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THE LONG ARM OF UNEMPLOYMENT - CHANGE OF MARITAL  
POWER AFTER JOB LOSS\*

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This study investigates the impact of job loss on marital power structure. It has been predicted that with job loss the male breadwinner forfeits a major possibility to gain tangible (e. g., money) and intangible resources (e. g., status). Consequently, he would lose power, whereas the wife would gain marital power. Destabilization of power would then lead to a deterioration of marital harmony. Shift of marital power has been studied more specifically in purchase decision situations. If unemployed, the husband should respect the wife's opinion more than if employed, buy less frequently against her will, and feel less resentment if she buys contrary to his will. The wife, on the other hand, was predicted to respect the husband's will to a lower extent if he was job less rather than employed, to buy more frequently against his will, and to feel more resentment if he ignored her opinion. In general, these hypotheses have been supported by the data.

1. INTRODUCTION

With the economic recession in the industrialized countries of the West, unemployment has again become a major issue in social sciences. Whereas a large body of scientific information about mental and physical health problems of the unemployed individual has been accumulated during the Great Depression and recently (Ferman & Gordus, 1979; Jahoda, 1981; 1982; Kieselbach & Offe, 1979; Wacker, 1983; Warr, 1983a; 1983b; Kelvin & Jarrett, 1985), rather little attention has been paid to the detrimental impact of unemployment upon marital relationships. This study aims to explore some aspects of unemployment and its influence on couples' relationships.

In some cases, unemployment of the husband appeared to have improved the marital relationship. But those were exceptions (cf. Kieselbach & Offe, 1979; Frese & Mohr, 1978; Voydanoff, 1983; Liem & Liem, 1979; Catalano & Dooley, 1979). In general, spouses and families, respectively, lack the necessary strategies to cope with unemployment in a mutual satisfying way. Families neither seem to be able to protect the unemployed

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member from sever harm nor are they successfully protecting themselves from difficulties caused by unemployment.

With job loss, a family member loses an important source to gain resources for the common use. Not only financial resource contributions diminish with unemployment. (Moen, 1983, Brinkmann, 1976) but also contributions of intangible resources (e. g., status, love; for a taxonomy of resources see Foa, 1971). Job loss of one family member, especially of the male breadwinner, changes the pattern of the member's relative resource contributions.

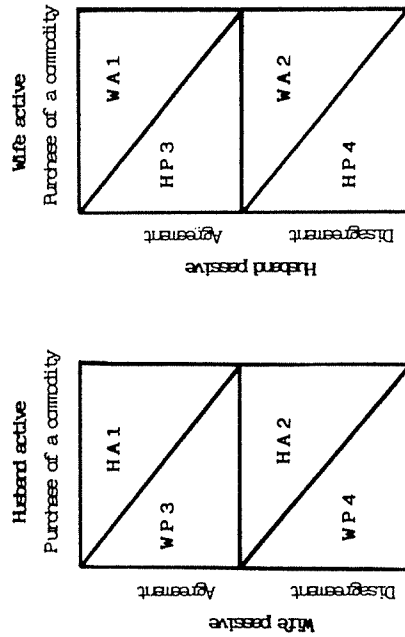
Resource contributions are an important base of social exchange relationships, such as the family (Nye, 1979; Safilios-Rothschild, 1976; Scanzoni, 1979), and a source of family power (Blood & Wolfe, 1960; Heer, 1965). The more resources a member can give and the more the others are in need of these resources, the higher the member's power. According to resource theory (Blood & Wolfe, 1960), a family member's influence power decreases with diminishing ability to make substantial contributions to the common budget. More generally, according to social exchange-theory (Nye, 1979) its attraction or "value" depreciates with devaluation of his/her resource contributions. Thus, losing his/her job, a family member is expected to forfeit his/her say. This causal relationship has been suggested both by studies during the Great Depression (Komarovsky, 1940) and recently (Schindler, 1979).

Job loss and destabilization of marital power patterns also challenges marital harmony. In a micro-analysis of the processes occurring in everyday life during the first six months of unemployment (Kirchler, 1984; 1985), the unemployed blamed his/her spouse, the own children, and the home in general for his/her bad mood state more frequently than reemployed did. Contrary to the optimism that close relationships become closer during periods of externally caused crises, unemployment undermines marital happiness. As Jahoda, Lazarsfeld & Zeisel (1960, p. 88) put it in their celebrated study of the 1930s, only a few families of Marienthal reported that the spousal relationship had improved after job loss. In general, insignificant dissension between the spouses became a potential issue of sever marital conflict.

In their everyday life married couples must make countless decisions. The responsibility of purchase decisions seems to be a significant area to study marital power and conflict. This study focuses specifically upon employed and unemployed couples' experiences in purchasing situations. If power of the breadwinner decreases after job loss, also his/her say in purchasing situations should decrease.

It can be assumed that marital power is reflected in a spouse's dependency upon the other's opinion in purchasing choices. Dependency is expected to be especially pronounced in situations where only one spouse desires a specific good or service. In such situations, the unemployed is expected to depend more on his/her spouse's agreement than the employed. An unemployed

Figure 1: Purchasing Situations



the money for the commodity could be spent otherwise or be saved. Try to imagine the different situations below as vividly as possible and indicate how well you would feel in each situation, and how frequently the specified situation occurs in your relationship".

The following text specified two different situations: the passive partner either agreed to the purchase or disagreed; the subjects in both cases decided to buy.

1. "Imagine you want to buy the commodity, but your partner disagrees. After a short discussion, however, he/she agrees to the purchase. Subsequently you visit the shop and buy this commodity. How would you feel .... How often does this situation occur in your family ....."

The other situations read as follows:

2. "Imagine .... After a short discussion, however he/she still opposes the purchase. Nevertheless, you visit the shop and buy this commodity. How would you feel .... How often does this situation occur in your family ....."

The items of the passive part read as follows:

"Imagine your partner wants to buy a desirable commodity. The commodity is expensive, and of no use to you. You think the money for the commodity could be spent otherwise or be saved. Try to imagine ....."

3. "Imagine your spouse wants to buy this commodity, but you disagree. After a short discussion, however, you agree to the purchase.

Subsequently your partner visits the shop and buys the commodity. How would you feel ..... How often does this situation occur in your family"

4. "Imagine ..... After a short discussion, however, you still oppose the purchase. Nevertheless, your partner visits the shop and buys the commodity. How would you feel ..... How often does this situation occur in your family ....."

Each of the descriptions was followed by a scale of well-being and frequency of occurrence. The scale measuring well-being ranged from 1 (feeling very bad) to 7 (feeling very good). The scale measuring the frequency of occurrence of the specified situation ranged from 1 (almost never) to 5 (almost always). The wording of the questionnaires was gender appropriate for wives and husbands.

Subsequently, the subjects were asked to indicate their marital power structure (two questions asked to indicate how much say the subject and his/her spouse has. The wording of the questions was: "In our relationship my partner has the say", and marital happiness (four questions asked to indicate how much the spouses loved each other, their happiness, cohesion, and mutual acceptance. The wording of the questions was: "I am happy with my partner", "My partner accepts me as I am", "My partner loves me", and "Our relationship is harmonious"). Each question was followed by a rating scale ranging from 1 (agree) to 5 (disagree).

Next, each respondent indicated how much of each resource out of Foa's (1971) taxonomy; namely status, love, information, money, goods and services; each spouse contributes for the common use. This was assessed by asking each spouse to partition a square, which symbolically indicated 100 % of the common budget of the specific resource, into two parts which correspond to the parts contributed by him/her and his/her spouse. The six resources have been circumscribed according to Foa's (1971, p. 171) definition as follows: "Love" is an "expression of affectionate regard, warmth, or comfort; "Status" is an expression of evaluative judgment which conveys high or low prestige, regard, or esteem; "Information includes advice, opinions, instruction, or enlightenment, but excludes those behaviors which could be classed as love or status; "money" is any coin, currency, or token which has some standard unit of exchange value; "goods" are tangible products, objects, or materials; and "services" involve activities on the body or belongings of a person which often constitute labor for another".

Finally, each spouse indicated the following social date: (a) age; (b) education level, (c) years living in the common household; (d) number of children; (e) employment status, and if unemployed, length of unemployment in months; (f) amount of

money earned per month; and (g) amount of money at disposal in the household.

After completion of the questionnaire, which took approximately 30 minutes, the couples were debriefed and released.

### 3. RESULTS

#### 3.1. Comparison of Employed and Unemployed Couples

First, both samples of employed and unemployed couples have been compared in respect of social indexes, in order to assure appropriate hypotheses testing. As Table 1 shows, no differences in demographic characteristics have been found between employed and unemployed couples except for the husband's average monthly income. It is not surprising that unemployment insurance is significantly lower than the average income of employed men.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Employed and Unemployed Couples

	Employed Couples (n = 26)	Unemployed Couples (n = 24)	F	t-test df	p
Age					
Husband	31.88 (8.632)	29.54 (10.048)	.89	48	.38
Wife	30.15 (9.160)	27.48 (8.687)	1.02	48	.31
Education					
Elementary School					
Husband	3	2			
Wife	3	4			
Middle School					
Husband	11	11			
Wife	16	11			
High School					
Husband	12	11			
Wife	7	9			
Months Living in a Common Household	94.27 (92.929)	76.92 (96.016)	.65	48	.52
N of Children					
0	12	9			
1	6	12			
2	3	3			
3	5	0			
4	1	0			

Husband's Monthly  
Net Income 15,326 10,104 2.47 45 .02  
(Austrian Shillings)

Duration of Unemployment  
(months) 1 - 3  
2 - 5  
3 - 3  
4 to 6 - 6  
6 to 12 - 5  
more than 12 - 2

Note: Numbers indicate means of frequencies, standard deviations (in parentheses), and F-values, degrees of freedom, and probabilities.

#### 3.2. Husband's Employment Status and Perception of Resource Contributions

Hypothesis (a) predicted that the husband would be perceived as contributing the major part of resources to the common budget if he had a paid job, and a considerable lower part if he had no job. Resource contributions of husband and wife were measured by assessing the percentage of both spouses' contributions of the six resources (Foa, 1971). A 2 (employment status) by 2 (sex, within factor) Manova on spouses' perception of husband's contributions of the six resources as dependent variables, yielded a significant main effect for unemployment status ( $F(7,33) = 3.42; p = .01$ ). No interaction effect and no main effect for sex have been obtained. Univariate analyses yielded significant effects for husband's contributions of money ( $F(1,39) = 20.07; p = .00$ ) and status ( $F(1,38) = 5.20; p = .03$ ). As shown in Table 2, both spouses perceived the employed husband as contributing more money to the common budget and providing more status related resources than the unemployed husband.

Table 2: Unemployed Husbands' and Wives' Perception of Resource Contributions

Type of Resource	Employed Couples (n = 26)		Unemployed Couples (n = 24)		Analyses of Variance	
	Husband	Wife	Husband	Wife	F	df
Love	47.62	49.87	51.95	46.54	< 1	1, 39 .81
Money	67.04	75.43	42.64	46.43	20.07	1, 39 .00
Services	43.12	41.73	44.05	40.58	< 1	1, 39 .98
Goods	52.88	51.34	49.92	50.11	< 1	1, 39 .50

Status Information Average	56.75	64.42	48.92	50.54	5.20	1.38	.03
Resource Contributions	47.87	52.01	46.10	41.34	2.38	1.39	.13
	52.55	55.80	47.26	45.92	3.42	6.33	.01

Note: Numbers indicate the percentage of perceived husband resource contributions. The wife's contributions can easily be computed by subtracting the husband's part from 100 %.

As Table 2 shows, employed husbands rated their contributions of money higher (67 %) than the wives' contributions of money (33 %), and so did the wives (75 % versus 25 %). Unemployed husbands, on the other hand, indicated to contribute less money (43 %) than the wives (57 %). Similar results have been reported by the wives (46 % versus 54 %). Also the husbands' contributions to the marital status were higher when they were employed (husbands' and wives' estimations were 57 % and 64 %, respectively) rather than unemployed (49 % and 51 %, respectively).

3.3. Marital Power and Harmony by Husband's Employment Status

With decrease of resource contributions, power of the husband was predicted to decrease too. Power has been assessed by asking each spouse separately who had the most say in the partnership. Answers on the two power questions were averaged and analyzed by a two way analysis of variance (employment status, sex). Both spouses reported significant decrease of husband's power after job loss ( $M = 3.47$  and  $2.99$  for husbands with and without jobs, respectively;  $F(1,48) = 9.85$ ;  $p = .003$ ). No main effect for sex and no interaction effect were found.

Similarly as for marital power, ratings on marital happiness have been averaged and analyzed by a two-way Anova. No significant main and interaction effects have been obtained ( $F(1,48) < 1$ ).

It has been predicted that with job loss the breadwinners also loose a substantial source to gain resources for the common use. Decrease of resource contributions would then be followed by a decrease of marital power, and consequently, destabilization of established power patterns would challenge marital harmony. These linear causal relationships have been investigated by a path analysis, including the following variables: (a) length of unemployment (length of unemployed husbands was indicated in months out of job; employed husbands scored zero), (b) average spouses' perception of husband's resource contributions, (c) spouses' ratings of marital power, and (d) average spouses' ratings of marital harmony. The resulting path diagram is presented in Figure 2.

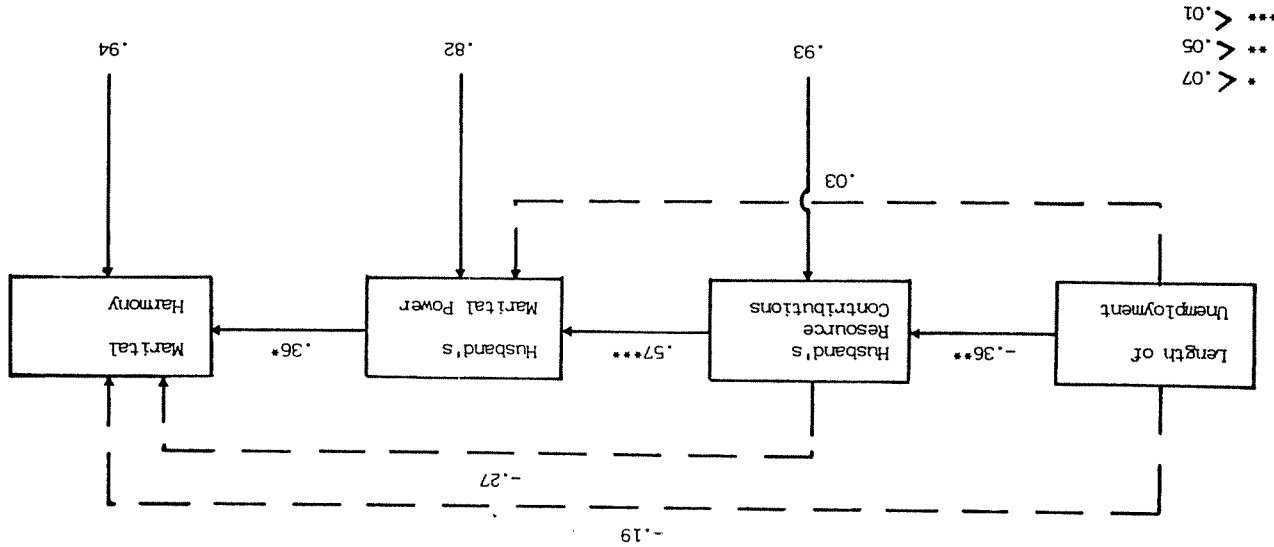


Figure 2: Path Analysis of Length of Unemployment, Husband's Average Resource Contributions, Husband's Marital Power, and Marital Harmony

\*\*\* < .01  
 \*\* < .05  
 \* < .07

### 3.4. Husband's Employment Status and Well-being in and Frequency of Purchasing Situations

In the following, differences on marital power between employed and unemployed couples have been assessed in purchasing decision situations. According to hypotheses (c), (d), and (e) employed husbands should respect their wife's opinion to a lower extent, buy more frequently against her will, and feel more resentment if she realized a purchase against his will than unemployed husbands.

Respect, frequency of purchase, and resentment were assessed, similarly as in a previous study (Brandstätter, Kirchner & Wagner, in press), as follows: Respect has been defined as difference between mood state in the situation where the spouse buys a commodity after having reached agreement with his/her spouse and mood state in the situation where the spouse buys a commodity against the partner's will (see Figure 1):

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Wife's respect} &= \text{WA1} - \text{WA2} \\ \text{Husband's respect} &= \text{HA1} - \text{HA2} \end{aligned}$$

Respect, conceived of as difference between well-being in mutual agreement and conflict situations, is defined by the social costs of a active spouse. In other words, the lower the well-being in conflict as compared to well-being in mutual agreement situations the more the spouse respects the other.

Frequency of buying against the other's will has been assessed directly by the questionnaire (see Method section, question 2).

Resentment has been defined as difference between mood state in the situation where the spouse agrees with the partner's buying decision and mood state in the situation where the spouse disagrees with the partner's purchase (see Figure 1):

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Wife's resentment} &= \text{WP1} - \text{WP2} \\ \text{Husband's resentment} &= \text{HP1} - \text{HP2} \end{aligned}$$

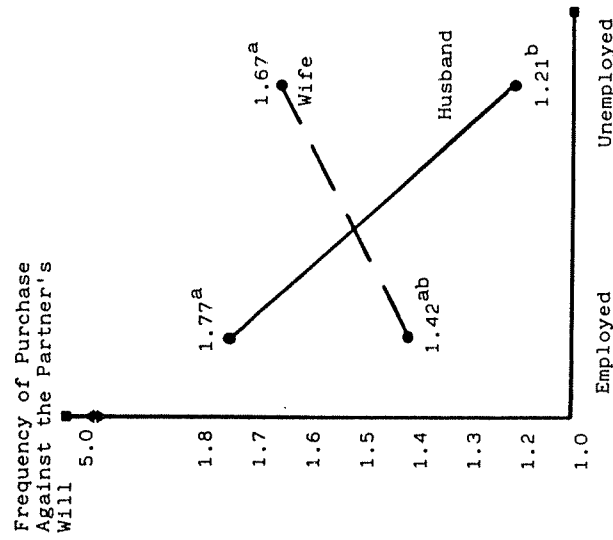
Resentment is defined as a passive spouse's gain and loss, respectively, of well-being in conflict and agreement situations. The more a passive spouse's well-being is affected by the active partner's decision to buy against his/her will the more the spouse is puzzled, that is, the more he/she feels resentment.

A 2 (employment status) by 2 (sex, within factor) Anova including respect as dependent variable, revealed a main effect for sex. Generally, the active wife respected her husband's opinion more ( $M = 2.18$ ) than vice versa, the active husband respected his wife's opinion ( $M = 1.52$ ;  $F(1,48) = 7.34$ ;  $p = .009$ ). This result is in line with present societal roles, attributing high dependence to the wife and independence to the husband. Contrary to the prediction, no interaction effect

and no main effect of employment status have been found. However, the longer the husband was out of a job, the more he started respecting his wife's opinion. The correlation between husband's length of unemployment and respect amounted to  $r(24) = 0.36$ ;  $p = .04$ ; the correlation between length of unemployment and the wife's respect amounted to  $r(24) = -.19$ ;  $p = .19$ .

The second 2 by 2 Anova with frequency of buying against the other's will revealed, as expected, a significant interaction effect ( $F(1,48) = 9.27$ ;  $p = .004$ ). No significant main effects were found. As shown in Figure 3, employed husbands realized an egoistic purchase against their wife's will more frequently than unemployed husbands; whereas, the wives bought less frequently against their husband's will if he was employed rather than unemployed.

Figure 3: Frequencies of Purchases against the Partner's Will and Wives' Purchases against the Partner's Will



Note: Different superscripts indicate significant differences



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