

# Occupational social work and job retention supports

An international perspective

● **Roberta Rehner Iversen**

As the 20th century ended, millions of persons around the world were experiencing economic and social disadvantage because they were unemployed. Global changes in employment conditions stem from a number of sources: expanding industrialization and democratization (Harris, 1997), a growing market orientation (Ngai, 1993), reduced or privatized public services (Estes, 1997; Gammon and Dziegielewska, 1997), technological advances (Karger, 1993), major population shifts (Sherraden and Martin, 1994), revised labor laws that make dismissals easier (Faison, 1998) and radical changes in welfare policy (Besharov et al., 1997; Chau and Yu, 1998). Such changes frequently result in structural and personal byproducts.

Structural byproducts include growth of low-wage jobs and marginal employment (Economic Policy Institute, 1997; Seck et al., 1993), rising rates of unemployment and underemployment (Andrews, 1997; Jargowsky, 1997) and longer periods of joblessness (Root, 1993). In the US, and reportedly many other countries, economic disadvantage is experienced particularly strongly by women, members of racial and ethnic minority groups and youth (Abrahams and Peredo, 1996; Blank, 1997; Hale, 1997; Holzer, 1996a; Sarri, 1997; Wilson, 1996). Personal byproducts include interpersonal and family stresses, such as the higher incidence of substance use, anxiety and depression (Textor, 1995; Wintersteen et

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al., 1997), spreading juvenile delinquency (Tsui et al., 1996) and disintegrating relationships (Briar and Lawson, 1995).

Occupational social work<sup>1</sup> would seem to be the relevant field of specialization to address structural and personal conditions related to unemployment. Although occupational social work is practiced among unemployed persons in Israel (Bargal and Katan, 1998), occupational practice is not reported in evaluations of welfare-to-work or other work-enhancement programs in the US (Besharov et al., 1997; Herr et al., 1995). Moreover, most occupational social work literature is directed at practice with employed persons in the workplace (Kurzman and Akabas, 1993; Seck et al., 1993; Straussner, 1990). Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) have been the predominant mode of service delivery in US workplaces, generally specializing in service at the individual level. Somewhat similarly, in countries such as Germany, Australia and Israel (Ribner, 1993), occupational social workers augment national health and welfare plans through short-term employee counseling and referral, although they are likely to engage in program-level activities as well. In contrast, occupationally-related social work in developing countries is generally more focused on community development and community enterprises (Midgley, 1996). On rare occasions, multiple levels of service are provided. In the Netherlands, occupational social work incorporates comprehensive interpersonal and policy-related services (Bargal, 1993), and labor welfare social workers in India use specialized interpersonal and labor expertise at individual and organizational levels of practice (Midgley, 1997).

While the auspices, sanctions, roles and settings of occupational social work practice differ from country to country, growing similarities in work-related conditions and needs provide a base for exchange and mutual benefit. To counter unemployment-related disadvantage in the US, a proposed reformulation of occupational social work practice systematically focuses on the job retention needs of unemployed and newly-employed persons (for full discussion, see Iversen, 1998). Under reformulation, the occupational social worker will apply specialized skills and knowledge gained from practice within the workplace to enhance job retention among work-program participants. Although this position does not address many of the political and economic aspects of global unemployment, it focuses on how occupationally-focused workers can formulate supports to reduce unemployment and its deleterious byproducts.

In this article, I briefly present how occupational social work can be reformulated. I then examine what lessons other countries' employment-oriented efforts suggest for this reformulated occupational practice in US work programs. I suggest also that practitioners in other countries can derive lessons from this expanded occupational social work knowledge and experience in the US to target unemployment and worker dislocation.

### **Occupational social work reformulated**

The reformulation of occupational social work aimed at job retention highlights two aspects of practice: roles and settings. Historically, occupational social work scholars such as Gould and Smith (1988), Kurzman and Akabas (1993), Ozawa (1980), Straussner (1990), Seck et al. (1993) and Lewis (1997) have emphasized the need for social as well as interpersonal change functions. Building on this literature, reformulated occupational social work calls for individuals to practice multiple roles, all with an employment focus: assessment, brief counseling and referral; advocacy; program development and social activism. Individual practitioners will engage in these work-specific roles concurrently at micro (individual), meso (small group and family) and macro (organization and community) levels. These dimensions are expanded in the next section.

Second and centrally, occupational social work will be systematically practiced in settings focused on the needs of unemployed and newly employed persons. In 1996, US welfare policy replaced means-tested public assistance grants with temporary and time-limited assistance coupled with mandatory employment. Welfare-to-work programs, community employment sites, transitional work programs, supervised worksites, mentoring agencies and job readiness programs are examples of such settings.

Job retention supports in earlier demonstration programs increased the ability of former welfare recipients and new workers to progress toward economic self-sufficiency (Herr and Halpern, 1991; Hollister et al., 1984; Rangarajan et al., 1998). The most successful supports, whether for men, women or youth, were individualized, intensive and long-term. At the individual level, job retention supports included continuous work-related assessment and goal-setting together with counseling, referral and advocacy for substance abuse and mental health concerns that might impede work. At the program and organizational level, retention supports

included individualized job search assistance, closely supervised work experience by supervisors who had workplace knowledge and interpersonal skills, job-specific skill training and open-ended post-employment monitoring and resource provision. At the policy level, childcare, health and transportation subsidies were particularly important for keeping a job.

### **Lessons for job retention in the US from occupational social work abroad**

#### *Retention-oriented assessment, brief counseling and referral roles*

As a first step in the development of job retention supports, the occupational practitioner in a work-program setting will conduct a contextualized assessment of what work and employment mean to program participants (Vigilante, 1982). Beginning 'where the client is' directs the practitioner to examine issues raised in recent sociological and social work literature on occupational attainment. Such issues might include attitudes and values about education and work in the family of origin (Farber and Iversen, 1998; Iversen and Farber, 1996), work experiences in youth (Rich, 1996), networks and information sources about work, early and future goals, articulation between education and work (Iversen, 1995), conflictual or discriminatory experiences in the workplace (Holzer, 1996b), workplace health and safety (Lewis, 1990) and workplace-relevant physical abilities or disabilities (Estes, 1987). Within-workplace knowledge about downsizing and its ramifications, types and extent of non-wage benefits and job search strategies are among the relevant applicable skills. The occupational practitioner will need extensive knowledge about local labor market conditions, family dynamics, stress and coping, and how different people and institutions experience and respond to migration, immigration, unemployment and poverty.

Information from countries such as Germany and Switzerland, where workplace and social upheaval is associated with increased numbers of 'guest' workers and mass migrations of ethnic minorities, can benefit retention-focused workers in the US. Knowledge about how displaced workers balance competing work and family demands (Googins and Godfrey, 1987), and how the relative use of formal and informal supports differs according to immigrants' country of origin, could help US practitioners guide new residents to the most congruent work-enhancement program. For example, job readiness and mentoring activities for recent

Puerto Rican immigrants could be set up in '*casitas*', a kind of blended social club and community center common to their Caribbean origins that successfully drew clientele in New York City (Sherraden and Martin, 1994). Work programs in such sites would allow for provision of both formal and informal supports. Similarly, features of family- and employment-focused social work in Australia and parts of western Europe that promote new, more community-based employment initiatives which view families as both employees needing supports and providers of work-related supports (Briar and Lawson, 1995), can model ways to expand the linkage and liaison functions of the counseling role in expanding job retention services.

#### *Retention-directed advocacy role*

The second step in the process for the occupational worker in a reformulated advocacy role will be identifying and working with corporate counterparts to facilitate improvements in organizational structure and resource management (Googins and Davidson, 1993; Mor-Barak, 1998) appropriate for unemployed and dislocated workers. Together they can examine hiring mechanisms, such as informal recruitment and weighting of credentials, for their discriminatory potential (Holzer, 1996b). They should examine gender-related policies as well, since work issues related to women are particularly neglected or minimized in most models of social work intervention (Vigilante, 1993). The occupational social worker will educate, and advocate with, local businesses in order to increase hiring of unemployed and working-poor clients and to take advantage of tax subsidies for doing so. The occupational practitioner also would draw upon experience with workplace job relocation to set up support services such as mentoring and job coaching for employees making the transition from welfare to work. Concurrently, the practitioner would gather data on workers who are disadvantaged by factors such as insufficient or poor-quality childcare, problematic transportation, hours that conflict with family needs and inadequate wages, in order to influence institutional and governmental policy in these areas.

Experiences in the Netherlands might be particularly informative for employment-focused advocacy in the US. In the 1920s governmental legislation established workers' councils in all Dutch work organizations employing more than 10 people (Googins and Godfrey, 1987: 180). These councils led to an atmosphere in the workplace that facilitated social work support of workers' rights

and other advocacy efforts on behalf of workers. Knowledge about the structure and politics of these councils might suggest ways that occupational practitioners could advocate with employers to create job retention supports in the workplace. How close collaboration between employers, social workers and councils has been developed and fostered would be particularly salient.

*Retention-focused program development role*

Third, occupational practitioners could initiate community programs aimed at expanding human and social capital, both critical elements to job retention. Such projects might include career enrichment programs between high schools and community colleges, the formation of one-stop employment and skill development centers in local communities to serve the retraining needs of all residents and establishment of mentoring agencies. Collaborative connections between residents, businesses and community groups would be mutually beneficial, as they would increase individual human capital and provide an enriched hiring pool for employers at the same time.

Germany's education and work programs for youth are especially impressive examples of human capital initiatives. The structure of half-day formal education and half-day youth work/youth education (Textor, 1995) models the kind of integrated education and job training efforts that could be particularly informative for urban school-to-career efforts in the US. Examples of social capital formation for program developers could come from industrially developing regions of Africa and Latin America where social workers formed community welfare centers (Estes, 1997). These centers were 'ground-up' community organizing efforts that compensated for byproducts of industrialization through a structured emphasis on relationship and network-building. Similarly, a human services infrastructure is developing in Zimbabwe and Malaysia that will enable members of families with mentally ill children to continue working and will address the relational disintegration that can accompany geographic separation between workers and other family members (Wintersteen et al., 1997). Such efforts could guide US program and policy efforts to solve problems of spatial mismatch resulting from the fact that needy workers reside in inner cities, job opportunities are located in suburbs and public transportation between the two is limited or non-existent (Jargowsky, 1997).

*Retention-focused social activist role*

Finally, occupational social workers could use a retention-focused social activist role to initiate and support policy changes that are essential for poor workers, such as the Earned Income Tax Credit and the American Family Fair Minimum Wage Act, flextime and flexplace. Another policy change would be the development of time-limited community service employment programs (Savner and Greenberg, 1997), with union or union-like benefits and on-job training opportunities in the absence of sufficient opportunities in local labor markets. Work-program social activists also can use testifying, lobbying and coalition-building skills with governmental task forces on job creation in order to build employment opportunities for work-program participants and to reclassify employment-focused social service jobs as needing the particular knowledge and skills of occupational practitioners.

The ways in which cooperation between unions and government in the Netherlands developed alternatives to traditional work sites and secured full-time benefits for part-time workers, producing one of the lowest jobless rates in Europe in the process (Andrews, 1997) could directly guide US activist efforts. Also, the methods by which the UK and France established small business initiatives among persons receiving unemployment benefits and public assistance (Livermore, 1996: 40) could guide similar micro-enterprise development efforts among participants in welfare-to-work programs. On-site education about business procedures, acquisition of start-up loans, methods for providing peer support within the enterprise and ways that new ventures, area businesses and consultants can collaborate are among the findings from these countries' experiences that could broaden work-program retention successes. Similar efforts in India that illustrate how labor welfare workers lobbied for governmental policies to secure employment and enable poor workers to obtain loans and build assets (United Nations Development Programme, 1997) would guide the expansion of US job retention supports.

**Lessons from the US for job retention supports abroad**

In spite of having social welfare services that generally surpass those in the US, other countries increasingly express the need for more knowledge about the clinical and therapeutic aspects of social work. Lessons from job retention-focused practice can lead occupationally directed social workers outside the US to confront the causes

and growing byproducts of unemployment. Three examples of these lessons follow.

First, social work practitioners in Poland want to know more about group work and family therapy (Gammon and Dziegielewska, 1997; Imbrogno, 1990). They also want more advanced training about how to form support groups and psycho-education programs for persons and families of persons with schizophrenia. They recognize that such supports can help the work efforts of family members and disabled persons alike. As Poland experiences increasing numbers of families with incomes below the poverty level, in spite of a public policy that guarantees employment, expanded voluntary services are needed to address the interactions between work efforts and family concerns that sabotage employment.

The US might guide Poland by means of its well-developed social work practice expertise in group work and family therapy. Both modalities share a relevant ecological and environmental base which can easily be expanded to provide a framework for employment-specific concerns. Such lessons would be especially valuable if the transmitters consider how these modalities are utilized differently within individualist compared with more communal sociopolitical frameworks. For example, a constructionist orientation to individuals and families, with its emphasis on meaning, context, relationship and negotiation (McNamee and Gergen, 1992) may be particularly applicable to employment-focused practice in diverse cultural and political communities.

Second, social workers in China assert that they need more professional training to deal with the special needs young people have in response to global restructuring. According to Chinese scholars, these practitioners want expanded counseling expertise to address the complex interplay between interpersonal and marital relationships, stress management, job interest and skills analyses, and job placement help (Ngai, 1993; Pearson and Phillips, 1994). Other reports document the need for additional professionally trained staff in community-based centers called occupational therapy stations (Chau and Yu, 1998). Such centers train participants in both social and occupational skills, readying them for economically productive work in direct or sheltered employment. However, because trainers have insufficient professional training, they lack the skills to adequately counsel learning-disabled trainees. The centers also remain under-resourced, in part because trainers' advocacy skills are underdeveloped.



Consequently, US expertise in combining occupational social work counseling with advocacy could contribute to China's developing services, particularly if educators address the contrasts between political ideology and societal values (Ngai, 1993). US occupational social workers have confronted such challenges in mediating conflicts between professional values and workplace priorities. The ways that occupational practitioners have maintained both service delivery and advocacy roles, honed their negotiation, mediation and conflict-resolution skills, and resolved characteristics and limits of confidentiality in situations of disparate rights and obligations (Kurzman, 1988), can guide Chinese educators. In addition, the multiple concurrent roles proposed in reformulated occupational practice would guide Chinese practitioners as they engage with trainees in employment-related change at both individual and community levels. In these ways, the training centers would increase the competence of their professional services and improve their ability to garner resources.

Third, Germany, too, expresses the need for improved parent education, divorce and single-parent counseling, outpatient counseling for youth, couples and families, and improved foster services. Such services, specified in their 1991 Child and Youth Welfare Law but as yet not fully offered (Textor, 1995), are integrally associated with work attachment and job retention.

The long history of child welfare services in the US, both its successes and failures (Schwartz and Fishman, 1999), could provide helpful lessons as the two former Germanys struggle to blend. The increased attention paid to cultural and socioeconomic diversity in recent US child welfare evaluation and programming could guide the way Germany resolves work and family conflicts among people from disparate backgrounds. The work-focused assessment, program development and outreach suggested by the reformulation presented here might produce solutions that integrate employment and family supports offered through governmental and voluntary sectors in unified Germany. Most importantly, US practitioners can encourage Germany to retain the kind of strong national support structure for child welfare that will reduce the high rates of child abuse and neglect associated with decentralized social welfare and poverty in the US. These lessons may pertain to work and family concerns in other countries as well, particularly as they respond to the changes in Europe under the European Union.

## **Implications of job retention focus and international exchange**

This article suggests ways to reformulate traditional occupational social work practice to systematically construct and deliver job retention supports in welfare-to-work and other work programs. Such supports are known to enhance rates of employment and job retention among work-program participants. Given the congruence between the nature of job retention supports and the character of social work practice, such supports may produce even higher rates of retention if they are constructed and delivered by occupational social workers according to a reformulated framework.

Systematic focus on job retention supports in work-program settings also perpetuates the mission of the profession to improve conditions for persons who are economically disadvantaged: specifically, unemployed and new workers. The reformulated occupational roles could also target the work needs of under-employed, dislocated and working poor persons, as well as the needs of those who are comfortably employed. In addition, the knowledge base of this expanded practice specialization could be applied productively to economically disadvantaged clients at service sites other than those that are specifically work-related. Knowledge about how to develop employment supports in and out of the workplace, how to collaborate with local businesses about job creation and how to influence job-related legislation could help practitioners expand the work efforts of persons with chronic mental illness. Similarly, such services, together with assessment of family supports for work, work-focused program development with medical facilities and activism for workplace-relevant disability legislation, could constitute enriched practice with persons with physical disabilities.

Job retention in the global workplace can be promoted through collaborative information exchange and participatory knowledge building among occupationally oriented workers in countries around the world. In both industrial and developing countries, collaboration between social and economic developers, legal authorities and clinical service providers (Elliott and Mayadas, 1996) can effect program- and policy-level employment-focused change. US practitioners can learn lessons from industrial and developing countries about practice concerns such as geography-based work displacement, community-based employment initiatives, union-management collaboration and proactive directions for

national policy. Social workers in other countries can expand their work-program effectiveness by drawing from US expertise in group and family counseling, psycho-education and the formation of self-support groups. Use of diverse roles concurrently at multiple systems levels, as proposed in the US reformulation, can expand countries' abilities to solve conflicts between work and family needs, serve a broader base of persons with physical and mental health disabilities and mediate between service providers in a broader range of voluntary and governmental sectors.

International exchange of knowledge, skills, programs and policy directions forwarding job retention would serve the social work profession in addition to its clientele. Sharing and knowledge-building among countries can revise and expand occupational social work practice as this field of specialization continues to evolve. Features of individual-level practice in the US can be enriched by aspects of community practice in developing countries and the more inclusive social welfare framework in other industrial countries, and vice versa, consonant with the reformulation presented here. The predominance of social work in the western world as a model for developing countries (Gammon and Dziegielewska, 1997) thus would be replaced by mutual and reciprocal model-building at the global level. International exchange of knowledge also could influence occupational social work education, counteracting the 'Americentric' tradition (Hartman, 1990) through an expanded educational focus on global aspects of labor, economics, participatory service construction, immigration, politics and family. In these ways, social workers around the world can collaboratively and proactively confront unemployment and its disadvantages in the 21st century.

## Notes

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1. The terms 'occupational social work' and 'industrial social work' are essentially synonymous. In this article, the former term will be used.

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