“I’d bank on that more than any emergency fund”: Social support during the Great Recession
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The Great Recession of 2007-2009 was no ordinary recession. When the collapse of the housing bubble led to a drop in consumer spending and a decline in business investment, the result was job loss on a massive scale: During 2008 and 2009, the US labor market lost 8.4 million jobs, the greatest contraction since the Great Depression (Economic Policy Institute 2015). By 2009, unemployment climbed to 10 percent, the highest rate since 1983. In February 2009 alone, employers laid off more than 325,000 workers (BLS 2012).

Previous research on job loss has revealed that job loss has a pervasive negative impact on the physical and mental health of the unemployed (Goldsmith et al 1996; Ensminger and Celentano 1988; Gore 1978). Job loss can cause financial strain, social isolation, and loss of self-esteem (Ensminger and Celentano 1988, Newman 1999). Furthermore, the devastating effects of unemployment are not only a function of income loss, but reflect a scarring effect of job loss on a person’s well-being: Young describes the stigmatized status that is attached to unemployment: “The unemployed are often seen as suffering the consequence of their own personal shortcomings: a questionable work ethic, shortage of talent, disagreeableness, and a generic failure to be an employable person” (2012, 611). Losing a job is stressful, and searching unsuccessfully for a new job adds additional stress (Baum et al 1986).

Amidst these hardships, the unemployed cope and respond. Research findings suggest that social support alleviates the negative impact of stressful events, including job loss (House et al 1988; Gore 1978). Social support is the tangible or intangible assistance people obtain from others in their network (Song et al 2011). While the relationship between social support and well-being in the face of stressful life events is well documented, less is known about how this relationship operates. Are some relationships more supportive than others? How do the unemployed reach out for assistance? This study attempts to fill this gap by elucidating the ways in which the unemployed receive social support during difficult times. Drawing on interview data collected from adults who lost jobs during the recession, we ask: What type(s) of social support were most salient for displaced workers in the wake of the Great Recession? What kinds of relationships provided this support? What does this support mean for the unemployed?
Data and methods

Data were collected from 92 workers and job-seekers in Columbus, Ohio. Today, Columbus is Ohio’s best-performing city, in terms of job growth (Foroohar 2012). During the Great Recession, however, Columbus lost roughly 420,000 jobs (Williams 2013). Thus, Columbus represents a middle-road context, in which unemployment was not a universal phenomenon, yet many thousands felt the sting of unemployment during the recession.

In-depth interviews were collected from 92 men and women. Participants were eligible if they were at least 18 years old, were currently working or looking for work, and had lost a job during the recession (2007-2009). Participants were recruited via institutional sampling and network-based sampling methods. The research team contacted community organizations that serve the unemployed and economically disadvantaged in Columbus, and participants were also referred by churches. To reach individuals who were not affiliated with organizations, the research team also recruited participants at job fairs throughout the city during 2012-2013. While these sampling methods do not yield a statistically representative sample, they represent the best available in the absence of a sampling frame. Our objective is not to make claims regarding the incidence or quantifiable amounts of social support, but rather to explicate in detail what various types of social support look like for these workers, and what this support means for them.

The benefit of this data is that support is reported by respondents themselves, not inferred by researchers. They were asked to describe it, not quantify it. Their descriptions reveal a great deal about what forms of support are most salient to them, and who provided that support. Beyond the types and sources of support reported by respondents, our data also include detailed descriptions of social interactions that may not be categorized by respondents as social support, but are theorized by researchers to be supportive. Thus, our data can illuminate potential sources or types of support that have gone understudied because respondents may not report them in questionnaires.
When coding data, we used House’s (1981) typology of social support (emotional, instrumental, informational, appraisal). Drawing on Tardy (1985) and Zimet et al. (1990), we identify support received from family, friends, co-workers, community members, neighbors, and professionals.

Preliminary findings

Previous research has shown that relationships provide specialized support, and most support comes from a small subset of network ties (Wellman and Wortley 1990). Friends, for instance, usually provide emotional support. So it is reasonable to expect that the unemployed turned to friends for a listening ear, or a shoulder to cry on, during the Great Recession. We find that friends provide social support, but not just any friends, and not just any type of support. Friends who are experiencing similar difficulties – who are not much better or much worse off – seem to offer the most valuable emotional support, from the perspective of the unemployed. Friends experiencing similar difficulties, such as job loss, are important because they provide a reference point for the unemployed. They serve as a reminder that the Recession and its attendant job loss has affected other worthy workers too. This reminder helps the displaced worker not to blame herself for her job loss, easing her emotional burden. Friends who have not experienced layoffs cannot provide this support.

We find that friends also help the unemployed in a different way: by providing feedback to the unemployed about their “true” value as workers. In our study, network members help the unemployed to cope by reinforcing their identities as worthy workers, through statements such as “you were so dedicated to that company” or “you need to be in project management.” Such statements guard against self-doubt and reinforce self-esteem. This supports House et al.’s suggestion that “Social relationships may also alter the perception or cognition of the world in general, or of potentially stressful events and situations in particular” (1988, 307). Our findings indicate that when faced with job loss, the unemployed find comfort in commiserating with friends experiencing hardships, and that feedback from network members helps to bolster their self-image.
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References


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