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Keywords

qualitative research

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The Dislocated Textile Worker in Rural Alabama: A Portrait by Sharon G. Lankford-Rice[±]

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Abstract

This is a study that delves into the attitudes of the rural Alabama textile worker at the point of being laid off. The methodology and findings are discussed and a personal interview transcribed from a former dislocated worker concerning her feelings, attitudes, and aspirations on how the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) program has impacted her life and career.

Introduction

The sense of urgency is almost palpable as the guests enter the break room. The workers start filing into the room a short time later, at first in small groups and then in larger ones. Their comments are hurriedly whispered to each other and too low to be overheard. Some of the workers laugh nervously and others remain grim faced. Almost all of the workers in this group are women aged anywhere from 37 to 65 and some look much older than their questionnaires indicate; however they all have one thing in common regardless of age, background, gender, and marital status: they have all just been laid off from possibly the best job they have ever held. They ask the same questions of the guests that groups before them have asked and future groups are likely to ask as well. "What do we do now? How are we going to make a living? I don't know how to do anything else!"

The guests have come to help the workers find answers to their questions and hopefully solutions to their dilemmas. The author has been faced with this particular type of group many times and has been able to help the dislocated workers leave their closing factories with a plan of action formulating in their heads and a renewed sense of hope that all is not lost. The guests are representatives from local agencies such as the Employment Service, the Unemployment Compensation Office, Human Resources, Adult Basic Education Centers, area colleges, and local training programs, who make up what is called a Rapid Response Team.

This team is called together whenever a factory announces a shut down; they visit the closing facility, set up meetings, and detail dislocated workers' options upon becoming unemployed. As a member of this panel who travels from company to company; the researcher acts as a representative of the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) program and explains the benefits of retraining and education to groups of workers just like this one. The researcher acts as career counselor, mentor, and motivator in many of these workers' lives.

This is just one of many meetings that has been arranged for this particular company. It is a local textile plant with well over 250 residents employed on the first, second, and third shifts. These workers are considered lucky in that they have been given notice of the closing and will receive a severance package. Many other plants in this rural area simply pack up and leave over the weekend shut-down leaving their workers to discover locked doors and bounced paychecks on Monday morning.

While all the agencies play an important role in the dislocated workers' life, one agency that delivers a training program performs a very vital role in training the unemployed worker in a new capacity: The North Alabama Skills Center. JTPA or Job Training Partnership Act has retrained over 1000 dislocated workers from 1996-1998 through the local delivery agent. The agency provides training dollars, case management, career guidance, and moral support to the workers who choose to take advantage of the unique opportunity the program offers. The North Alabama Skills Center in the delivery of the JTPA program services have made a tremendous impact on the people in the community it serves. The researcher worked in the capacity of coordinator of the North Alabama Skills Center in the northeast corner of Alabama for 11 years delivering services to the dislocated workers of that region.

This article will present a review of literature concerning women in the workplace and dislocated workers specifically relating to women's issues in the training arena, a description of the methodology, the findings surrounding the program which emerged through the study and, finally, an ethnographic case study of one dislocated worker and the impact of JTPA on her life.

Review of Related Literature

Women

The JTPA program was designed to serve many different groups of people in a structured training program. Originally the focus was on the economically disadvantaged, particularly those who needed supportive services and/or a mixed combination of training services (Solow & Walker, [1986](#)). The Solow and Walker study showed that emphasis on a high number of low cost placements had displaced program focus toward women. Specifically tailored programs for females have been limited to a very small percentage of training dollars in JTPA. While that may have been true for the greater portion of the US, rural Alabama has had to shift training focus to female oriented training as a result of the large number of women being laid-off due to the loss of the textile industry. While non-traditional training was offered to the displaced workers in this southern state, very few opted for that choice. The General Accounting Office (GAO) in [1989](#) reported that women nationwide were more often trained in traditionally female oriented occupations such as clerical/typist and secretarial positions than any other types of training.

However, Pearce discovered in her study of four JTPA training sites in middle America that a significant number of women entering JTPA training programs chose a non-traditional curriculum for employment. The factors that appeared to contribute to the success of these women were: JTPA intake workers who brought their experiences to the participants, female mentors, and customized training to accommodate the non-traditional choice ([1993](#)). One reason for the lack of success was the lack of supportive services such as child care for women. One

problem with training choices in JTPA that have been described in Middleton's [1986](#) study is women in low-paying non-technical occupations who often face discriminatory practices and attitudes and who lack a strong supportive services system. Middleton's [1986](#) study showed that only one site studied out of 13 used its entire supportive service budget of 15% to provide adequate supportive services to women and other participants.

The literature shows that women who have no supportive system in place run the high risk of dropping out of the training and not taking full advantage of the program. The North Alabama Skills Center has a strong supportive system in place that is designed to be "cradle to grave" in the training arena. A case manager is assigned from day one to the participant and stays with the client until he/she graduates from the program and finds a job. A major responsibility of the case manager is to help the client search for employment in that client's training field. Once employment is secured, the client is then tracked for 13 weeks to calculate retention rates.

Dislocated Workers

The dislocated worker has become a large area of focus in the JTPA program. Due to the high number of plant closings around the nation, the federal government enacted EDWAA (Economic Dislocation and Worker Assistance Act) to replace Title III services under JTPA in 1988. Upon enactment the amount spent on retraining dislocated workers jumped from \$172.4 million in 1987 to \$246.5 million in 1988 (GAO, [1990](#)). Prior to 1988 and the EDWAA replacement act, services varied greatly to Title III customers; however the predominant service was job placement assistance which comprised more than 80% of the services rendered. Fewer than half of the participants received occupational skills training and fewer than 25% received any supportive services. It was also indicated that fewer older dislocated workers aged 55 and older and fewer less educated workers were enrolled in the program. This study revealed that 69% of the participants were placed in jobs; however the wage at placement was lower than their previous wages had been (GAO, [1987](#)). While it would appear that placing workers below their previous standard of pay may indicate unsuccessful rates, another study conducted revealed that while no significant differences existed for those who undertook short training programs, the workers themselves felt they had gained valuable training that would assist them in their future job search efforts. Most of these training programs were GED, basic skills, or short occupational curriculum and did provide wider employment options for the dislocated workers.

The majority of those workers studied stated they would go through the programs again even though many returned to manufacturing jobs at substantially lower wages than before their dislocation (Merrifield, [1991](#)). Unfortunately in rural areas, manufacturing jobs are usually the highest paying positions in close proximity to the workers homes. Too many times it is a matter of quality of life rather than free choice that brings the workers back to the factory in assembly work.

It is imperative that dislocated workers have the time necessary to train and strong cooperative efforts be made to assist the dislocated worker to place her back in the job market. Naylor in a [1989](#) study made recommendations to fortify the abilities of the local educational structures (JTPA included) to serve the needs of the dislocated worker. Some of those recommendations were to develop programs that are comprehensive, link programs with public and private

agencies, to have aggressive managers who are closely aligned with local employers and who are dynamic in advertising the programs as well as promoting the participants.

The review of literature revealed that dislocated workers are very likely to return to the workforce with or without new skills, but do not regret any time spent in training regardless of the outcome. While most would prefer to secure employment in fields other than their previous fields, the workers are grateful to have had the opportunity to learn new skills they feel will help them in future endeavors. The North Alabama Skills Center has made learning new skills a reality for the dislocated workers in the rural community it serves.

The researcher has worked for years interviewing and retraining dislocated workers and heard the same sentiments expressed time and time again. Regardless of background, job status, or gender, dislocated workers have evinced similar feelings. The researcher was interested in categorizing these attitudes to come to a richer understanding and design "help" programs geared specifically for the workers. To achieve these objectives, an ethnographic study appeared the most appropriate form for such categorization. Each worker may have expressed similar feelings but each individual lent a different perspective on those comparable experiences. In order to capture the context of each workers' encountering, it was necessary to use a method that adequately allowed the workers to freely express their sentiments rather than just a method that allowed them to check off responses that did not truly express the depth and breadth of their emotions.

Following descriptions of research methodology and participants, a descriptive account of one woman's training journey from dislocation to successful re-employment is presented.

Methodology

Ethnography is the work of describing a culture (Hebert, [1995](#)), in this case the culture of the workers in a rural Appalachian community. Rather than "studying people" as the word suggests, it is the researchers aim to have learned from the people and understand their unique position through their native point of view. To truly understand the dislocated workers' standpoint, researchers would need to "walk a mile" in their shoes.

As a service delivery program administrator, the researcher understood the dislocation from a JTPA program performance context, however the researcher needed to fully understand the workers' feelings, emotions, and experiences as much as possible expressed in their own unique style. In order to relay those emotions and feelings accurately, an ethnographic methodology was appropriate.

To capture the dislocated workers' feelings and perceptions, a combination of interviews, surveys, and observations were used to gather data. Participant observations were made in their natural settings--on the job before the plant shut down and in the aftermath of actually losing their jobs. While the observations had no specific structure, they were guided by procedures already in place within the Skills Center structure.

The in-depth interviews were conducted over a period of a year and spanned the time just before the worker became unemployed and in many instances ended just after the dislocated worker became gainfully employed again after training. These interviews had an open structure and consisted of open ended questions designed to draw the participant out and not only gather information about the participants feelings but develop insight as well (Bogdan & Biklen, [1982](#), p. 135). Each participant had a unique view of their situation and these types of interviews allowed each participant to "draw his or her own picture" in regards to the closing of the textile plant. Questions designed to give the researcher the "grand tour" of the gamut of feelings and emotions (Spradley, [1979](#), p. 86) were asked of every participant and followed up with more specific questions; an example of this would be "Tell me what you think about the plant closing down," followed with "tell me how this is going to affect you and your family." The participants' responses guided the interviews and the direction of the ensuing questions so that a deeper understanding could be obtained.

The total study transpired over the course of a year. Observation notes were taken as well as case notes on the conversations and interviews with each participant. Whenever the participant agreed to the tape recording of the interview it was done and transcribed verbatim. When the participant voiced reluctance at having the interview taped, notes were taken during the interview and immediately afterward to record specific comments and emotions. As themes began to emerge, they were noted, developed, and compared with the evolving hypotheses (Marshall & Rossman, [1989](#), p. 118). These interviews were then examined and unitized for "chunks of meaning." These chunks were then explored further and themes then emerged.

Participants

There were 35 participants in the study: all were white women between the ages of 35 to 65. Thirty-one already had their high school diplomas and 4 completed their GED in the JTPA program just prior to the commencement of their freshman year of college. All had tested with the JTPA program and placed high in the testing process. All participants indicated a college degree was among their goals when asked to list what they wanted to accomplish in the next two years. Each participants interest inventory supported the training decision to go into the college referral program with the JTPA program.

For the purpose of this study a dislocated worker was defined as a textile worker who had received her lay-off notice between January 1996 and January 1997. The participants were chosen at random using the random tables of numbers. Each participant was assigned a number and then selected accordingly. Approximately one half of the participants came from Jackson County's largest textile closing in January 1996 and the other half came from Dekalb County's largest textile closing in February 1996 and extending into April 1996.

Results of the Study

Many themes emerged during the course of the study. The dislocated workers expressed a myriad of concerns during this time in their lives. However two themes readily emerged early in the interview process and then continually throughout the life of the study. Each theme will be discussed separately.

"All one happy family"

As the interviews evolved it became clear that many of the participants were having the same feelings about specific issues. Several participants voiced concern about leaving their "family" of co-workers. The researcher found the interviews reinforced Hebert's familial concept when he interviewed students who worked closely in swim teams who developed the same type of "family" relationships (1995). One worker cried as she described her relationship with her co-workers, "I don't know what I'm going to do....these women are like my sisters. I have gone through my married life with them, a divorce, my kids growing up and everything. I am used to seeing these people everyday....I tell them everything." Another woman was very frank about her co-workers, "Some of them I can live without but the girls in my group are my family, hell, they've gone through two husbands with me!"

All the participants voiced concern at having their support system being taken from them in such an abrupt manner. Most of the women had worked together for an extensive amount of time and felt their co-workers were part of their immediate family unit. The core of the group at each plant appeared to have remained intact over the years with a minimal amount of transition through the workforce. Many of the older women felt very maternal towards the younger members of the group. They felt responsible for the younger more inexperienced workers and took them under their wing as well as mentored them. In fact the researcher saw generations working at the same factory. It was not unusual to find the grandmother-mother-daughter all working in the same textile plant in different departments.

"I can't do anything else, I'm not smart enough"

Another theme that emerged rather quickly was the assumption by all the dislocated workers that they were "not smart enough" to make it outside the textile plant industry. All the workers had been out of school for at least 18 years and were reluctant to return to the classroom. Many of the participants discussed how they had been told by family members, husbands in particular, that they were not smart enough to get a GED, a college degree, or a different job. Many of the participants had no self-confidence in their own skills and self-esteem appeared to be in shreds.

An interesting spin-off on this theme was the results of the testing that was required of all participants. Test results indicated all participants had high levels of intelligence and academic skill, yet none seemed to accept that concept. When the results were revealed most participants asked for copies of scores to take home to family members to "prove they were smart." During the interview process, a transformation seemed to take place in the participants when an independent test imparted the knowledge that the workers could be very successful in the classroom. To have an unbiased party express confidence in their abilities seemed to bolster their own self-confidence and esteem.

These two themes were the major two motifs that emerged through the interview process: the feeling of strong familial ties with the co-workers and the overwhelming lack of confidence in their own academic abilities. The 35 participants all divulged a myriad of feelings and emotions throughout the entire process, but the aforementioned themes seemed to be a part of all the interviews. It was interesting to note the metamorphosis all the participants affected as their confidence grew throughout their program of study. As the participants progressed in their

studies, their own view of their abilities evolved. With each quarter and each grade sheet, all the ladies expressed a more independent nature. One participant grew so self-confident that she triumphantly announced her divorce decree in the office during one visit. She told the researcher that she had always been told she "was stupid" and through the JTPA college program she realized she wasn't. In every case, the participant "blossomed" while participating in the study; not every party confirmed it with a divorce however.

Implications

JTPA addressed both motifs that evolved in the interviews. Many women were reluctant to embark on a new academic experience without at least one co-worker. Because the JTPA program scheduled departments together for interviews and testing, the workers felt more secure in their support network and more apt to take risks. Risks included working toward a GED and even going to college. The dislocated worker was able to transfer her support system from the workplace to the classroom with little disruption.

JTPA also addressed the "I'm stupid" theme by administering tests that proved to the participant she could succeed in the academic arena. These tests were the tangible evidence of intelligence for the women. These scores became badges of honor among the participants; even so much so that several ladies carried copies in their purses for reinforcement of the concept. While the testing remained competitive among the dislocated workers, it also cemented their camaraderie. It was proof in their own minds they knew each other better than their own family members.

Discussion

The dislocated workers' emotions and feelings ran high during the course of their participation in the program as well as the study. The findings in this research were significant to the Skills Center because it helped the staff understand the emotions of such a turbulent time for the workers. Many staff members had not experienced a layoff with few or no options and the research helped them empathize with the workers on a deeper level. Too many times, participants in programs such as this become "numbers" rather than people and this study helped affix a face and a story behind each statistic. The research guided the staff in this center in designing the types of activities needed for the participant as well as choosing the types of counseling techniques employed in one-on-one sessions.

Follow-up studies are imperative to gauge the lay-off trends prevalent in the area. Future studies would be able to better assess the needs of future dislocated workers as well study the long term impacts of the JTPA program in the lives of the participants of this particular study. Specific studies could focus on the accomplishments of this group and how retraining shaped their lives and the explicit effects upon their families. Further studies could be made into the effects of a parent returning to school on the children. Such a study would be significant in other areas and could impact reforms regarding those areas such as welfare to work.

A case study follows that epitomizes the dislocated female workers in the Jackson-Dekalb county area. Paula's story mirrors the stories of all 35 participants in this study.

Paula's Story

Paula lived in rural Dekalb county all her life and met her husband while both were in high school. She dated him all through school and on the day she graduated from high school set her wedding day. Immediately upon marrying she became pregnant with her first child and worked to help put her husband through college. After her second child was born she stopped working and became a full-time mom. Paula continued to stay at home until after her fifth child started school. It was then she went back to work in a textile plant. It was this job she liked most because her co-workers took her in and treated her like a family member. Paula shared the details of her life with her co-workers the kinship grew. "I spent 8 hours a day with these women, that was more time than I spent with my family during the week!" She invited these fellow workers into her home and life. She bought gifts and even baby-sat for the workers who delivered babies; she invited them to her daughter's wedding. They helped her through the trying time when her parents died. They were the friends who were there for her in the "worst of times and best of times." "These women were like my sisters. I could always count on them."

When the plant closing was announced, Paula was concerned, of course, about her extended family and the loss of income, but her main concern was about the kind of job she would get next. "I didn't know what I would do after the plant shut down. I had my husband and my kids of course, but what was I going to do. To me losing my job and my co-workers was like losing family members." On the last day of work, Paula and her co-workers cried and promised to get together at least once a week as a support group. In the following weeks, they remained a close knit group until the different members began finding other work. Others took advantage of the JTPA program and started training for new jobs. Paula herself decided to give it a shot and see if she could make it in college. It was a new environment for her and she thrived in her new academic environment. The JTPA program provided Paula with the opportunity to return to school and earn her degree. "That was the other really scary move for me, I had been a stay at home mom for so long I just wasn't sure if I could hack it in school. Everybody encouraged me including my old friends from the plant, so I am glad I really did well." While many work friends dropped out of touch along the two years Paula was in school, there were a few who remained in her inner circle of friends. These friends remained by her side as she studied hard and maintained a 4.0 average while raising a family and watched her walk across the stage to receive her degree. "I had a case worker at the JTPA office who was always there when I felt down. I knew I could go there and be encouraged. Even when I wanted to throw my hands up and just give up, I knew that JTPA would help me through whatever crisis I was having at the time."

Paula has since graduated from college and started to work for the Director of the Technical Division of her alma mater. Her office handles all the JTPA students at the college. Part of her duties consists of maintaining records for JTPA students and acting as liaison for the students. She gives encouragement to people just like herself who come back to school after being dislocated. Paula credits JTPA with giving her the opportunity to change the direction of her life, but credits her family and herself for having the determination to continue. "The people at the JTPA program made me believe in myself again. If it weren't for the people at JTPA I don't think I would have had the courage to go back to school after such a long time. My family told me I could do it and I believed them. But I also know they love me and wanted me to be happy. The

people at the JTPA office showed me I could do it with my test scores--that's what made me know I could be successful."

When asked how she likes her new career, she smiles a wide grin and says, "Oh I love it...and the best part is when I see a dislocated worker from JTPA. I can honestly tell them that it is going to be all right because I know from experience. I can look in their eyes and see myself when I first got laid off; I just hope they can look at me and see themselves when they finally graduate!"

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Author Note

Sharon G. Lankford-Rice is a doctoral candidate at the University of Alabama and was the coordinator at the North Alabama Skills Center for 11 years where she worked with dislocated workers for the last seven years. She has been fortunate enough to have been present at the graduation of many former participants and watched them regain their confidence and self-esteem through the help of the JTPA program. She is currently an Instructional Development Specialist with the Department of Defense at the US Chemical School at Fort McClellan, Alabama near Anniston where she is currently developing distance learning products for use with Army training. She may be contacted at the Chemical School or via email - sharonl@quicklink.net