
Backgrounder

Labour Market Changes and Family Transactions An in-depth qualitative study of families in British Columbia

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This study examines the nature of different family transactions and components of resiliency as they relate to labour force attachment. The workplace at the end of the 20th century differs radically from the workplace for which much of our legislation and social policies were designed. Canadians are only beginning to examine the impact of the changing labour market on the economic stability, physical well-being, and mental health of families and children. All sectors have a stake not only in what social economic and political factors affect employment, but what happens inside the family itself.

In this study, researchers explored in-depth 25 Canadian families living in Surrey, British Columbia in 1996. The study focuses on how these families connect to the labour market, as well as documents their various strengths and liabilities in coping with the challenges of daily life. The analysis identifies the types of transactions in which family members, both adults and children over five engage to help resolve fundamental concerns about family and work. The method used was a combination of in-depth interviews, family interviews, focus groups and questionnaires.

The households consisted of 14 two-parent families and 11 lone-parent families; women headed nine of the lone-parent families. Seven families had stable employment for at least one breadwinner, six had lost jobs but found new ones, seven had lost jobs and not recovered, and five were unemployed long term.

One of the most compelling findings of the study was the extent to which striking a balance of priorities preoccupied most adult members of these 25 families, especially those revolving around employment and child care. The study confirmed that all families balance economic and social goals to achieve a "social bottom line." For many families, achieving the social bottom line meant deferring full-time employment and living with fewer resources in the short term while raising their children. The other transactions addressed in this study - emotional support, household tasks, and financial arrangements - also affected decisions around labour market attachment.

A second important finding to emerge from the study suggests that those families who attempted to achieve their social bottom line while working in nonstandard employment such as part-time, temporary or contractual arrangements, were not doing especially well either in terms of their economic security or their family functioning. In fact, many families who were coping with labour force changes by relying on income assistance as a temporary support measure were doing better than those who worked in nonstandard jobs. Through varying combinations of retraining, additional education, volunteer work, and access to informal supports, many of those families receiving income assistance were coping quite successfully.

Balancing Labour Market and Child Care Demands

The families in this study were often trying to balance competing objectives, the most fundamental of which involved balancing work and child care responsibilities. While maintaining attachment to the labour market was a fundamental priority for families, the child care demands were a pivotal force behind these families' coping strategies.

Some families, especially those with young children, sacrificed income so that at least one parent could look after the children. The consequences of these decisions included a lower standard of living, the sacrifice of the career development of one member of the family - usually the mother - and, in some cases, a reliance on non-standard employment, such as working part-time at a number of jobs.

The lone-parent families experienced more of a challenge in attempting to achieve a balance between employment and child care. The adults in these families generally had to confront much starker trade-offs with fewer resources at their disposal to achieve their social bottom lines. A number of the parents in families that deferred employment nevertheless maintained a strong desire for future labour market attachment. As a long-term strategy, adult members of such families engaged in training or education programs.

Emotional Support

In both lone-parent and two-parent families, participants made strong links between emotional support and successful employment experiences. The support of family members, their relationships, and their psychological state affected the emotional well-being of individuals in the labour force, which in turn affected work performance. Conversely, stressful or consuming employment might affect the psychological state of workers, which in turn often had an impact on the emotional well-being of family members.

Household Tasks

In both two-parent and lone-parent families, finding an acceptable process for assigning, supervising and completing tasks was important to functioning well as a family. Adults and children both acknowledged the connection between taking responsibility for household tasks and labour market attachment. In lone-parent families, children of all ages felt obliged to assume increased responsibility for household tasks, sometimes even more than they would prefer.

Financial Arrangements

The clear majority of families in this study were experiencing variations of the "money crunch." Whether they were simply trying to pay their rent and buy food, or struggling to pay off their mortgages and put gas in their cars, families considered themselves to be under a great deal of financial stress. In fact, only one family in five agreed that its household was "doing well financially."

Two-parent families in the study were willing to endure the money crunch for future results, especially where at least one of the parents maintained a secure attachment to the labour market in some type of "standard employment." The scenarios were different for lone-parent families. Though they might also make the decision to care for their children full-time and give up employment income, lone parents more often had then to rely on income assistance.

Many financial transactions occurred across households. Financial gifts and loans from relatives helped some families make it through the month and reduced stress. The families that did not have access to informal financial supports were more vulnerable.

Strengths, Liabilities and Family Resiliency

Another objective of the study was to examine the relevance of families' strengths in dealing with challenges confronting them. Physical health and emotional well-being were important factors associated with the capacity to cope with life's challenges.

The families considered and engaged in a complex range of strategies and activities to both achieve goals and to rationalize some of the choices they made. Some of the strengths of these families were neither the result of labour market attachment nor necessarily one of the causes contributing to labour market attachment, but rather reflected supportive patterns of transactions and access to more extensive informal and formal sources of support.

In many cases, individuals within a family mentioned the following attributes: shared optimism and positive outlook; shared goals and priorities; sense of being a family and commitment to the family; and sense of control. Another important strength that some families possessed was a shared agreement about negotiation, problem-solving, and decision-making. The degree of role satisfaction was an important strength of many families. The flexibility and adaptability of roles appeared to support the family's capacity for resilience. If family members are willing to accept new tasks or assume new roles, then they are more likely to be able to weather crises. The families that seemed able to maintain the more pronounced capacity for resilience were also those that had a strong, consistent link with at least one other household, such as friends, family or members of a religious community.

The Nature of Labour Market Attachments

The most resilient families were not always those who never had to deal with losing employment. Rather the evidence from the current study suggests that the type of job, such as full-time and permanent employment versus part-time, temporary or contractual work, played a more important role in the ability of these families to function well.

Two-parent families were employed at higher rates than were lone-parent families, were more likely to have full-time employment, and were considered to be less vulnerable on average than many other families in the study. In fact, none of the two-parent families with full-time, permanent jobs was classified as "struggling." Just as compelling, none of the families currently living on wages from part-time or contractual employment was considered to be "thriving," regardless of the family composition. Seventy percent of the families who were receiving income assistance were either thriving or surviving, while thirty percent were struggling. Lone-parent families who were relatively isolated and received income assistance were more likely to be struggling. Those families experiencing "transitional" labour force attachments - that is, varying combinations of retraining, additional education, social service support programs, and volunteer work- were coping relatively well, at the minimum "surviving", while those in the "deferred" attachment category were more likely to be "struggling"

Future Steps

Connections among family dynamics, members' attachment to the labour market and the resulting effects on long-term resiliency have been largely unexplored in Canada. There are many factors that individuals and families must consider in deciding which bundle of strategies to adopt in their attempts to satisfy each member's basic needs. For example, recognizing that families have a social bottom line means that even the decision to participate in the paid labour force may be partly contingent on the resources and informal support networks available to families. Such issues as rising rates of child poverty, higher infant mortality rates, and the declining quality of care point to important questions about how well families are managing. The finding that families with income assistance, however low, were sometimes coping better than families dependant on one or more part-time jobs is another important consideration.

Future research requires a broader sample or cross-section of Canadian families to identify or further confirm the types of transactions, external support, and family strengths that enhance employability. In particular, there is a need to examine the conditions and circumstances under which families change their labour market attachment, as well as those factors that enhance their capacity to recover as a social and economic unit over time. Future research should include families from multiple communities, tracked over time to help clarify the nature of causality and to gauge long-term outcomes.

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