

WPS DEVELOPMENTAL NOTE #12

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Topic: The importance of work

*Always you have been told that work is a curse
and labour a misfortune.
But I say to you that when you work you fulfil a
part of earth's furthest dream, assigned to you
when that dream was born,
And in keeping yourself with labour you are in
truth loving life,
And to love life through labour is to be intimate
with life's inmost secret.*

Kahil Gibran – Poet, philosopher and artist

Work is the means by which most people play a full and active part in community life. Karl Marx viewed humans as potentially creative creatures that express their basic humanity and differentiated themselves from other animals in and through work (Bilton *et al.*, 1988). Sigmund Freud and his followers also saw work as crucial to the psychosocial development of the individual, especially ego development and learning about reality (O'Brien, 1990).

Jahoda, *et al.* (1933) were among the first to identify and research a link between lack of work and psychosocial developmental problems. Their case study series on the effects of high unemployment in the Austrian village of Marienthal, during the Great Depression, revealed that those who were unemployed sharply curtailed their social activities, read less, lost their sense of time and punctuality, and experienced increased familial breakdown. This must surely resonate with Noel Pearson's thesis in that these and other behaviours (including phenomenal levels of violence, outrageous levels of grog addiction and a large and growing drug problem amongst the youth) are like a pandemic sweeping across Aboriginal communities which, according to Pearson, stem largely from the people's detachment from work and the real economy (Pearson, 2000b).

Since this pioneering study by Jahoda and associates, there has been a great deal of research into the effects of unemployment throughout the western world, all of which has shown quite convincingly that it does have a negative impact on people's mental health, not as an association but as a cause (Jackson *et al.*, 1983; Liem, 1987; Warr, 1987; Morrell *et al.*, 1994; Schaufeli, 1997). This research also reveals that there are a number of demographic variables, which influences the nature and severity of the impact.

For example, studies by Marsden & Duff (1975), Hill (1977), and Hepworth (1980) have all revealed how there is a gradual increase in anxiety and depression and loss of morale in the unemployed as the period of unemployment lengthens. Similarly, Shanthamani (1973) found that emotional instability increased with length of unemployment.

The level of activity is another variable where studies have shown that the level of activity decreases with decreasing occupational status and length of unemployment, so that the longer a man was unemployed, the less likely he was able to fill his time meaningfully (Hepworth, 1980). According to Jahoda *et al.* (1971), the inability to fill one's time meaningfully leads to apathy and depression and once this state was reached, a vicious circle was entered from which it was nearly impossible to escape, save re-engagement in employment.

Another important demographic variable is culture. There appears to be little published evidence about commitment to the labour market among Indigenous Australians in comparison to non-Indigenous. One might expect from the disadvantaged position of Indigenous people in general that young unemployed Indigenous people would exhibit less positive attitude to paid employment than do non-Indigenous. Although, a study by Arthur and David-Petero (1999) found that, in some respect, young Indigenous Australian may approach work in a similar way to other young people. That is, they often express their future in terms of work.

There was one interesting study by Warr *et al.* (1985) where the commitment to participation in the labour market among young British born unemployed black people of Afro-Caribbean descent was compared with young British born unemployed white people. This study found that young unemployed white people exhibited higher general distress and depression than young unemployed black people. In comparison, young white males had a more positive attitude towards jobs and job seeking. They exhibited significantly higher employment commitment, lower unemployment orientation, and higher job search attitude scores. They were significantly more likely to describe themselves as actively seeking jobs, had made significantly more job applications in the past four weeks, and were significantly more likely to say they would accept any job that was offered. This concurs with my own experience with participants in Boys from the Bush Projects and the Work Placement Scheme. Warr, *et al.*, concluded that these differences reflect a more realistic adaptation to poor job prospects among the black sub-sample. They say: *Continually to seek jobs is particularly stressful in a labour market where rejection is almost certain, and temporary withdrawal from job search provides some defence against that threat* (1985, p.85).

Another important demographic variable is age. Eisenberg & Lazarsfeld (1938) were amongst the first to examine how unemployment affects young people, particularly during the crucial transitional period between childhood and adolescence. They concluded that young people who gain employment are more likely to make a full and successful transition from childhood to adulthood, whereas unemployment, particularly long-term unemployment, had a discernible effect on their personality.

These include the tendency to become drifters, increased irritability, loss of ambition, an increase in female prostitution, criminality and homelessness.

More recent studies have shown that unemployed young people experience a decrease in self-esteem and increases in depression (Winefield and Tiggemann, 1985); from general poor health to serious chronic illness (Cullen *et al.*, 1987; Hammarstrom, 1994; Mathers, 1996); impaired social competence, impaired learning, alienation and social exclusion (Warr 1987; Hannan *et al.*, 1997); and psychological morbidity (Feather and O'Brien, 1986; Winefield and Tiggemann, 1990; Winefield *et al.*, 1993; Morrell *et al.*, 1994; Prause and Dooley, 1997).

In addition to these psychosocial effects, there are other reasons why youth unemployment is a major concern. Firstly, widespread youth unemployment leads to an increase in criminal activity and other forms of antisocial behaviour (Thornberry and Christenson, 1984). Secondly, it can lead to increase risk of suicide (Platt, 1984; Morrell *et al.*, 1993; Krupinski *et al.*, 1994). Thirdly, there is the fear that it may have a detrimental effect on work values so that unemployed youths come to reject the work ethic and prefer a life of idleness supported by unemployment benefits rather than paid employment (Dowling, 1978; Carle, 1987).

At this point, it is worth reminding the reader of the incredible levels of unemployment that continue to exist in Aboriginal communities. The 2001 Census revealed that the national Indigenous unemployment rate was 22.5 %. This figure has barely altered since 1996, but what is more worrying is that the future looks set to make a turn for the worst. Estimates of future job growth point to an increase in unemployment and a decrease in employment over the remainder of this decade. By 2011, an extra 84,000 Indigenous people are expected to be of working age – almost as many again as are now employed. If CDEP scheme participants are counted as unemployed (on account of the notional link between CDEP wages and the Newstart and Job Search Allowances), then labour market outcomes for Indigenous people become far worse, with an unemployment rate of 43.4 % in 2001 and projected to rise to 50.4 % in 2011. If all people who claimed they want to work and are not included in CDEP, Newstart or Job Search Allowance (categorised as discouraged workers) are included in the labour force the unemployment rate in 2001 was 55.9 % and projected to rise to 61.3 % in 2011 (Hunter, Kinfu and Taylor, 2003). To make matters worse, detailed calculations by Daly and Hunter (2000) show that over 50% of both males and females had been unemployed for more than 18 months, compared to 37% of unemployed non-Indigenous Australians. These figures are national statistics and, of course, the situation is much worse in individual communities on Cape York Peninsula.

The effect of this level of unemployment on a community can be devastating, as revealed by Jahoda using the plight of the Austrian village of Marienthal. Many would argue that Marienthal pales in significance to the incredible suffering and waste of humanity that presently takes place in a number of communities on Cape York. Take, for example, the open letter to The Courier Mail on August 7, 2003 by Dr Lara Wieland.

Indigenous people in [Cape York Peninsula] communities suffer from much higher levels of psychosocial distress. I found in my time as a doctor that despite the high rates of physical disease I would spend the majority of my day dealing with social/stress problems. Almost every day I would see someone who had been contemplating suicide. The majority of mental problems are related to substance abuse, unemployment, relationship problems, domestic violence, witnessing violence, trauma and grief, lack of sleep, and overcrowded housing also play a part.

So what is it about work that provides so much relief to so much human wastage and so much pain and suffering? For an answer, we can again refer back to Jahoda (1979, 1981, 1982). Work, according to Jahoda, has both manifest and latent functions. The manifest function is **income** and the latent functions are **time structure, enlarged social experience, engagement in collective purposes, identity, and creativity**.

These latent functions can be explained by referring to the young people involved in our project, which I will now discuss.

Relevant latent functions of work

The first of Jahoda's latent functions is **time structure**. It is work, more than any other life activity, that provides us with the opportunity for order and structure. Most work involves starting at a set time and finish at a set time, with lunch and tea breaks at set intervals. For daytime workers, it means getting up early in the morning in time to prepare oneself for the working day, including travelling time. This preparation involves showering, dressing, preparing and eating breakfast, and cleaning up. Whereas, most young people from remote communities, including many young people from major regional centres, are not used to this sort of order and time structure. The task of getting up early in the morning requires going to sleep earlier and this is something that comes hard to these young people. They are more used to staying up to the early hours of the morning watching videos or roaming the streets at night and sleeping during the day. This partly explains why so many participants in the Work Placement Scheme sleep in their work clothes and get up minutes before their morning transport arrives. Thus they had no time to shower or eat breakfast. This lack of order and structure also helps explain why so many are so forgetful of their necessities every morning. This behaviour does improve over the course of time when engaged in the Work Placement Scheme and their lives become ordered and structured.

Another latent function is **enlarged social experience**. Again, it is work, perhaps more than any other activity, which enlarges our social experience. This is clearly evident with the young people in the project. If it was not for the purpose of going down south to pick fruit, these young participants would have no reason for visiting this region and meeting the people they have. Work brings all of us into contact with a wide range of people doing all sorts of things. And of course it is our experiences, combined with our genetics, knowledge, beliefs and values that make us all different. The more people we meet, and the more we experience, the richer our lives become. Work environments can sometimes be like a laboratory – bringing people together from all over the world from all different backgrounds. Who knows what will

happen? Often I saw and heard participants talking to itinerant pickers from nearly every corner of the world: Africans, Iraqis, Pakistanis, Afghans, Vietnamese, Cambodians and Europeans - how they made sense of each other I do not know, but they must have added something to each other's point of view.

What I do know is that the traditional divisions of black versus white which exists on Cape York and in the Torres Strait, no longer applied in these fruit and vegetable growing areas of Victoria and South Australia. Their employers were Australian-Greek, Australian-Cambodian, Australian-Filipino and Anglo-Australian. It's good that these young participants see this as it helps remove race and culture from the world of work and the ownership of wealth and property - something that they have little experience of back home. At the very least, they are now beginning to learn how the real economy works and the importance of getting a job and the value of money.

Another very important latent function is **identity**. Identity is all about establishing and knowing who you are (Berger, 1983). Erikson has written extensively about the search for identity as the primary task, and crisis, of adolescence - a search, if successful, will move the individual into adulthood and maturity. As he puts it, *Especially in times of change in the structure of society identity, becomes as important as food and security* (Erikson 1975). I know of too many young Aboriginals who believe that to be an Aboriginal you must drink alcohol and behave in an unruly manner (Erikson would call this **identity foreclosure**, where the young person has accepted parental/family values and behaviours wholesale, never exploring alternatives nor truly forging a unique personal identity). I also know of too many young Aboriginals who do not understand the question, *What do you want to be when you grow up?* They believe that work is a whiteman's thing. (Erikson would call this **identity confusion**, where they have few commitments to goals or values and are apathetic about establishing an identity). Some of the participants in the Work Placement Scheme could fit into one of these categories, particularly the older participants. A number of older participants have said to me, in no uncertain terms, that they are adults and as such are free to do what they want. The problem is that their version of adulthood is to be dependent on others, doing minimal work and consume copious amounts of drugs and alcohol at other people's expense. I likened them to tumbleweeds blowing in the wind thinking they have mastered the art of flight. As I mentioned elsewhere, this behaviour begins to wane with the change in group dynamics – which confirms the powerful role of peers and group dynamics in the business of identity formation (Berger, 1983). Another important point to note in relation to identity formation is that if you **now** ask long standing participants, *What do you do?* They will answer, *orange picking*, or *orange picker*, *grape picking* or *grape picker*. The fact is, they also do a lot of other things, (or I should say, they **did** do a lot of other things, like drink, fight, smoke dope, watch videos, and generally hang out) but their **primary** role or task in life by which they describe themselves now is a work task or work role – this is what work socialisation is all about.

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