

★ Unemployment is a public health pandemic

Dr Peter McIlveen spoke to the 2016 Symposium about how career practitioners can and do change the perspectives of individuals and communities for their personal and shared benefits. In this article he urges a paradigm shift in how civil society, government, and industry, understand, react to, and prevent unemployment for those who are in need of decent work.



Unemployment is a form of trauma associated with physical illness, mental illness, and suicidality; unemployment is a public health pandemic (McIlveen, 2016). When considered metaphorically as a problem of public health, and that those who suffer unemployment trauma are in need of rehabilitation and those at risk of unemployment—all of us—are in need of primary health care, then the seriousness of the problem takes on new meaning. This medicalizing discourse is questionable from a critical perspective (e.g., Foucault, 1973); however, there should be a significant paradigm shift in how civil society, government, and industry, understands, reacts to, and prevents unemployment for those who are in need of decent work. Although this medical discourse is one of power and may further stigmatize (Kossen & Hammer, 2010), it sets up a framework for acknowledging that illness, both physical and mental, are symptoms of unemployment.

Rehabilitation from unemployment trauma should be directed to those who suffer. Nonetheless, additional critical observations are warranted because such interventions may not go far enough to elucidate the power of economic constraints and social class on the lives of individuals who are without sufficient resources to protect themselves: Children.

There is a pressing need to investigate the cognitive development of children in poverty (Dickerson & Popli, 2016; Heberle & Carter, 2015). Unemployment and poverty are practically synonymous in the lived experience of those without decent work, and their children are at risk of serious complications. If it is the case that intractable poverty diminishes children's cognitive and social development then the long-term trajectory for effects on later adult development are frightful (Kalil, Duncan, & Ziol-Guest, 2016). Furthermore, consider the evidence that low socio-economic status leads to diminished aspirations (Flouri, Tsivrikos, Akhtar, & Midouhas, 2015). With respect to identity development, youngsters' perceptions of their social class, as being different from their peers, carries a negative psychological effect (Odgers, 2015). Research into adults' recollections of their childhood perceptions of their lower social class is suggestive of a predictive relation between class perception and mental disorder (Lyons & Edwards, 2016). Even the ostensibly innocent world of childhood fantasy may be perturbingly distorted to maintain social structures whereby social class can be portrayed—cynically—as benign in children's G-rated films (Streib, Ayala, & Wixted, 2016). The preponderance of evidence is that poverty has pernicious effects that curb the healthy development of children.

What are we to do? For a start, we should rethink how we understand unemployment and poverty as economic phenomena. The discourse of economics seems somehow disconnected from the everyday experiences of those who are in need of decent work. We may be satisfied by “healthy” economic indicators, such as 5% unemployment, but for the many who make up that number their everyday lives are not so satisfying and healthy. What would happen if we began to understand and talk about unemployment as a public health

problem, all the while realizing that doing so may further marginalize those who are in need of decent work? What would happen if we began to take action on the evidence that unemployment causes illness, dysfunctional cognitive development, and suicide?



Peter McIlveen PhD – Associate Professor at the University of Southern Queensland

Follow at <https://au.linkedin.com/in/petermcilveen>

References:

- Dickerson, A., & Popli, G. K. (2016). Persistent poverty and children's cognitive development: evidence from the UK Millennium Cohort Study. *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society: Series A (Statistics in Society)*, 179(2), 535-558. doi: 10.1111/rssa.12128
- Flouri, E., Tsivrikos, D., Akhtar, R., & Midouhas, E. (2015). Neighbourhood, school and family determinants of children's aspirations in primary school. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 87, 71-79. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2014.12.006>
- Foucault, M. (1973). *The birth of the clinic* (Vintage Books 1994 ed.). New York: Random House.
- Heberle, A. E., & Carter, A. S. (2015). Cognitive aspects of young children's experience of economic disadvantage. *Psychological Bulletin*, 141(4), 723-746. doi: 10.1037/bul0000010
- Kalil, A., Duncan, G. J., & Ziol-Guest, K. M. (2016). Early childhood poverty: Short and long-run consequences over the lifespan. In J. M. Shanahan, T. J. Mortimer, & M. Kirkpatrick Johnson (Eds.), *Handbook of the Life Course: Volume II* (pp. 341-354). Cham: Springer International Publishing.
- Kossen, C., & Hammer, S. (2010). Mature-aged job seekers' experiences of Centrelink and the Job Network Services in an Australian regional centre. *Australian Journal of Career Development*, 19(1), 45-53. doi: 10.1177/103841621001900109
- Lyons, M., & Edwards, Y. (2016). Perceived childhood inequality predicts schizotypy in adulthood. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 90, 174-176. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2015.11.005>
- McIlveen, P. (2016). *Effectiveness of career development? Ask a precise question in you want a precise answer*. Paper presented at the Symposium of the Career Development Association of New Zealand, Christchurch, New Zealand.
- Odgers, C. L. (2015). Income inequality and the developing child: Is it all relative? *American Psychologist*, 70(8), 722-731. doi: 10.1037/a0039836
- Streib, J., Ayala, M., & Wixted, C. (2016). Benign inequality: Frames of poverty and social class inequality in children's movies. *Journal of Poverty*, 1-19. doi: 10.1080/10875549.2015.1112870