in the first place is because there were a hundred dogs on the island, but only ninety-five bones dropped from the sky each day. A more complete assessment of the problem would have noted this fact and concluded that the amount of bonelessness suffered by the dog population was wholly determined by the number of bones that dropped from the sky each day, while the distribution of that bonelessness was largely determined by the dogs' relative motivation and fighting skills.

This assessment of the problem suggests an additional policy option. The proposed training and motivational program for boneless dogs might have worked in achieving their intended goal, but the distributional problem also would have been solved if five additional bones were dropped from the sky each day. In fact, the latter policy would have been more certain to succeed, even if the only goal of the policy were to equalize the distribution of bones among the dogs; and if reducing the aggregate amount of bonelessness were also a policy goal, it is the only measure that would have worked. Ignoring considerations of cost (which might cut either way), increasing the supply of bones would appear to be a plainly superior policy to trying to equalize the distribution of bonelessness. It would be more certain to achieve an equal distribution of bones, and it would reduce whatever suffering the dogs experienced from going without, if only for a day now and then.

The same may be true of policies based on the job-shortage approach to combating unemployment. If successful policies were implemented to eliminate the economy's job gap, inequalities in the distribution of joblessness would tend to disappear. Moreover, to the extent that structural and/or behavioral factors still prevented certain job seekers from finding work, or interfered with their access to the full range of employment opportunities available in the economy, the existence of full employment would be likely to increase the effectiveness of policies designed to address those problems. This latter point warrants special emphasis, as there are a number of ways in which the existence of an aggregate job shortage diminishes the effectiveness of structuralist and behavioralist policies for combating joblessness.

#### **Reducing differential rates of unemployment in a job short economy**

There are several reasons why the existence of an aggregate job shortage is likely to reduce the effectiveness of structuralist and behavioralist strategies for combating joblessness among disadvantaged workers.

First, labor markets tend to reward success with more success, and tend to punish failure with more failure. Analysts who acknowledge the existence of an aggregate job shortage sometimes describe unemployed workers as "queuing" for jobs (Holzer 1996: 29; Mead 1992: 86), but the workers are in a queue with peculiar features. The distinguishing characteristic of most queues is that people move from the back to the

front as they wait. Among the unemployed, however, the hiring queue probably moves in the opposite direction. Among two otherwise identical candidates for employment, employers are likely to receive the one who joined the unemployment queue more recently as a more desirable candidate for employment. In fact, job applicants who are still working in their old jobs are probably the most attractive to new employers, and there are large numbers of such job seekers.

A recent study found that, during a three-month period in the winter of 1994-95, a total of 5.6 percent of all wage and salary workers actively looked for a new job while still employed (U.S. Department of Labor. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 1997). During the same period, the national unemployment rate averaged about 5.5 percent with a mean duration of unemployment of about seventeen weeks. Because of turnover within the population of unemployed persons, the total number of persons who were unemployed at some point in the three-month period would have exceeded the total number of persons who sought work while still employed.

Nevertheless, literally millions of currently employed job seekers competed with unemployed job seekers for vacant jobs during the period. In theory, at least, it is possible for an economy to have both a high job-vacancy rate and a high job-turnover rate without any unemployed job seeker every finding work. All that's required is a high rate of job-search activity among currently employed workers, and a hiring preference on the part of employers for employed job applicants over unemployed job applicants.

*Jobless individuals can and do find work, of course, but the way in which hiring queues work makes it harder for them.<sup>iii</sup> Efforts to move jobless individuals to the front of hiring queues work against a natural tendency for markets to discriminate against such persons. The larger the economy's aggregate job shortage, the longer the hiring queue will be, and the farther back in line unemployed job seekers, especially disadvantaged job seekers, are likely to find themselves.*

*Second, efforts to help disadvantaged job seekers find work, if they succeed, are likely to increase unemployment among workers who are only marginally better off and who probably have personal characteristics that are very similar to those of the assisted population. These are the workers most likely to lose job opportunities when previously less-attractive job applicants are helped to the front of hiring queues. The increased economic stress and associated problems that these workers are likely to experience may cancel and certainly will diminish the net social benefit achieved by helping disadvantaged job seekers find work. A redistribution of the burdens of joblessness among the lowest strata of the labor force may not reduce the harms caused by joblessness very much.<sup>iv</sup> The severity of this problem also is linked to the size of the economy's job gap, because that is what determines the intensity of competition for jobs available among employed and unemployed workers.*

*Third, efforts to increase the employment of disadvantaged individuals also may elicit a nullifying counter-response from more*

privileged workers. This counter-response may take socially beneficial or, at least, benign forms. Threatened workers may invest more in their own education and in that of other family members, display an increased willingness to move where jobs are most plentiful, and intensify their own job-search activities when unemployed. But their response may take less-benign forms as well, increasing resentment against groups targeted for special assistance. Access-broadening initiatives may come under ideological, political, and legal attack as threatened workers seek to protect their advantages. Opposition by white male workers to affirmative action illustrates this kind of reaction. Whatever form it takes, however, the defensive behavior of more privileged workers threatened with a reduction in their own job security is likely to frustrate efforts to increase the job security of workers who are less advantaged.

Fourth, to the extent that the distribution of joblessness is a product of discriminatory hiring practices, the existence of a significant job gap makes it harder to alter employer practices. Surplus labor supply provides both a cover for discriminatory practices and an economic cushion that allows employers to indulge their biases. Proving discriminatory treatment is very difficult when large numbers of workers apply for a small number of jobs and are evaluated according to multiple, incommensurable, partially subjective hiring criteria. This may be one reason for the prevalence of discriminatory firing cases over discriminatory hiring cases in employment-discrimination litigation (Donohue & Siegelman 1991). The existence of

labor surpluses also permits employers greater latitude in deciding where to locate their businesses, avoiding minority populations if they want, without fear of being unable to recruit adequate numbers of workers (Holzer 1997: 131). As the economy's job gap shrinks, the economic pressure on employers not to discriminate increases, and the deterrent effect of anti-discrimination law probably becomes more effective.

For these reasons, structuralist and behavioralist efforts to equalize the burdens of joblessness are likely to work better when the economy's job gap is small than when it is large. Ironically, this suggests that a precondition for the success of structuralist and behavioralist strategies for combating joblessness may be the implementation of an effective strategy based on the job-shortage approach. In other words, it may be more appropriate to think of structuralist and behavioralist strategies as useful complements to an effective job-shortage strategy, rather than as alternatives to the job-shortage approach (Harvey 2000).

Properly understood, the goal of structuralist and behavioralist strategies for combating joblessness is not to reduce joblessness, but to reduce its social cost by redistributing its burdens more equally. In contrast, the goal of policies based on the job-shortage approach is to reduce the social costs of joblessness by reducing the total amount of joblessness suffered in the economy. To the extent the latter goal is achieved, inequalities in the distribution of joblessness among population groups will tend to be reduced, but the implementation of structuralist and behavioralist initiatives still would be needed to ensure that job opportunities are distributed more or less equally among all population groups.

### **Low-wage workers in a job-short economy**

What are the implications of this analysis for the way in which low-wage workers perceive their own experiences and are perceived by the general public? The key point that needs to be made is that the way in which individual workers normally experience aggregate labor-market conditions tends to reinforce behaviorist and structuralist views of the sources of and remedies for unemployment. The same is true of the way in which the general public perceives low-wage workers. This tendency is illustrated by the changes that occur in public attitudes toward jobless individuals during recessions, the only times when aggregate job shortages are widely recognized.

In a non-recessionary economy, high rates of labor turnover can create large numbers of job openings over time, even if job-vacancy rates are low at any point in time. Job destruction may be occurring, but an equal or greater amount of job creation also is occurring. In this environment, a large proportion of the work force has regular and successful experience seeking and finding work. To most workers it does not seem that hard. Based on personal observation and experience, they see that individual behavior matters in the quest for work. They also may see that structural factors influence an individual's chances of finding employment. Everyone has stories to tell that illustrate and tend to confirm the behaviorist and structuralist roots of joblessness. In contrast, there is nothing in the personal experience of workers that tells them

whether there are enough jobs for all job seekers. There may be a perceived shortage of “good” jobs, but jobs in general may appear to be plentiful.

Low-wage workers may have more doubts about the adequacy of job availability, but their perceptions of the labor market are likely to be dominated by the same experiences as other workers. If anything, these experiences are accentuated for low-wage workers, who they change jobs more frequently, experience higher rates of unemployment, and are especially vulnerable to structural barriers to equal employment opportunity.

The lives of low-wage workers provide abundant evidence of the effects of behavioral and structural factors in causing joblessness and of the efficacy of behavioralist and structuralist strategies for overcoming it. Low-wage workers can invest in their own education or seek specialized job training. They can move to communities where jobs are more plentiful. They can try to compensate for discriminatory hiring practices by trying to shed stigmatizing cultural traits, or they can join in legal or political action to challenge the discrimination. They can increase their job-search efforts, adjust their expectations, and try harder to conform their behavior to employer expectations. The nuanced insights of ethnographic studies have much to teach us about these strategies and the difficulties that low-wage workers face in implementing them.

What is not immediately apparent to labor-market participants, including low-wage workers, is the way in which their experience with

unemployment and the process of seeking work is affected by the existence of aggregate job shortages in non-recessionary periods. Job seekers are not just competing for better jobs; they are competing for scarce jobs.

Successful job-search strategies require job seekers not only to qualify themselves to do a certain kind of work, but also to “jump ahead” of other job seekers in hiring queues. In fact, successful job-search strategies in this environment are all queue-jumping strategies. They are designed to give a job seeker a competitive advantage over other job seekers, and the fact that a variety of forces are at work that tend to undermine the effectiveness of these strategies merely raises the ante of effort required for job-search success.

Individual competition for jobs is intense, and it undermines cooperative and solidaristic feelings among workers, except within narrow groupings. Family members and members of the same community or ethnic group may find it advantageous to support one another’s job search efforts, but the success of one group of job seekers ultimately depends on the failure of some other group, and antipathy and resentment among different groups is likely to flourish.

Unsuccessful job seekers do not elicit much sympathy in this environment. As noted above, high job-turnover rates mean that a large proportion of the work force is accustomed to success in their job-search efforts. This widespread success encourages workers to believe that other job seekers should be able to enjoy similar success. Indeed, this perception

may be accurate when it is applied to individual job seekers. Individuals who pursue reasonable job-search strategies are likely to find jobs. But the assumption that everyone would find work if they pursued the same strategies is a classic example of the fallacy of composition. If all job seekers were to enhance their job skills, lower their expectations, and increase their job-search efforts to the same degree, the relative attractiveness of each job applicant would remain unchanged. Nothing would change for the population of job seekers as a whole, even though employers would be pleased, as they would have larger numbers of better-qualified job applicants from whom to choose. In order for the number of people finding work to increase, the total number of available jobs must grow.<sup>v</sup>

Given the seductiveness of the fallacy of composition in this context, the public is not likely to recognize a distinction between the opportunities for self-help available to individual job seekers and the opportunities available to the population of unemployed job-seekers as a whole. This failure to distinguish individual opportunities from group opportunities probably diminishes public sympathy for jobless workers in general; and as low-wage workers suffer more unemployment than other workers, they are especially vulnerable to unfavorable attitudes on the part of the public. Jobless low-wage workers may be perceived as “losers,” and low-wage workers themselves may share this view, blaming each other (and themselves) for their lack of work.

People who believe that there are significant structural barriers to equal employment opportunity are less likely to blame jobless workers for being jobless, but the apparent failure of structuralist policies to reduce joblessness probably has undermined public support for this perspective. Widespread perceptions that structuralist policies associated with the 1960s have failed may even harden public attitudes toward jobless low-wage workers, as these workers are perceived as unable or unwilling to take advantage of special help when it is offered.

As noted above, the importance of public perceptions of job availability in shaping attitudes toward jobless workers is demonstrated by the way these attitudes change during recessions. When unemployment rises sharply, the existence of an aggregate job shortage is taken for granted. Large numbers of normally employed workers lose their jobs, and it is readily apparent that there are not enough new jobs being created to provide compensating employment opportunities. In these circumstances, the public is more likely to blame joblessness on the economy's failure to provide adequate numbers of jobs rather than on individual behavioral or structural barriers to equal employment opportunity. Relief from the problem of joblessness is likely to be sought in additional job creation, and jobless workers are likely to be viewed with more sympathy than is typical in non-recessionary periods. Job losers will get the most sympathy, but attitudes toward the long-term jobless are likely to soften as well. Jobless

*individuals in general are more likely to be viewed as victims of circumstance than as authors of their own fate.*

*Changes in the public image of jobless workers, therefore, depend largely on what the public perceives to be the root cause of the problem, and these perceptions tend to shift with phases of the business cycle. The reason that perceptions of joblessness run in the tracks they do are not difficult to comprehend, but it is important to understand that the experiences that shape these perceptions are misleading. Only during recessions is the role of job shortages in causing joblessness widely recognized. Ethnographers can help us to understand the ways in which the labor-market experiences of low-wage workers shape both their self-image and their public image, but we should be careful not to assume that perceptions of the causes of joblessness that flow from these experiences are properly balanced.*

## *Endnotes*

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- i. The term “frictional unemployment” is used to describe unemployment that results from the job search and job screening activities undertaken by job seekers and employers prefatory to an actual hiring. Because these activities take time, a certain amount of frictional unemployment would exist even if there was a surplus of jobs relative to the number of people seeking work and even if job search activities by job applicants were both vigorous and unhindered by structural barriers to employment.
  
  - ii. In September 1999, for example, when the national unemployment rate averaged 4.2 percent, the estimated unemployment rate in the nation’s metropolitan areas ranged from a low of 1.1 percent in Columbia, Missouri, to a high of 33.4 percent in Yuma, Arizona.  
*Employment and Earnings* 46: Table C-3.
  
  - iii. The likelihood that a job-seeker will have received a job offer necessarily increases with the length of time the individual has been unemployed. This is because the number of job applications increases with time, however, not because the job seeker’s “turn” has arrived. Even if your chances of winning a lottery declined each time you played (as an unemployed workers chances of being hired as a result of any particular job application probably decline over time), your chances of winning still would increase the longer you played.
  
  - iv. Increased cycling on and off of public-assistance rolls may be one result of such a policy.

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This kind of cycling was common in the Aid for Families with Dependant Children Program (AFDC) (Spalter-Roth, et al. 1995).

- v. Actually, there would be some reduction in frictional unemployment if the existence of a larger, better-qualified applicant pool caused employers to make more rapid hiring decisions. The size of this effect is uncertain, however, and it might not be felt at all, since employers would have larger numbers of qualified applicants to screen, and it might take them longer to identify the best candidates. Better candidates also could expect to receive a larger number of job offers ( they would be applying to more employers) could delay final hiring decisions. Widespread changes in the qualifications and/or job-search behavior of workers also might affect macroeconomic trends, but more highly qualified and motivated labor forces do not necessarily experience lower aggregate rates of unemployment, even though more highly qualified and motivated workers in a population will tend to experience lower rates of unemployment as compared to other workers in the population (as Figure 1 shows). For a more extended discussion of these issues, see Harvey (2000).

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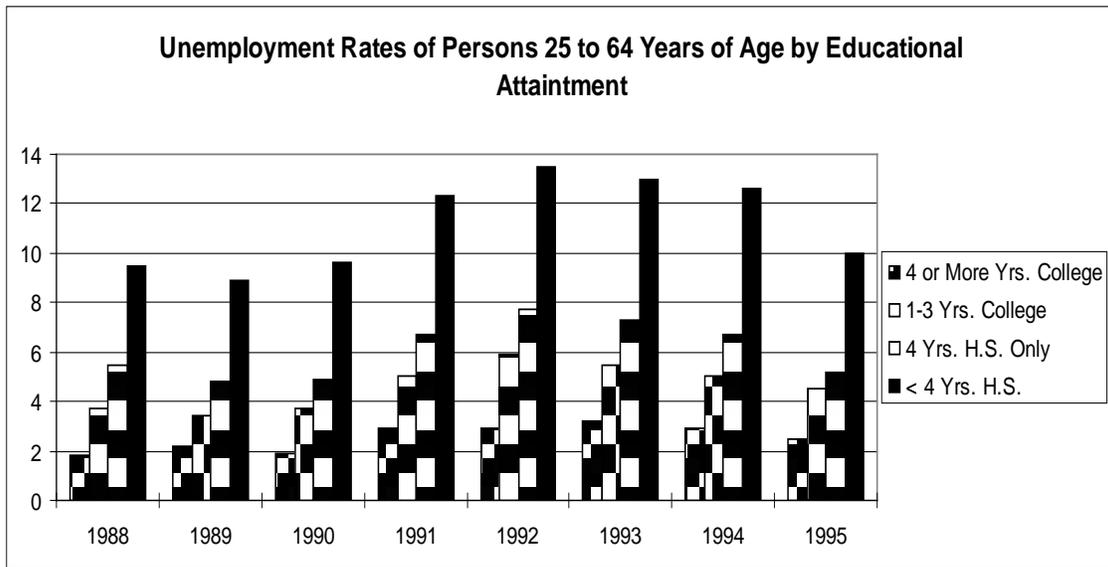
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FIGURE 1



Source: Jacobs (1997: 110).