
A Critical Perspective of Contemporary Unemployment Policy and Practices

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Abstract

This article explores the challenges of unemployment via the lens of critical psychology. The conventional discourse on unemployment is critiqued, revealing ways in which conventional policies and practices serve to further marginalize the lives of the unemployed and impede the development of ethical, effective, and empathic individual interventions and structural changes. In the practice realm, the importance of inclusion of mental health treatments in work-based interventions is highlighted based on the prevalence of psychological problems as a direct outcome of unemployment. New directions in research and public policy emerging from a critical analysis of existing are also outlined.

Keywords

class-related career issues, career barriers, unemployment, career constructive approach/post modern approaches

The recent rise in unemployment has placed the question of understanding the role of work in people's lives at the forefront of public policy and social scientific research

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(Blustein, 2008; Paul & Moser, 2009; Peck, 2010). However, unemployment has been constant in most market economies for centuries (Dooley, 2003). As detailed in this article, unemployment, for most people, involves predictable and unpredictable transitions between work and nonwork roles in the economic market place. In keeping with the cohering theme of this special issue, we use a critical psychological lens to explore contemporary unemployment policy and practice. As we propose in this article, a critical psychology perspective provides a means of unpacking some fundamental assumptions in the unemployment literature, which have framed this line of work for decades. As reflected in the use of the term “critical,” we examine the current role of psychology and counseling in the discourse on unemployment with the goal of moving toward a more critical formulation of the effects of unemployment in people’s lives. In this article, we provide a critical analysis of ways in which our field can more effectively, empathically, and ethically intervene in the lives of people without access to work.

Transition Between Work and Nonwork in the Market Place

As Richardson (in press) argued, working can take place both in the market place and in caregiving contexts. With this caveat in mind, we refer to unemployment in this article as the lack of access to market work. While both care work and market work are central to psychological health (Blustein, 2008; Richardson, 2010), the focus in this article is on working in the economic market place.

As Fouad and Bynner (2008) noted, the movement from employment to unemployment (and vice versa) entails a significant life transition that can evoke substantive aversive outcomes for individuals and communities (Blustein, 2008; Jahoda, 1988; Wilson, 1996). Indeed, as the labor market becomes increasingly unstable, the transition between employment and unemployment will likely become more common, and in our view, increasingly challenging (Reich, 2010). As we detail in this article, a critical view of the intellectual foundations of the unemployment literature in psychology may yield important insights into the assumptions that have guided public policy and counseling practice to date.

In the Fouad and Bynner (2008) analysis of work-based transitions, the importance of the context, broadly conceived, is detailed. One of the major contextual factors is the question of voluntary versus involuntary job loss. In their discussion of work-based transitions, Fouad and Bynner included gender, access to the opportunity structure, family influences, and access to cultural and social capital in their conceptualization of the context. In addition to these community-based contextual factors, Fouad and Bynner noted that relationships within one’s proximal environment play important roles in how people manage work-based transitions. When considered collectively in light of the unemployment literature in psychology (e.g., Dooley, 2003; Fleig-Palmer, Luthans, & Mandernach, 2009; Paul & Moser, 2009), the context of the work and nonwork transition contributes significantly to

how people adapt to the painful experience of job loss. (Consistent with our focus in this article, nonwork refers to the experience of not working within the market place.) Indeed, a focus on the context of the unemployment experience points to the importance of the critical perspective that we adopt in this article and in this special section.

Another relevant approach articulated by Dooley (2003) is the notion that the space between work and nonwork is best understood as a continuum rather than discrete states. For example, some unemployed individuals may obtain part-time work, consulting projects, or work in nontraditional venues (black market activities) as a means of reconnecting to the workforce. A critical analysis of unemployment needs to encompass the broad spectrum of contexts between work and nonwork. In this article, we focus primarily on the nonwork pole of this continuum, which is the location currently of the crisis that is affecting people around the globe (Reich, 2010).

Moreover, we argue that unemployment is a consistent crisis that is often overlooked in times of more robust economies; indeed, an unemployment rate of 5% is equally catastrophic for those individuals who cannot gain access to market work (e.g., Dooley, 2003; Hanisch, 1999; Jahoda, 1988). Furthermore, unemployment has differentially affected nations and regions around the globe, with countries in the southern hemisphere facing far more unemployment than many nations in the northern hemisphere (Marfleet, 2006). As such, our position is that a critical analysis of the unemployment literature in psychology is relevant beyond the fluctuations of the market place, beyond the time frame of the current recession, and beyond the confines of North America, Europe, and Pacific Rim nations.

The Nature of Unemployment

A considerable body of literature in the social sciences has identified the aversive consequence of unemployment in the United States, particularly in relation to mental health and the welfare of communities (Paul & Moser, 2009; Wilson, 1996). Long-standing mental health consequences to both individuals and society have been documented due to prolonged unemployment (Hanisch, 1999; Jahoda, 1988; Paul & Moser, 2009). Recent integrative reviews of the literature reveal that unemployment is a significant cause of mental illness (Dooley, 2003; Paul & Moser, 2009). As Paul and Moser noted, “distress is among unemployed people the consequence of a lack of five latent functions of employment (time structure, social contact, collective purpose, status, and activity), which correspond to important psychological needs” (p. 265). Employment has the potential to provide these five latent functions, which provide a sense of structure and meaning in life.

Especially among the younger generation, an extended period of unemployment causes long-lasting effects in health, mental health, behavior, and earnings (Peck, 2010). Due to a combination of a decrease in financial resources and an increase in stress levels, the physical well-being of the jobless significantly worsens. Peck argued that if recent graduates experience an extended period of joblessness, their

sense of self and their mental health is negatively impacted, which has ripple effects for society at large (Peck, 2010). Moreover, these cohorts of individuals have tended to struggle more with obtaining and sustaining employment throughout their lives in comparison to their peers who have been able to enter the workforce more readily in their emerging adult years.

Further underscoring the conclusions articulated by Peck is a national longitudinal study that found that individuals who experienced an extended period of unemployment during adolescence and early adulthood were more likely to abuse alcohol at middle age and show symptoms of depression later in life (Mossakowski, 2008). Even after they find jobs, those now employed are likely to maintain the unhealthy lifestyle and negative psychological feelings that developed when they were out of work. Furthermore, elderly American men who were unemployed in their 20s and 30s during the Great Depression have had a greater tendency to be withdrawn, unmotivated, directionless, and lacking confidence in comparison to their peers from a historical time frame with less unemployment (Wickrama, Lorenz, Fang, Elder, & Abraham, 2006). While the implications of the summary presented by Peck are broader than the scope of this article, the relevant observation is that unemployment is a major and painful event that can often lead to life changes well beyond the period of nonwork in the marketplace.

In addition to the psychological consequences of unemployment noted previously, research emerging from sociological and public policy analyses reveals that unemployment is associated with predictable declines in the welfare of communities (e.g., Wilson, 1996). Wilson's classic study of growing unemployment in urban Chicago revealed that the loss of jobs was related to breakdowns in family structure, increased crime, health problems, substance abuse, and violence. In effect, entire communities seemed to lose their capacity to provide a secure base for adults and children.

In sum, the psychological sequelae of unemployment are clearly daunting. At the same time, some economists view a modest percentage of unemployment as a natural and potentially positive by-product of free market capitalism (see Friedman, 2005; Shipler, 2004; and Spring, 1998 for a review and critique of these positions). In contrast to this rather optimistic view of unemployment by some macro-level economists and politicians, the vast majority of evidence points to pervasive and predictable problems that affect individuals, families, and communities as a direct result of unemployment (Paul & Moser, 2009; Wilson, 1996).

Despite the gravity of the social and psychological consequences of lack of work, little attention has been devoted to *critically* examining the assumptions and conventional practices with respect to research and theory of unemployment. For example, an analysis of the literature in psychology on unemployment reveals a prevailing tendency to use logical positivist approaches that highlight the role of individual characteristics as sources of barriers and resources of individuals adapting to unemployment (see Paul & Moser, 2009, for a review of the recent literature). As we argue in this article, we believe that the individualistic focus of psychological studies of unemployment serves to collude with broader structural forces that sustain

unemployment within market-based economies. In our view, unemployment is a phenomenon that is located within social, political, and psychological contexts within a highly complex network of relationships and broader social and economic forces (cf. Reich, 2010; Wilson, 1996). Despite attempts to simplify the understanding of unemployment, we believe that more useful analyses require the complex intellectual lens offered by critical psychology.

Critical Analysis of Work-Based Interventions for the Unemployed

The critical analysis of the state of practice, research, and policy in this article is grounded in Prilleltensky's (1997) Emancipatory-Communitarian (EC) approach. His framework has its origins in communitarian perspectives (e.g., Etzioni, 1991) that emphasize mutual determination, caring, compassion, and democratic participation to balance the rights of the individual with an obligation to contribute to the betterment of a community. Although Prilleltensky noted that these perspectives are an improvement over conventional approaches, he argued that communitarian perspectives tend to ignore larger systemic forces that affect community well-being. This limitation highlighted the necessity of adopting the tenets of liberation psychology (e.g., Martín-Baro, 1994) and emancipatory pedagogy (Freire, 1973) respectively, to establish a framework for critically analyzing the political and social structures within society and extend a moral obligation to oppressed groups. These considerations form the core of our position on the current state of the study of unemployment and our argument for the field to embrace a more transformative paradigm to craft future directions in counseling, policy, and research.

Conventional work-based counseling interventions have been criticized for their emphasis on individual change without critical analyses of the sociopolitical context, thus making career counseling most applicable to those people with the greatest volition, autonomy, and privilege (Blustein, 2006). Furthermore, traditional career counseling theories alone are not sufficient to account for the dynamic nature of work that characterizes the current experiences of many workers (Blustein, 2010; Dooley, 2003; Stead, 2004; Wilson, 1996). DeBell (2006) also highlighted that macro-level forces, such as globalization and the spread of free-market capitalism, when coupled with technological advances, serve to erode the job security of many workers regardless of skill level, occupational status, or educational attainment. However, DeBell noted that those workers who are unskilled or semiskilled are especially vulnerable to these forces, which places them at a distinct disadvantage when seeking new employment opportunities.

A Critically Informed Perspective of Career Counseling

Career counseling with unemployed individuals has tended to focus on enhancing clients' abilities to identify a marketable skill set that can be utilized in searching

for and acquiring a new job (e.g., Bolles, 2010; Jome & Phillips, 2005; Saks, 2005). As Blustein (2006) noted, these approaches, while popular within the discipline, may be most applicable to a subset of unemployed workers who are relatively well educated and have significant volition in their work lives. In light of DeBell's (2006) review of the changing face of work in a global context, it may be harder for workers to transfer skill sets from one place of employment to another, especially as technology rapidly evolves and globalization results in many jobs moving overseas. Moreover, the necessity of retraining and reeducation, which DeBell highlighted, may not be feasible for marginalized workers who lack the resources to pursue these possibilities. For example, let us consider the experiences of a hotel housekeeper whose union job is replaced by nonunion workers who are hired with one third less pay and no health insurance. As the hotel industry moves to nonunionized workers, many of the housekeeping staff will have a very difficult challenge in locating work with the similar salary and benefits, particularly without marketable skills. Thus, differential access to opportunity and the changing nature of work require counselors to refine how they help clients transition between jobs and the recommendations they make. Given the focus of traditional career counseling on clients with a relative degree of choice in their lives, we adopt the term "work-based interventions," which includes traditional career counseling techniques, but also provides a wider scope to encompass the full array of workers and those who strive to work.

A related area of inquiry has focused on the interpersonal skills and personality attributes that allow job seekers to be successful in identifying and pursuing job opportunities (Jome & Phillips, 2005). Trends in the literature have suggested that successful workers are motivated, conscientious, resilient, and self-confident (Fleig-Palmer et al., 2009; Solberg et al., 1994). Individuals who are able to demonstrate these capacities are more likely to find rewarding employment possibilities (Werbelt, 2000). While this sort of project is important, the emphasis on individual attributes remains as the focal point of inquiry, thereby neglecting the broader factors that are creating new generations of unemployed people. Furthermore, much of the research has focused on self-efficacy within the context of career opportunities (Lent, 2005). However, as detailed by Blustein, McWhirter, and Perry (2005), self-efficacy research and practice assumes a level of volition and access to resources that may not be viable for many unemployed individuals. Indeed, the focus on self-efficacy as a target for work-based interventions, while often helpful and indicated, underscores the prevalence of culturally encapsulated and individualistic practice approaches to the challenges of being unemployed. The reality that work may be neither intrinsically meaningful nor fulfilling should be considered by counselors who aim to provide social support and increase the self-efficacy of their clients. An additional concern with contemporary practice focusing on personality attributes and behavioral tendencies of unemployed individuals (Tango & Kolodinsky, 2004) is the relative neglect of the role of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and other devalued identities in the search for stable employment.

Using an EC framework, Blustein et al. (2005) proposed that counselors seek to empower clients and change systems that keep marginalized clients in a disempowered position. In addition, Blustein (2006), drawing from Prilleltensky (1997) as well as Freire (1993), posited that counselors should consider fostering critical consciousness in their clients. Critical consciousness, which builds on Freire's work (1993), refers to the intellectual and emotional state in which individuals can read and react to broader social and political processes that contribute to their oppressed conditions (Diemer & Blustein, 2006). Doing so helps to free clients from self-blame and makes them more aware of the systemic and structural barriers that limit their vocational options. Optimally, a critically conscious population of unemployed individuals has the potential to develop advocacy groups, political action committees, and other social justice-oriented organizations designed to change the structures that sustain pervasive unemployment. (Further discussions of the macro-level implications of a critical perspective are presented later in this article.)

The Elephant in the Career Counseling Consulting Room: Mental Health Challenges

As detailed earlier, unemployment negatively affects mental health in profound and often long-lasting ways (Paul & Moser, 2009). This suggests that work with unemployed clients should address the emotional toll of being unemployed along with more pragmatic considerations related to seeking new training and employment opportunities. We argue that maintaining the view that work-based interventions are separate from mental health practice serves to sustain the illusion that unemployment has a circumscribed impact that can be ameliorated simply by obtaining another job (cf. Blustein, 2010). As a means of critiquing this assumption, we argue that counseling efforts need to affirm the fact that mental health consequences are a natural by-product of unemployment (Paul & Moser, 2009). Assuming that career counselors have skills in treating mental health issues, we propose that integrative approaches be utilized.

A compelling literature is emerging, which has highlighted that work and personal lives are generally treated as separate domains and that this false dichotomy fails to give sufficient attention to the meaning that individuals derive from their work lives (Betz & Corning, 1993; Blustein & Spengler, 1995). Richardson (1996) contended that psychotherapists who ignore or minimize the importance of work in their clients' lives may fail to attend to the role of sociopolitical barriers to well-being. Increasingly, scholars and practitioners are calling for an integration of career counseling and psychotherapy (Blustein, 2006, 2010; Richardson, 1996; Robitschek & DeBell, 2002) in light of the growing recognition of the centrality of work in people's lives and the acknowledgement that concerns about work affect well-being. Betz and Corning (1993) also argued that an integration of these two areas would be more consistent with the holistic philosophy of counseling psychology. The findings from the meta-analysis by Paul and Moser (2009) support these

calls for an integrative approach, given that unemployment was shown to be directly related to mental health outcomes. In this case, a critical analysis of counseling interventions for unemployed clients points to a body of literature that is well suited to transform individual psychological interventions.

As an example of an integrative mental health/work-based intervention, let us consider the plight of a 35-year-old African American sheet-metal worker who is laid off from a construction job, after 15 continuous years of market work with the same employer. After 14 months of unemployment, the client becomes increasingly depressed and self-deprecating, characterized by agitation, increased sleep, and a loss of interest in pleasurable activities. In addition, the client questions whether his identification with his racial identity as an African American may be reducing his opportunities for employment, stating that perhaps he should start “acting White.” Using an integrative approach, as detailed by Blustein (2006), the counselor might explore the client’s belief system, providing alternative explanations for the unemployment—in effect, reducing the self-blame and enhancing critical consciousness. As part of this intervention, the counselor can explore the client’s racial identity and validate his concerns about racism in society, and in particular, in the unequal distribution of employment across racial and ethnic groups. In addition, the counselor can provide traditional mental health services to treat the depression, including relationally oriented treatment (Blustein, 2010), which can help the client to connect to needed social support and to self-soothing practices. In short, the treatment blends the focus on helping the client to transform his self-doubt and self-castigation to a perspective that implicates the broader community in creating and tolerating vast numbers of unemployed people. Moreover, the integration of mental health treatment deals with the very real consequences of unemployment, thereby enhancing the client’s support systems and resilience in the face of hardship.

Critical Analysis of Research and Future Directions

Psychological research on unemployment has cut across the social sciences with the intention of understanding the nature of unemployment, both from micro and macro perspectives (e.g., Dooley, 2003; Friedland & Price, 2003). Unemployment also has been studied in other social science fields, such as sociology (e.g., Kalleberg, 2008; Wilson, 1996). For the most part, these studies have utilized quantitative methodologies that fall under logical positivist or post-positivist paradigms relying heavily on statistical inference (most typically derived from analyses of self-report measures) to arrive at conclusions (Paul & Moser, 2009; Pernice, 1996). As a result of the reliance on statistical techniques, quantitative approaches tend to present findings that can be replicated and generalized across populations but at the expense of fully capturing the lived experiences of individual participants (Fryer, 1992). The distance created between researchers and participants may be especially problematic when studying the work transitions of marginalized groups. These individuals’ experiences already

tend to be denied or minimized within society; from a critical perspective, we argue that the use of quantitative methods risks reproducing these experiences of marginalization because the work narratives of these individuals are limited to the language of self-report measures rather than reflecting their lived experiences.

As an alternative to the relatively distant stance of positivist researchers, Blustein (2006) argued in favor of an “experience-near” approach to developing and designing research and intervention projects. However, an “experience-near” approach favoring qualitative methods does not go far enough in helping psychologists to move toward what Martín-Baro called the “new horizon.” Similarly, Nightingale and Neilands (1997) argued that the value in research is in its ability to both identify and deconstruct oppressive systems. Research as it stands now, even when discovery oriented, is largely aimed at illuminating the experiences of the oppressed but may not be accompanied by an explicit goal of social transformation.

Critically minded research must capture the tension between what is and what could be. In our view, it is necessary but not sufficient to call attention to political and social injustice. Voices of opposition must be accompanied by action aimed to overturn oppressive systems (Rappaport & Stewart, 1997). This behooves researchers to shed post-positivist assumptions embedded within society’s status quo and the assumptions of dominant discourse within career development in favor of embracing research defined by what Fine (2006) called its ability to successfully awaken the reader’s sense of obligation to transform social injustice rather than simply watching it unfold. As we argue in this article, research thus far in the study of unemployment has tended to watch social injustice as it has unfolded. It is time to shed our illusions of objectivity in favor of values and actions that are clearly in service of marginalized groups most in need of a just society and equal access to a meaningful work life.

An example of a qualitative study that would emerge from a critical analysis of psychological discourse on unemployment might examine the extent to which unemployed individuals experience and internalize social barriers. Interviews and observations of unemployed individuals seeking to construct meaning about their unemployment experience might shed light on the extent to which social barriers, such as racism, sexism, ageism, and classism, have affected their job loss and job search. In addition to the very real experiences with these social obstacles, it is likely that many of the unemployed might internalize aspects of these aversive social messages, further debilitating their resilience. Reporting the narratives, in the participants’ voices, optimally to a broad audience (perhaps via a trade book as in the influential book by Wilson, 1996) has the potential to expose the public to the maldistribution of employment and the degree to which social barriers further debilitate an already beleaguered population. Moreover, both the researchers and the participants might work in tandem to present alternatives, rooted in a critical social justice agenda, to the devastating consequences of free-market capitalism that so profoundly and aversively affects the work lives of so many people around the globe (cf. Reich, 2010).

To fully explicate a critically informed research trajectory for vocational psychology, we pose the following questions, which map out the terrain for the next generation of critically informed unemployment research:

1. To what extent can vocational psychology provide incrementally unique new information to the unemployment literature?
2. To what extent can vocational psychology expand beyond its focus on individual attributes in studying and intervening in the lives of unemployed people?
3. What would a critical psychological perspective on unemployment yield?

In responding to the first question, we propose that psychology (and vocational psychology in particular) has the potential to create important new knowledge that can play an essential role in public policy on unemployment. First, research informed by a critical perspective can give voice to the experiences of unemployed individuals, thereby pushing the public discourse toward greater empathy and understanding of the losses that occur when one loses his or her job. Second, we can generate research that documents the full spectrum of aversive consequences of unemployment in an experience-near and rigorous fashion, thereby underscoring the case that unemployment is a major crisis that affects both people and communities. This research optimally would inform the development of initiatives for the broader body politic, focusing on dismantling systems that sustain oppressive practices. Additionally, psychologists can disseminate their research findings to the general public to foster critical consciousness among all citizens rather than simply facilitating dialogue in professional circles or among government officials. Taken together, these research findings can then inform public policy recommendations by counseling practitioners, scholars, and professional associations. In effect, we believe that psychologists are well positioned to bear witness to the human toll of unemployment and to use these narratives and testimony to engage in structural change initiatives.

The second question about vocational psychology expanding beyond its focus on individual attributes is a bit more challenging as the dominant discourse in vocational psychology is one that is based on a relatively individualistic focus, with contextual factors often emerging as the “ground.” As argued previously, this is reflected in career counseling interventions that focus heavily on intrapersonal characteristics of successful job seekers without providing significant attention to the experiences with racism or discrimination. Using the critical perspective that we have presented here and that is reviewed in the other articles of this special section, we believe that scholarship needs to expand beyond the focus on individual differences and individual performance in the job search process. The impact of this traditional focus functions to sustain a view of unemployment as an individual problem that can be solved via individual methods.

One viable way for psychologists to break out of the individual focus would be to join forces with scholars from macro-level fields, such as sociology and public policy. A key to expanding the reach, and ultimately, the impact of psychological

studies of unemployment is to use a critical lens in identifying the assumptions that underlie contemporary norms in the field. A study of the impact of unemployment on the individual should also seek to understand individuals as nested within multiple contexts. Such a view inevitably requires collaboration with other disciplines both in the identification of the problem to be studied and in the development of appropriate intervention strategies. This is an example of where the expertise of sociologists, economists, and political scientists can supplement the social justice vision of psychologists by providing additional support and perspectives that reflect specialized training in studying macro-level effects of unemployment.

As we have argued here specifically in regard to unemployment and by critical psychologists more broadly (e.g., Prilleltensky, 1997; Prilleltensky, 1999), the role of the psychologist cannot be limited to the confines of the 50-minute hour. The use of a fuller array of social sciences in tandem naturally represents a considerable challenge, given the diverse theories and methods that predominate in each discipline. As an example, let us consider once again the qualitative study that we described previously on the social barriers that unemployed face and internalize. Once these findings become available, labor economists may be able to generate new quantitative research building on the aforementioned qualitative research exploring the economic consequences of the highly skewed distribution of unemployed among diverse racial and ethnic groups. From a sociological perspective, scholars may be able to examine the ways that neighborhoods and social structures (such as churches) function to insulate community members from the harsh consequences of unemployment and racial discrimination. Optimally, if this team is working together, a report can be prepared to be presented in academic circles, public policy forums, and to legislators.

The third question regarding the value added by a critical psychology perspective provides a means of outlining the goals of a critically informed analysis of unemployment. From an individual perspective, the focus on colluding factors that sustain beliefs of individual responsibility for unemployment and for re-employment can provide a transformative infusion that will reduce self-blame and shame. In addition, critically informed research on unemployment can identify the ways in which social oppression serves to sustain the unequal distribution of employment based on race, social class, gender, immigration status, ability/disability status, and sexual orientation (Blustein, 2006; Helms & Cook, 1999). Moreover, research optimally would be essential in developing the framework for systematic public policy advocacy, which is reviewed next.

Critical Perspective of Public Policy on Unemployment

The policy discussions of unemployment have generally employed the input of social scientists from the more macro-level fields, such as economics and political science. While psychologists and counselors have developed programs to help unemployed clients find work and assessed the efficacy of various job search

strategies (see Jome & Phillips, 2005, for a review of programs), our field has not typically sought to inform public policy. (One notable exception can be found in recent efforts by the National Career Development Association [the U.S.-based association of career counseling and development professionals] in developing a legislative and advocacy agenda, which includes some proposals about workforce development and unemployment.) A critical psychological perspective suggests that attention to existing social and political structures is clearly necessary to fully understand and address the unemployment phenomenon.

Another issue that would benefit from the input of vocational psychology relates to the ways in which training and education intersect with public policy. The distribution of training opportunities (including postsecondary institutions, training for skilled trades, etc.) has been markedly uneven, serving to sustain inequalities that function to perpetuate social and economic stratification (Blustein, 2006; Reich, 2010). With the input of applied psychologists, we can design and evaluate training programs that embrace the role of work in psychological health. For example, the call for greater attention to community colleges as a source of training and education, especially for marginalized populations, builds on notions from the psychology of working that have advocated for greater investment in postsecondary institutions that are community-based and accessible (Blustein, 2006, 2008). Additional research emerging from a critical analysis of unemployment may benefit programmatic efforts on the welfare-to-work programs that are increasingly common in the United States (Edwards, Rachal, & Dixon, 1999).

In our view, infusing an explicit critical psychology perspective would generate a more radical and, optimally, more comprehensive analysis of existing public policies on unemployment. One compelling issue is the general acceptance of a prescribed level of unemployment as a natural outgrowth of market economies. We argue that the existence of significant cohorts of unemployed workers provides employers with a ready-made labor market that can be hired for relatively low wages and fired when the economy slows down, thereby keeping production and service costs down (cf. Marfleet, 2006; Spring, 1998). By documenting the consequences of unemployment to individuals, families, communities, and to the overall social system, psychologists can enter the debates about unemployment (and, in fact, working in general) with a cohesive and compelling agenda.

Conclusion

This article has sought to critique existing psychological understandings and interventions about unemployment. Using a critical psychology perspective, we have intended to identify ways in which traditional discourses have resulted in outcomes that may serve to reinforce oppressive practices within research, practice, and public policy on unemployment. Rather than placing the care and welfare of our clients at the foremost level of our ethical considerations, many existing approaches to understanding the antecedents, nature, and consequences of unemployment serve to

further marginalize and oppress people. The critical psychology perspective offers the intellectual tools to dismantle a mode of practice that has functioned to perpetuate grossly inequitable conditions with respect to access to work. By encouraging psychologists to examine their efforts critically, we hope to foster the creation of a body of knowledge, values, and commitments that will serve to implement the position articulated by Blustein that “working as a fundamental human act that is the birthright of each person” (2006, p. 316).

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