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When Losing Your Job Feels Like Losing Your Self

by Aliya Hamid Rao

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Todd* is a trim 45-year-old, but when he walks into the upscale diner where we are meeting, his shoulders are stooped, and he constantly fidgets with his fingers, emanating a nervous energy. On the day we are speaking, Todd has been unemployed for about 10 months. Todd's job loss has had tremendous financial repercussions for his family. Yet, in a small voice, he confesses, "I think the hardest part is just not feeling like anybody sees value in me."

I interviewed Todd, a marketing professional, in 2014 for my forthcoming book, *Crunch Time: How Married Couples Confront Unemployment*, which focuses on the unemployment experiences of highly educated, married professionals with children in the U.S. Like dozens of other professionals I interviewed, Todd's employment is key to his sense of self, determining how he measures his social status and self-worth. Yet, this self-worth is constantly threatened, because professionals like Todd have become recent casualties of a pervasive labor market uncertainty that existed long before the coronavirus pandemic.

As unemployment reaches historic levels, now is a good time to re-examine this link between our identities and our jobs.

Labor Market Uncertainty Has Been Growing For Decades

U.S. organizations have for decades been shifting their philosophies from "big is better" to "smaller is beautiful." Layoffs, downsizing, and rightsizing are now built into the structural logic of many corporations. The Great Recession of 2007-2009 was a watershed moment, crystallizing the trend toward labor market uncertainty, even for highly educated workers. Today, economic fallout from social distancing threatens to upend the careers of an even larger swath of U.S. professionals.

The economic costs for individuals and families will of course be tremendous, but what will be the human impact? In addition to the loss of his income, Todd experienced a loss of his social status and a deep sense of shame. As he wrestled with feeling rejected by the labor market and ashamed at his unemployment, he lost confidence in himself. He was unsure of how to interact with others, or how to spend his time purposefully.

Todd's experience highlights a contemporary reality: Employment, or the lack thereof, has become an intrinsic marker of a person's moral worth. Several decades ago, the sociologist Erving Goffman identified unemployment as a "spoiled identity." What he meant was that the unemployed are denied full participation in social life because others view them with suspicion. Through my research, I've heard firsthand accounts of this stigmatization. For example, Robert, another unemployed man in my study, explained that neighbors and friends treated him with kid gloves. It was, as though they feared they would "catch" unemployment if they mingled too freely with him.

Other scholars, drawing on research from economic downturns like the Great Depression and the Iowa Farm Crisis of the 1980s, have found that employment has important functions beyond income: in addition to being the basis of our social status and identity, it provides a way to structure

our time, provides a sense of purpose, and broadens our social contacts. From this perspective, unemployment not only takes away income, but damages a key organizing element of our lives.

Mothers and Fathers Experience Unemployment Differently

While Robert's and Todd's injured self-worths were an experience shared by many of the men I talked to, the situation was slightly different for unemployed women, at least in the early months of their unemployment. Doris, an unemployed lawyer, told me that "I'm getting a lot of validation in being a mother." She linked this specifically to the extensive demands of her prior job, which she described as "pulling" her in ways that prevented her from spending as much time with her two sons as she had wanted.

Unemployed women talked about gaining access to a new social world: that of stay-at-home moms. When Darlene, another unemployed woman, showed up at her son's school on a weekday morning, she was welcomed by other mothers from the school's Parent Teacher Association. She explains, "They didn't ask me 'What are you doing here at a Tuesday morning at 10 o'clock?'" Instead of having to justify what she was doing outside of a workplace, Darlene felt enthusiastically included: "They were like 'Hey come on, we need your help!'"

Unemployed fathers, on the other hand, experienced parenthood differently. One father, William, described an uneasy instance of taking care of his four-year-old son during the weekday. William would take his son to their neighborhood pool, where, as he put it, "It would be like 20 moms and then there'd be me." He added: "I just didn't know how to engage, and I didn't really want to, you know? I felt awkward. I just felt like I'm that guy." William's discomfort stands in sharp contrast to Darlene.

Over time, though, I found that even women for whom unemployment provided a reprieve from the impossible task of trying to be an ideal worker and an ideal mother yearned to engage in professional activity. And, while motherhood does help some unemployed women structure their time, feel a sense of purpose, and broaden their social contacts, this is of course possible primarily because women's paid work is simply not as valued as men's. Even when women earn more than their husbands, they continue to be held responsible for the invisible and unpaid work in their families. Fatherhood is still not a culturally legitimate way for men to contribute to their families in the U.S., so fatherhood does not quite replace the latent functions of employment for unemployed men. This paradigm makes it challenging for women to participate equally in the realm of paid work and for men to participate equally in the realm of unpaid work and caregiving.

It's Time to Rethink This. Government and Employers Can Help.

As steady employment becomes more precarious in the U.S., and indeed globally, and we brace for a wave of unemployment in the wake of Covid-19, we should take stock of placing so much significance on employment in determining our worth as social beings.

Uncoupling moral worth from employment will require a cultural shift, one that can be catalyzed by social policies. For instance, unemployment benefits are frequently a key bone of contention at the policy level, and there is often a stigma around using them, stemming from equating morality with employment. Universal Basic Income, which would provide a living income whether you have a job or not, may be a step toward minimizing this link between job and moral worth.

Government policies could also address gender inequalities, making it possible for both men and women to hold variety of social roles, not just as workers, but as parents, siblings, children, aunts, uncles, friends, mentors. This could be partially accomplished by recognizing caregiving as work, as many Nordic countries already do. In Sweden, parents are entitled to approximately 15 months of leave, paid at up to 80% by the government (with a cap). They are also guaranteed a spot in a public childcare system once their child turns one. Investing in social policies that take caregiving obligations into account can encourage both men and women to be proud of, and find meaning in, their roles outside of paid work.

Employers have a part to play too. For example, companies could loosen the reins on expecting constant availability, face time, and an acute devotion to work. By truly adopting flexibility policies — i.e. working from home or flexi-time — they could signal that availing oneself of such policies is both feasible and acceptable without jeopardizing one's career. Employers can play an important role in reshaping the entire culture of work just by taking into account employees' non-work obligations.

Combined, these steps could help all parents develop roles outside of work. William's presence at the swimming pool would be expected, simply because dads taking care of their children would not be peculiar.

Over the years, Todd, William, Doris, Robert, Darlene and the other professionals I spoke with eventually got new jobs. Some got full-time work with great benefits. Others did part-time work. Yet others got fed up with trying to find employment and decided to open consulting firms. Through the course of their professional ups and downs, life also happened. Some lost parents, others got divorced. One person died. Some lost jobs again. The professional lesson, however, was clear to them: Employment, even when prestigious and well-paid, is no longer dependable.

How much sense does it make, then, to hinge our entire mental and emotional well-being on this fickle friend?

*All names are pseudonyms.

Aliya Hamid Rao is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at Singapore Management University. Her research focuses on the intersections of work, family, and gender. Her book, *Crunch Time: How Married Couples Confront Unemployment*, is forthcoming in June 2020 with the University of California Press.