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AUSTRALIAN CHILDREN’S ACCOUNTS OF THE CLOSURE OF A CAR FACTORY: Global restructuring and local impacts

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ABSTRACT (188 words)

This paper presents children’s accounts from Adelaide, South Australia, about parental job losses from automotive manufacturing: an industry that is being restructured globally. The research is informed by the “new sociology of childhood” and nests within a longitudinal, mixed-method study of 372 displaced workers. We interviewed 35 boys and girls aged 4 to 19 from 16 families. Findings support calls for children’s voices to be heard. Many children did not see the job loss as a major problem, some felt they now had a better life, and many valued not moving for new work. While some reported social, health and financial impacts, others were shielded by parents. Parents consented to their children’s involvement in 23% of in-scope families and those who had moved interstate were not included. Nevertheless, the children’s accounts contribute a better understanding of adult domains, including the value of family-friendly work patterns; they also highlight the benefits of including children’s perspectives on social and economic change. Economic and policy contexts that may have limited the job loss impact include the welfare state, trade unions, a low unemployment rate and government intervention to manage job loss.

Keywords: children, job loss, manufacturing restructure, globalisation, Australia

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article présente des comptes-rendus d’enfants vivants à Adelaïde (Australie Méridionale) qui traitent de la perte d'emploi de leurs parents travaillant dans l’industrie automobile, un secteur en cours de restructuration au niveau mondial. Cette étude se base sur la « nouvelle sociologie de l'enfance » et s’inscrit dans le cadre d’une étude longitudinale de 372 travailleurs déplacés, qui utilise une approche quantitative et qualitative mixte. Nous avons interviewé 35 garçons et filles âgés de 4 à 19 dans 16 familles. Les résultats indiquent qu’il est important de tenir compte de l’avis des enfants. De nombreux enfants interviewés ne n’ont pas perçu la perte d'emploi comme un problème majeur. Certains ont estimé qu’ils avaient maintenant une vie meilleure et beaucoup ont apprécié ne pas avoir à se déplacer pour trouver de nouveaux emplois. Alors que certains ont mentionné des conséquences sociales et financières ainsi que des effets sur la santé, d’autres ont déclaré qu’ils avaient été protégés par leurs parents. Les parents n’ont consenti à la participation de leurs enfants que dans 23 pour cent des cas de familles répondant aux critères de sélection. Les personnes qui ont quitté l’Australie Méridionale n'ont pas été prises en compte dans l’étude. Néanmoins, les comptes-rendus d’enfants contribuent à une meilleure compréhension du domaine des adultes et soulignent les bénéfices d’un aménagement du travail qui convienne aux familles. Ils montrent aussi l’intérêt de connaître la perspective des enfants à ce sujet. Le système de protection sociale, les syndicats, un faible taux de chômage et l'intervention des pouvoirs publics dans la gestion des pertes d’emplois sont les paramètres économiques et politiques qui ont contribué à limiter les effets néfastes des pertes d’emplois.

Mots-clés: enfants, perte d'emploi, fermeture d’usine, restructuration, mondialisation, fabrication, Australie
AUSTRALIAN CHILDREN’S ACCOUNTS OF THE CLOSURE OF A CAR FACTORY: Global restructuring and local impacts

Introduction

This paper presents children’s accounts of the impacts of parental job loss from a car factory in Adelaide, South Australia, on themselves and their family. ‘Job loss’ occurs when employers terminate employment in relation to downsizing or planned closure, which may result from changes in the economy, a company’s organization, or increasing technology use (Parker, Thomas, Ellis & McCarthy 1971). The backdrop of the research is the restructuring of world economies over recent decades as traditional manufacturing in developed countries has wound down, closed or moved offshore. Manufacturing in Australia declined from the early 1960s as service industries gained significance (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2007a). The increasing global mobility of capital and technology means that labour costs and quality now weigh more strongly in companies’ location decisions and capacity for global restructuring (van Liemt 1992); governments either tolerate large scale job losses and argue for market readjustment, or contribute to schemes to support industrial change or planned redundancy. The car industry is being restructured on both meta-regional and international scales (Larsson 2002). In Australia, car manufacturing has been concentrated in particular regions, so that its closure is likely to affect whole regions, and it has traditionally been unionized and had wage rates and benefits that are difficult to replace, especially for those with limited formal education and/or who are long-term employees.

Recent qualitative research on job loss has studied the experiences of workers and their families, with only a few asking children’s views (e.g., Wauchope 1994). In Australia no qualitative studies document children’s accounts of job loss impacts. This paper reviews the literature showing how the traditional quantitative focus on workers is being supplemented by qualitative research that includes their partners. The paper then argues for increased attention to children in research. Next, the paper describes the project within which the children's component nests, and then describes the methodology and results. Finally, it discusses the major themes from
children’s interviews and makes some conclusions about the value of children’s accounts in exploring the global phenomenon of industrial restructuring.

**Background**

**Research on job loss impacts on children**

Most research investigating the impacts of unemployment or job loss has focused on the economic, social and psychological impacts on children and families as measured quantitatively. Such research usually surveys workers (and sometimes also partners/spouses) to explore associations with childhood distress, or changed child or family behaviour or functioning as measured by psychological, behavioural, and academic measures (e.g., Bowman 1988; Broman, Hamilton and Hoffman 1990; Dew, Penkower & Bromet 1991; Kalil & De Leire 2002; Liem & Liem 1988; Rayman 1988; Rege, Telle & Votruba 2007; Voydanoff & Donnelly 1988; Yeung & Hoffert 1998). Increasingly, research incorporates qualitative methods and asks workers and/or sometimes also partners about feelings, reactions and experiences. Researchers have investigated the impact of social and economic change accompanying economic rationalism and globalisation in the 1980s and 1990s associated with large-scale redundancies from one location. Much of this investigated the impact of job loss on the family’s overall functioning and coping mechanisms, but some sought adults’ views about the impacts on children’s lives (e.g., Armstrong 2006; Christoffersen 1994; Gaillie, Marsh & Vogler 1994; Grayson 1983; Karlsen & Mjaavatn 1995; Lobo & Watkins 1995; Morris 1985; Nasman & von Gerber 1996; Perucci & Targ 1988; Vickers & Parris 2007). Yet reviews by Hanisch (1999) and Kalil (2005) argue for more research on the social and psychological impacts of parental job loss on families and children. We argue that this research should also involve children themselves.

**Methods**

**Acknowledging children as active research participants**

Jensen and McKee (2003) note the limited empirical evidence on children’s experiences of and reactions to social transformations. Building on the “new sociology of childhood”, which acknowledges the self-agency of children, is important (MacDougall, Schiller & Darbyshire
2004) and we therefore used qualitative methods and viewed children as active participants in the research, so that we researched with, as much as about, children.

The sample and interview procedures

This study nests within a longitudinal, mixed method and multi-disciplinary study with an initial sample of 372 workers made redundant from a major car factory in southern Adelaide, which collected three waves of survey data and two waves of in-depth interview data. In May 2004 the company announced approximately 700 redundancies from its engine foundry and 400 from its assembly site (Beer et al. 2006). The 372 workers were mostly male (90%), older (mean age 48 years), had lower education levels (51% secondary education or less), and were lower skilled (78%). Three-quarters were married or in a de facto relationship and most had incomes above the local average (AUS $33,412 in 2003-04: ABS 2007b). A large proportion had been with the company for 10 to 20 years (43%), just under a fifth for 20 to 30 years (18%), and 14% for 30 years or more. Of those with children aged 8 to 18 (in scope for the children’s study) 39% had only one breadwinner in the family. Three-quarters of all workers said their family life had been affected in some way by their job loss, either positively or negatively.

The first survey form asked workers about consenting to their children’s participation in a further study. Of the 372 respondents, 194 had children from under age 1 up to 32. Of these, 102 had children in the age range for interviews (8 to 18); an additional nine consented but had children outside this range (mostly under 8). This left 23 families with children in range and consenting to interview (22.5% of 102). There was no statistically significant difference in general or mental health between parents with children in scope who did and did not consent. ¹ This discounts potential sampling bias whereby parents with health problems might be more or less likely to consent to children’s interviews. We likewise tested for differences in intentions to move house after the job loss, and whether families had a single parent or a single breadwinner, and none of these were statistically significant. Two of the 23 workers who consented had moved interstate before the children’s recruitment and the researchers deemed phone interviewing inappropriate with children; another had had their telephone disconnected and another was uncontactable despite repeated calls; one said they were too busy, another said they were busy caring for a disabled child, and one had changed their mind about participating. The research team therefore located and
interviewed 35 boys and girls aged 4 to 19 from 16 families. Children under age 8 were included in interviews if they wanted to sit in with older siblings, and indeed they often wanted, and were able, to make informative comments.

One limitation of the selection process was potential bias from recruiting children via parents. Since the children’s study was nested in the broader study, child recruitment had to be via parents, despite the potential of parents being gatekeepers to recruitment (see MacDougall & Fudge 2001). This is less problematic if researchers can contact children directly via schools (see MacDougall et al 2004), giving them an opportunity to advocate for their own involvement. However, this was impossible in the current study because there was no single school, cluster of schools or other child-focused structure available for recruitment. In contrast with Backett-Milburn and Harden (2004), the broader research project was not designed as a family study; if it had been presented to workers this way then a greater proportion of parents may have consented to their children’s involvement. Women have the major responsibility for child-caring in Australia (Pocock 2003), so greater uptake may also have resulted had we been able to ask mothers about consent; but in our study 90% of the surveyed workers were male.

Table 1 outlines characteristics of the interviewed children. In all cases only one parent lost their job; most interviews were conducted a considerable number of months after the job loss. For confidentiality reasons pseudonyms are used for interview excerpts, except where it was unclear which child was talking, in which case a general indication is given e.g., “younger boy”.

**Table 1: Characteristics of the interviewed children**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Boys</th>
<th>Girls</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4 - 8 years</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 - 13 years</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 - 19 years</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>15</strong></td>
<td><strong>16</strong></td>
<td><strong>35</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Redundant parent**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Boys</th>
<th>Girls</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Father</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>16</strong></td>
<td><strong>19</strong></td>
<td><strong>35</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Children were involved in the study design by conducting a focus group with four girls and four boys aged 10 to 16 to generate the interview questions. In-depth semi-structured interviews were then conducted with children at their home, with a parent either present in the room or (for older children) elsewhere in the house. The ethical norms for research in South Australia are that adults such as parents or teachers should be either nearby or in line-of-sight during children’s interviews. It is therefore normal to find parents nearby during a one-off interview. This is not to say, however, that parents were exerting power over interviews. Often they were out of the room for some time, were passing through, or were engaged in tasks such as housework, and our judgment was that parents were not listening to children’s answers and exerting power. It is also important to acknowledge the common house design in the area, with one large open-plan kitchen/family-area/lounge rather than separate rooms. This leaves the only option for a private interview as the child’s bedroom, which is clearly inappropriate on ethical grounds. However, because these spaces have multiple uses, and there was often a television or radio in the background, it is reasonable to assume that these multiple uses occur with some element of privacy. Our analysis is that our data do reveal children discussing potentially uncomfortable issues, such as negative impacts on parental health. Our reflections are that researchers must negotiate sensitively the potentially competing forces of interviewing in a space encouraging children to provide authentic accounts; ethical norms and requirement for adult presence; house design; and the researcher’s position as a visitor.

Interviewees received a cinema voucher in thanks for participating. Interviews lasted an average of 30 minutes and were audio-recorded alongside field notes. Interviews were analysed to generate codes and themes, using the interview schedule and taking account of issues raised spontaneously. Since interviews were not long and conversations generally not complex, line-by-line coding was conducted directly on the hard copy transcripts; codes were then compared across transcripts and built into themes. The focus group, research approach and interview schedule were approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee at Flinders University. The semi-structured schedule asked: How do you feel about the factory closing? Was there any significant change in your family life because of the job loss of your mum/dad? (Prompt to see if positive, negative or neutral changes). How is your dad/mum coping since they lost their job? Have they been able to find another job? When they lost their job did a lot change around you?
(How? Do you know how it has affected your family financially?). Has it affected how much your parents can buy you, or the places they take you? (How do you feel about that?) Do you get to spend more or less time with your parents? Do you know any people who have had to move house or make big changes? Do you know how other children or families have coped? Have you spoken about it as a family? Is there anything else you would like to tell us? Are there other questions we should have asked you?

**Results**

**How children found out about the planned job loss**

Some children said their parents talked to them about the fact that one of them was going to lose their job, either specifically or during general discussions:

> I sat and listened and they just talked. Normally we talk at tea time and the topic comes up (John Teller, age 16).

> They told us on the last day that it was his last day and he had to look for a new job, and he found a job at [x] (Younger girl, Potter family).

The Cooper and Goodings children had overheard their parents talking, while others, like some adult workers, heard it first through the media:

> I saw it on the news, that lots of people from [the factory] had lost their jobs. And I heard that my mum could choose whether to keep on working or quit. (David Teller, age 12).

> I think it was just a general conversation that we had [with our parents] because it had been on the news and in the paper and all that. We knew it was going to close soon, but not when (Older boy, Tippett family).

One older boy understood quite a degree of complexity about job loss and workplace relations:

> From what I know, people were given the option of taking the package there and then, or wanting to stay and taking the risk of possibly being sacked and getting no package. I think what she [Mum] believed after that, was that she’d been put on the list to go (John Teller, age 16).

**Feelings about the factory closing**
When children were asked to think about first hearing about the job losses and when they actually occurred, most did not describe it as a memorable or negative event for themselves:

It was pretty much the same, we didn’t find too much different... I suppose there was some worry that he wouldn’t get another job (Matthew Cousins, age 11).

I noticed he was looking for a job, that’s about it. He wrote on the calendar “job interview” (Older girl, Cooper family).

Some said they or the family were “sad” or “upset” because they did not know what would happen. Others – mainly older children – talked about their or their parents’ feelings of uncertainty about the future:

It was a bit scary cos he didn’t find a job for a while. (Younger girl, Woods family)

I didn’t know how she was going to get another job... she didn’t do Year 12 so it would have been harder for her to get another job (David Teller, age 12).

I think it was hard on everyone. Just the money aspect of it, where was our next meal going to come from and all that. Just when it was leading up to dad losing his job, that’s when I was starting to get worried, would he get another job? I kept to myself and knew mum and dad would figure out something, but still worried (Older boy, Potter family).

A younger boy in one family said he hadn’t been particularly concerned because “I wasn’t into jobs... I thought it would be all right” (Younger boy, Potter family). Some said they now had a better life, while another said she trusted things would work out and her parents would organise things. The Johnson children (aged 10, 12 and 14) said they were less worried once the job loss actually happened and that they felt no need to worry once they saw their dad was less worried. One father present at interview clarified, however, that workers had suspected for several years that the factory would close, so that it might already have been in children’s minds and had therefore not been a complete shock. This was also mentioned by one of the girls (aged 16) in the Cooper family who said “we’d been expecting it for a while, so we knew what was going to happen”.

**Impact on social networks**

The most commonly noted social change was missing the factory’s Christmas Parties:
We do get to miss out on the parties that were really fun... every year... You just go into the [factory] and look around at what they do at work and get a little showbag. They show you some cars and how they make them (Matthew Cousins, age 11).

One mother explained that the Christmas Parties had been a major social event in the children’s year: the company would hire a big park or fairground for thousands of workers and their families.

A few children were sad because they or their parent would not see workmates as frequently:

I did feel a bit sad because Dad had lots of friends at [the factory] and they felt like part of the family. We knew them pretty well (Younger girl, Woods family).

However, few knew of other children whose parents had left the factory. One boy had only had a superficial conversation with children on the bus (Younger boy, Potter family), and another (aged 7) vaguely remembered a girl telling his school class about her dad’s job loss. Justine Goodings, aged 14, said a friend’s uncle worked at the factory but had not lost his job, and one boy said he would not discuss his feelings with other children anyway. Most children interviewed did not report having mixed with, or knowing what happened to, other workers’ children except at major events like the Christmas Party.

How mum/dad reacted to the job loss

a) The redundant parent

Some children were aware that the job loss affected their parents’ mood, even if parents tried to hide this. The Johnson children (aged 10, 12 and 14) talked about dad being “grumpy”, “sad” or “moody” for several months before leaving. The Teller boys believed their mum had wanted to stay at the factory so was sad to leave, but they also perceived mixed feelings in understanding that she hadn’t wanted to stay either in case she got sacked without a package.

Some older children were aware of parental stress from looking for new work, from the uncertainty about finding new work, or from being in new work with worse conditions (eg longer hours and less pay). The Davidson children, aged 14 and 16, had noticed their dad’s insomnia becoming worse since the job loss, while Laura Matheson, aged 14, said the main change was
her dad being more tired now he had further to travel to work and because he was not particularly happy in his new job.

Although the father in the Potter family felt he had been less grumpy since leaving, his daughters (aged 10 and 11) said they noticed no difference, while the older children in the Cooper family felt that there had been some positive impacts:

I think he became more excited because he was doing something [study] that he wanted to do. The only negative thing that I can think of [is] he might be a bit stressful at times... like when his exams come up (Older girl, Cooper family).

[Mum comments: Dad was really worried about losing his job and what was going to happen]. Oh, I didn’t know that (James Thorngrove, age 7).

He didn’t like it to start off with, but he really liked having time away from work, it sort of relaxed him. He’s still happy now but he’s had his time off. He doesn’t get a lot of time off now (Justine Goodings, age 14).

Others felt differently about the job losses once their parent found new work:

I just think Mum’s a lot happier where she is now. It’s all in the past now (John Teller, age 16).

b) The other parent

Children also observed job loss impacts on their other parent:

Mum was pretty happy that we could go [on holiday] to Tasmania (Older girl, Cooper family).

Some noticed negative impacts from their other parent worrying about the future or the pressures of increasing their own paid work, rather than worry about the actual news of the loss:

Mum was shocked but I don’t think she was that upset. We didn’t have as much money and it stressed out my mum a bit cos she had to work more till my dad found another job. She was working every day except Saturday and Sunday, but sometimes she had to work Saturday as well. She started work a lot earlier in the mornings, about 6am, and then wouldn’t get home till 6pm (Justine Goodings, age 14).
Ricky Thorngrove (age 10) had noticed his mother being more tired from increasing her paid work to full-time (and from 1 to 3 jobs) in response to financial uncertainty. While the children saw their mother more now that she worked at their school, they saw her less at home as she needed daytime naps to recover from the increased time in paid work. The Davidson teenagers said their mother’s usual panic attacks had worsened since their father’s job loss. One mother in particular had not seen any benefit in her husband being around the house more:

> Mum was frustrated cos dad was around so much. Me and mum like our time away from Dad. He gets very frustrating, pushes you to do things, rushes you. And he sits down and pokes us cos he’s got no-one else to talk to (Justine Goodings, age 14).

Some children had not noticed much difference:

> I didn’t see much [change]. I think she worked later a bit (David Teller, age 12).

c) The parental relationship

Children in one family (the Samsons, aged 12 and 18) observed that the job loss had affected both parents, who had argued more because of the stress. However, the older daughter said she had brought her parents together to discuss the issues. Otherwise, most children did not mention changes to the parental relationship, but parents may have hidden this from their children.

Changes to family life

a) Amount of time and time of day spent with parents

The main change children reported were changes to the family’s daily or weekly routine, particularly the times of day when parents were at home or work. This depended on whether the parent had found new work and whether the other parent’s paid/unpaid work routine had changed.

Where workers had not yet been able, or had not wanted, to find another job, children often noticed that the redundant parent was “around more”, they sometimes had more time with them, and generally they liked this:

> It’s a better life... cos he’s home more... He used to be home when we went to school and he never used to be home after that, only when he had days off. So now we see him more (Matthew Cousins, age 11).
We play a lot of sport and Mum not having a job just freed up a lot of time. Now she’s rushing and stressed out more [now she’s got another job] (John Teller, age 16).

He was home more and we got to spend time with him when we got home from school... Since he’s been home we’ve all gotten to connect more and we play games together (Younger girl, Potter family).

For some children this was a permanent change:

Now it’s even better cos he’s got his own business and he works at home. So if we want to do something with him we can just go out there [to his shed]. He fixed my skateboard for me today. When he usually came home he had a sleep, he was on nightshift (James Thorngrove, age 7).

For teenage children, job loss or changed work hours did not necessarily mean more time together:

We noticed he was around [laughs], but we spend most of the time with friends (Older girl, Cooper family).

The Potter girls (aged 10 and 11), whose dad had worked the afternoon shift (3pm to 11pm), found that his new earlier shift meant he was now around at times which they felt offered more quality interaction. Others were disappointed that they now saw their father less. Men who had worked on the early shift (7am to 3pm) had often collected children after school, or were home afternoons and evenings (although this had apparently only happened since regular overtime had disappeared). In the Johnson family the father’s new work hours (9am to 5pm) and workdays had changed family time in several ways:

We don’t see him as much. He’s working longer hours, and he works on Saturdays. He used to take us to sport, now he sometimes takes us if he’s not working. He [used to pick] us up from school [every day]. It didn’t really affect me cos I catch the bus but these two [younger siblings] now go to Nana’s and Papa’s (Older boy, Johnson family).

The Samson children reported their family’s total reorganisation since their mother had felt the need to return to paid work after 17 years out of the workforce. They disliked her now not being with them during school holidays. The most consistent finding, however, was that children appreciated more time with fathers, expressed as time in general rather than tied to particular activities or outings.
b) Desire to maintain continuity

All children interviewed appreciated not having to change house, schools or friendship groups because of the job loss. The Davidson children said the job loss had forced their parents to reconsider their private school fees, and the children had been relieved when the parents decided they were still affordable because otherwise they would have moved school and lost friends. Cassie Samson, aged 18, said her family had trialed a move to another state (Queensland) and that any permanent move would have meant disrupting her final year of high school and her relationship with her boyfriend. She was therefore pleased that her mother had disliked being away so the family decided not to move. Some children echoed their parents’ comments about arranging things deliberately so that children’s lives were not unduly affected by the job loss:

> It wasn’t too much different for me. I just kept going to school and doing what I did (Matthew Cousins, age 11).

**Impacts of changing finances**

Most children did not notice reductions to the family budget. However, the girls in the Samson, Davidson and Cooper families observed that their mothers had felt increased pressure to budget well and watch family expenditure. Most children did not feel their parents had bought them less since the job loss, and some children were pleased if they thought the redundancy payout might bring one-off or ongoing benefits:

> Our house is a lot better than we used to have. We improved it [using the redundancy payout for renovations] (Matthew Cousins, age 11).

> I felt a bit excited cos I knew we’d get something out of it, like a holiday... We went to Tasmania (Older girl, Cooper family)

Feelings could also be mixed and some children felt that temporary or permanent changes to the family income had implications for regular or special outings, activities or pocket money:

> It wasn’t too bad but we didn’t go out to dinner as much. We had to have a bit of a budget (Younger girl, Woods family)

> Mum wasn’t earning as much money... so we had to cut back on a few things... we didn’t get any special things in the lunch box. But it wasn’t much cut-back really. We didn’t stop any of [our sport] (John Teller, age 16).
I didn’t get pocket money because we didn’t have the money to give me, and I couldn’t do the leisure activities that I like to do… I used to go to the movies every weekend and I couldn’t go shopping (Justine Goodings, age 14, only child).

One of the Cooper girls said the family had become more money-conscious once they knew about the job loss, and some children had wanted to help out using their own money:

I knew that, because I have a job, I’d have to pay for more stuff out of my own money. I do a paper round… Going to the cinema and that, we could pay for it out of our own money instead of mum and dad paying… or we go halves (Older girl, Cooper family).

I did help out mum and dad a bit cos I do have quite a lot of money. People give us money, like Grandma, birthdays. We just lend money and then they [mum and dad] pay us back (Younger girl, Woods family).

Since the job loss one teenage girl said she had turned 16 and this had changed how the family received government family payments (Centrelink), so that she now regularly phoned in to report her own casual income (AUS $30 per fortnight). The older children in the Samson family were aware that their family had had difficulties with Centrelink because one parent was now out of work. However, Justine’s mother felt that children might have less fear of job loss if they ever faced it themselves because they would know that “dad got through it OK”.

Discussion

Our results extend the few studies which have investigated children’s accounts of parental job loss in middle-class professional families, to children of workers in the automotive industry. These children were aware of family strategies to adjust to job loss, were able to perceive parents hiding negative feelings about the changes, noticed changes to parental relationships, and reported both detrimental and beneficial impacts on themselves and their family. Children were also well aware that their parents’ employment status has a significant impact on their lifestyle. The negative factors noted were not considerable and none reported a dramatic decline in living standards. However, none had been dislocated from their home or school and experienced stability related to school, home, suburb and friends. For some children job loss was even followed by a better life, after some initial worries. Some talked about “going with the flow”, going along for the ride, or moving on to a better life. This may represent a family story or a
coping strategy used to interpret change positively. However, we were not able to contact families who had moved house and recommend that further research does so.

Wauchope (1994) found that parents mediate how children experience parental job loss, and our results augment this research. Some parents present or nearby during children’s interviews commented on their concerted effort to shield the children from potentially negative effects by trying to maintain as normal a life as possible, for example by reworking the family budget or by discussing the issue after children were in bed. While some children heard the news of the job losses in a sudden way in the media, others heard it from their parents. Furthermore, workers had suspected for some time that the job losses would occur and so families may have had time to prepare, including time to think about how to minimise impacts. A reciprocal effect of parental protection was trust by some children that their parents would make good decisions to help the family cope, and that their role was to trust their parents and do what they could to help.

Children in the study were not just passive beneficiaries of their parents' coping mechanisms. We found that children not only accepted financial changes for the family’s good but also took active steps to contribute themselves, consistent with one principle of the new sociology of childhood, that children are active agents (MacDougall, Schiller & Darbyshire 2004). In our study, children of the factory workers were active in managing job loss effects on the family, and thus were similar to the middle-class children in Wauchope’s (1994) study with no previous experience of paternal job loss, who experienced more threatening changes and yet were more active in managing stress than were working class children with experience of repeated parental job loss. Pocock and Clarke’s (2004) observation, that children value having parental time rather than receiving goods or money in compensation for time, was evident for our children in speaking of the value of having parents around at times when they could interact. They presented this as the value of “just being there” time, particularly with fathers. These accounts provide good guidance for the value of family-friendly working patterns and indicate the benefits of gaining children’s perspectives on making workplaces more family-friendly. Children’s accounts of daily routines and parents’ work hours showed that the factory’s shift system allowed fathers’ more involvement in children’s care than do standard 9am to 5pm jobs.
Methodologically, our findings support calls for children’s voices to be heard (Dockett 2000). The children in our study appreciated being looked after by parents, but far from being passive actors they initiated strategies. Furthermore, younger and older children alike were able to make insightful contributions, counteracting the view held by some that children cannot contribute to debates about theirs or other childrens’ needs because they lack the capacity for abstract thinking that characterises later adolescence and adulthood (MacDougall et al. 2004). Furthermore, the fact that children both responded well to interview questions and wrote the questions themselves contradicts the suspicion that standard research methods may not be applicable to children and that instead the opinions of significant adults such as parents and service providers should be sort (Kalnins et al. 1992; Sandbaek 1999).

In terms of practice implications, children are often treated like “mini-adults” in human service campaigns and interventions (Kalnins et al. 1992). However, children in our study spoke about the importance of remaining in local areas, school and friendship networks, and this suggests that government policy which sees relocation assistance as a key way to help redundant workers find new work (Costello 2006; Foley 2007) may be problematic for their children. We suggest the desirability of extending the scope of child-centred research beyond the narrow concentration on matters directly affecting children, such as child care, education, play and sport (Darbyshire et al. 2005). Children in our study contributed to our knowledge of what might be considered more adult domains, such as family functioning, government policy about redundancy, and the impact of working hours and working conditions on family wellbeing. In this way, our dialogue with children about quality of life contributes to what has been described as not only a basic right, but also a precondition for the promotion of health and wellbeing (de Winter et al. 1999).

**Conclusion**

Our findings must be considered against the economic and policy environment within which the job losses occurred in 2004 and 2005, a time when the automotive industry was experiencing a downturn, but the Australian economy was growing and there was significant real income growth and improved productivity growth (ABS 2007c), and a low unemployment rate (ABS 2007a). This increased the chances of re-employment for redundant workers, and may explain
why news about the job losses was not a major event for these children or parents. Experiences might have been different if parents were losing work at a time of general economic downturn and high unemployment.

The other crucial factors in explaining the relative lack of major impacts on the children may be that Australia has a welfare state providing payments to workers experiencing structural job loss, which provides a strong safety net for families. Furthermore, the company provided reasonably generous payments that resulted, in part, from trade union negotiations. The situation of these children contrasts strongly with that of children in middle- to low- income countries where trade unions have no power and welfare state safety nets are non-existent (Heymann 2006 provides accounts of families and children in these settings). Research by Kalil & De Leire (2002) also suggests that paternal job loss is more detrimental on families of lower socio-economic status. The accounts of the children in our Australian study therefore provide a powerful argument in favour of supportive institutions.

Our research reflections also add to the skills and strategies for research on children’s accounts of social and economic change. We did not include children in families who had moved house, who may have experienced greater disruption to their lives, and future researchers may want to include a travel budget to visit children living at a distance. Our study also highlights some limits to methodological flexibility of a children’s study nesting within a larger adult study rather than being designed in its own right. A higher response rate may also have been obtained if the main-carer had been asked, or if we had had flexibility to recruit children other than initially via parents. One of the study’s strengths was that children’s focus groups helped develop the interview schedule and that, despite parental presence during interviews, children did discuss both negative and positive experiences. However, we suggest the need to negotiate ethical spaces within the home environment which allow children to talk without parents exerting influence.

This study has reported the accounts of children from families with above average incomes who experienced job loss in an affluent country with a welfare state, where trade unions offer protection to workers’ rights, and with currently high economic growth and low unemployment rates. We found these children were shielded from many impacts of job loss in a way that is not
common globally. The global challenge is to make this experience available to all children. As one boy said when asked what governments can do: “Try and give the parents a payout that will cover their children as well. Try to help the families after the plant closes”.

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Notes

1. General health was measured with the SF-1 where people self-identify their health in general as being ‘poor’, ‘fair’, ‘good’, ‘very good’ or excellent. In accordance with standard practice people were grouped as having either ‘good’/‘very good’/excellent health or ‘fair’/‘poor’ health. Mental health was measured using the GHQ-12 (General Health Questionnaire). On the GHQ scores range from 0-12, with higher scores indicating worse mental health. We used the threshold of 2 or more to indicate at least minor psychiatric disorder, based on recommendations by Goldberg et al. (1998) who examined GHQ thresholds in a range of countries and primary care settings. They recommend that if the setting’s mean is below 1.85 then a threshold of 2 or more should be used. According to the 1997 Australia National Health Survey (ABS 1997) the national mean was 0.85, so we applied a “2 or greater” threshold for our sample.
References


