# A Grounded Theory Exploration of Undergraduate Experiences of Vicarious Unemployment

Mindi N. Thompson, Rachel S. Nitzarim,
and Pa Her
University of Wisconsin—Madison

Jason J. Dahling
The College of New Jersey

The experiences of vicarious unemployment (VU) among 17 undergraduate student participants who had a primary caregiver who was involuntarily unemployed were explored using grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Data from semistructured interviews with 15 women and 2 men revealed the nuanced nature of experiences with unemployment among those who experience it vicariously. Struggles related to increased family stress and experiences with stigma were common across participants. As participants reflected upon these challenges, they both lamented the costs associated with the struggles and expressed appreciation for the lessons that they have learned. They emerged from their VU experiences with increased financial and job market awareness, which informed their hope for a life that is free from the struggles endured in their families. Participants expressed confidence in their ability to cultivate financial security for their own families, stable employment, and opportunities to pursue work that will allow them to give back to others. Implications for counseling and directions for future research are discussed.

*Keywords:* vicarious unemployment, undergraduate career development, familial unemployment stress

Unemployment rates have surged in recent years, and joblessness is now the primary cause of nonelderly poverty within the United States (Levy & Kochan, 2012). As of July 2012, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) reported that 12.8 million (8.3%) U.S. citizens were out of work (BLS, 2012). Not surprisingly, understanding the impact of unemployment has garnered increased attention across disciplines. Psychological research, in particular, has begun to centralize unemployment as a critical incident that impacts the individual and the family (e.g., Ali, Fall, & Hoffman, 2013; Blustein, 2006; Cinamon, 2001). In the sections that follow, we present evidence of the impacts of job loss on both the worker and the family. We use this evidence to shape the development of a grounded theory exploration of vicarious unemployment (VU) among college students, with the objective of exploring how young adults perceive, internalize, and respond to unemployment in the family.

## Unemployment as a Critical Incident

Loss of employment contributes to significant difficulties for the individual given the central role of work to one's sense of identity, security, and self-worth (e.g., Ali et al., 2013; Blustein, 2006). Ali et al. (2013) highlighted the need to understand the "human costs"

of unemployment as related to social class and career development. Financial loss, increased social isolation and stress, decreased social status, and loss of daily routine are some of the difficulties that relate to unemployment (Christoffersen, 2000; Conger, Conger, Matthews, & Elder, 1999). These factors, in turn, increase susceptibility to mental health concerns (e.g., Diener & Seligman, 2004; Price, Choi, & Vinokur, 2002). In their meta-analysis of 237 cross-sectional and 87 longitudinal studies exploring relationships among unemployment and mental health, Paul and Moser (2009) demonstrated that unemployed persons exhibited higher levels of distress, depression, anxiety, and psychosomatic symptoms, and lower levels of subjective well-being and self-esteem, when compared with their employed counterparts.

Unemployment also is considered a crisis within the family. Unemployment increases family stress (e.g., Lundberg, 1993; Schliebner & Peregoy, 1994), financial strain, and marital conflicts (e.g., Conger et al., 1999; Robila & Krishnakumar, 2005). It also has been documented to contribute to mental health concerns among children and adolescents (e.g., Sleskova et al., 2006; Sund, Larsson, & Wichstrøm, 2003). Indeed, family members have been referred to as the "hidden victims" of unemployment (Atkins, Ferguson, & Blankenship, 1983, p. 29) given the increased rates of abuse, family stress, disengagement, and violence that follow job loss (e.g., Kalil, 2005; Lempers, Clark-Lempers, & Simons, 1989; McLoyd, 1989).

The recent increased rates of unemployment in the United States indicate that a large number of children and adolescents have, or will have, an unemployed caregiver. For example, in 2011, 11.5% of all families had an unemployed family member (BLS, 2012). Further attention to VU, or the experience of having a caregiver within the family who has earning potential but is unable to obtain

Mindi N. Thompson, Rachel S. Nitzarim, and Pa Her, Department of Counseling Psychology, University of Wisconsin—Madison; Jason J. Dahling, Department of Psychology, The College of New Jersey.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Mindi N. Thompson, Department of Counseling Psychology, 1000 Bascom Mall, 335 Education Building, University of Wisconsin—Madison, Madison, WI 53706-1326. E-mail: mnthompson@wisc.edu

or sustain employment, is needed. The purpose of this grounded theory investigation is to explore the experiences of undergraduate students whose primary caretaker has been or is currently involuntarily unemployed.

## Career Development Processes Within the Family

Career theorists have long highlighted the role of caregiver influence on their child's career development (e.g., Roe, 1957; Super, 1957). Although scholars (e.g., Hartung, Porfeli, & Vondracek, 2005) agree that understanding child and adolescent perspectives of the world of work is important, the process by which familial situations affect adolescents and young adults is not well understood (e.g., Otto, 2000; Santos, 2000). Several decades ago, Bandura, Ross, and Ross (1961) conceptualized the importance of vicarious learning. He proposed that people, especially children, learn from one another via observational learning, imitation, and modeling. Vicarious learning is one of four types of learning that inform the development of several career-related outcomes (e.g., Thompson & Dahling, 2012).

Jahoda (1981) argued that unemployment has both latent and manifest consequences to the individual and to the family. Ali et al. (2013) further clarified that unemployment is relevant to social class and career decision-making processes within the family. They highlighted three theories that may help to explain the impacts of unemployment (i.e., intersectionality theory [Cole, 2009], the social class worldview model [Liu et al., 2004], and the psychology of working perspective [Blustein, 2006]). Another potential explanation for the interconnections among employment and the family system is spillover theory (Bolger, DeLongis, Kessler, & Schilling, 1989), or the notion that an employee's work experience carries over into the home and home experiences into work.

Although much of the research on spillover theory has focused on work–life balance for the employed adult (e.g., Marco & Suls, 1993) and child–parent relations (e.g., Stephens, Franks, & Atienza, 1997), some research has examined its impact on undergraduate students whose families experienced a shift in income (e.g., Galambos & Silbereisen, 1987; Lim & Sng, 2006). For example, Galambos and Silbereisen (1987) surveyed the mother, father, and adolescent from two-parent families in West Germany. Results demonstrated that mothers and fathers of families who had experienced income loss greater than 5% in the preceding year reported higher levels of pessimism than their counterparts who had experienced no change in income or income gain. Adolescent girls (but not boys) in these families also reported lower expectancy of job success. In a related study, Lim and Sng (2006) demonstrated that maternal and paternal money anxiety related positively to undergraduate students' money anxiety, which subsequently contributed to negative motives for making money (i.e., working and making money for the purpose of overcoming feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt) and lower intrinsic motivation to work. These findings, coupled with those from research indicating that children who have an unemployed caregiver report increased feelings of confusion related to the job loss (Abramovitch & Johnson 1992; Schliebner & Peregoy, 1994), point to the need to consider the effects of shifts in work, including joblessness, among caregivers on children and adolescents.

## VU and Career Development

Attention to the effects of caregiver unemployment on children and the family has increased in recent years. Nonetheless, limited data exist that consider VU from a career development perspective among adolescents and young adults (e.g., Bryant, Zvonkovic, & Reynolds, 2006; Cinamon, 2001). Scholars (e.g., Barling & Mendelson, 1999; Cinamon, 2001; Thompson & Subich, 2013) have argued that factors related to social class and social status, such as job loss, may be particularly relevant during adolescence. Although not yet explicitly examined within the context of VU, other literature (e.g., Corrigan, 2003; Paulsen & St. John, 2002) has demonstrated that undergraduate students from lower income families face considerable financial challenges related to enrollment and persistence in college; these students are more likely to work full- or part time, take on more student loan debt, and be less engaged in the campus community.

A growing body of research has begun to illuminate some of the relationships of VU to the career development of adolescents and undergraduate students (e.g., Cinamon, 2001; Schliebner & Peregoy, 1994). Results from Pautler and Lewko's (1987) investigation within an Ontario community that had been impacted by significant layoffs indicated that adolescents who were directly affected by unemployment held less optimistic views of their future work, had lower work ethic, and were more likely to be motivated by job security and predictability (as opposed to affluence or intrinsically rewarding work) than their counterparts who had greater economic stability. Adolescents affected by layoffs also reported little confidence in their ability to get a job and viewed getting a job as outside of their control.

Cinamon (2001) examined the differences between Israeli 11th–12th graders whose fathers were unemployed and whose fathers were employed. Results indicated that adolescents with unemployed fathers had lower expectations of future career success and higher values for aestheticism in their work than their counterparts whose fathers were employed, but the two groups did not differ in levels of career maturity or other work values. In an investigation with Canadian undergraduates and their parents, Barling and Mendelson (1999) linked parents' job insecurity to their adolescent children's perceptions of insecurity. Adolescents' perceptions of insecurity, in turn, contributed to more negative mood (anger, anxiety, and sadness), heightened beliefs in an unjust world, and lowered school performance. In sum, these findings indicate that caregiver job loss relates to adolescent career beliefs and work attitudes. To date, however, no research explores the phenomenological experience of caregiver unemployment among those in the family who experience it vicariously.

## Statement of Purpose

This body of research (e.g., Cinamon, 2001; Lim & Sng, 2006; Paul & Moser, 2009) highlights the implications of unemployment on the individual who experiences job loss and on that person's family. Although existing findings have facilitated our understanding of a variety of considerations related to unemployment, the work has been relatively piecemeal in nature, and the psychological mechanisms through which VU operates on work and life expectations remain unclear. Gaining a nuanced, rich analysis of the lived experience of VU will help to organize existing findings

and to identify new directions for future research and counseling practice.

The purpose of this study was to explore one element of the "human costs" of unemployment by examining the experience of VU among a diverse sample of undergraduate students. During their undergraduate studies, many students continue to have shared economic and emotional ties with their caretakers (e.g., Barling & Mendelson, 1999). The college years are also considered formative to identity development as they represent the first time that individuals separate from their caregivers and are a time during which considerable career exploration occurs (e.g., Kenny & Rice, 1995). Finally, attendance and success in college has important implications for future careers such that earning a degree represents a springboard to future career development and earnings potential (e.g., Langhout, Rosselli, & Feinstein, 2007). One's experience of VU during the college years, therefore, seems likely to shape work beliefs and decisions with important implications for later life.

## Method

### Rationale for a Grounded Theory Method

A grounded theory (GT; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) approach using a constructivist lens (Charmaz, 2006) was used to examine the subjective experiences of VU. GT offers a format for examining the lived experiences of participants, including their values, beliefs, feelings, assumptions, and ideologies (Creswell, 2007; Fassinger, 2005). This approach allows participants to share their narrative through the use of open-ended interviews.

### Participants

Seventeen undergraduates (age 18–23; $M = 19.65$, $SD = 1.73$) who reported that one of their primary caregivers had been or was involuntarily unemployed for at least 8 months participated. Fifteen participants were women, and two were men. Participants self-identified as Asian American (three), African American (three), Latina (three), Mexican American (one), Hmong (one), White (one), Native American and White (one), African American and White (one), and African American and German (one). All participants self-identified as straight or heterosexual, and 12 reported that they were single, two that they were engaged, and three that they were currently living with their partner. Eight freshmen, one sophomore, four juniors, two seniors, and two fifth-year seniors participated. Thirteen reported being employed at the time of the interview (range = 8–30 hr per week; $M = 11.41$, $SD = 8.53$), and all reported involvement in extracurricular activities (range = 3–40 hr per week; $M = 8.88$, $SD = 8.60$).

When reporting annual household income for their caregivers, 11 participants estimated less than $40,000, three estimated $40,000–$59,999, one estimated $150,000–$179,000, and one estimated her father's income as less than $20,000 per year and mother's income between $20,000 and $40,000 (one participant did not report income level). Participants identified the following labels to describe their social class category: working class (seven), lower class (four), middle class (two), "between working class and lower middle class (one), upper middle class (one), lower class or working class (one), and one did not report.

Eleven participants stated that their primary caretaker was still unemployed at the time of the interview, and seven indicated that their caretaker regained part- or full-time employment. Duration of unemployment ranged among participants: Three reported that their caregiver had been unemployed for more than 5 years, eight reported between 2 and 5 years, and six reported that the unemployment lasted less than 2 years. Five indicated that the unemployment occurred prior to 2008, and 12 indicated that it happened after 2008. Participants identified the following persons as the unemployed caregiver: father (nine), mother (six), both father and mother (one), and grandfather whom the participant had lived with since childhood (one). The highest education levels for the unemployed caregivers were less than high school diploma (two), high school diploma or GED (five, some college (five), associates or bachelor's degree (three), and graduate school (two). Pseudonyms are used throughout to protect confidentiality.

### Researchers

Given the focus within GT of researchers as instruments (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), potential researcher bias was considered. The list of these biases included (a) assumptions and stereotypes regarding unemployed individuals as not wanting to work, being lazy, and uneducated or undereducated; (b) knowledge of familial effects of unemployment; (c) personal experiences and awareness related to familial unemployment; (d) frustration with the unemployment situation in the United States; and (e) awareness of limited attention to unemployment within the literature.

The first author is a 33-year-old Assistant Professor of Counseling Psychology and a licensed psychologist. She grew up in a two-parent, lower-middle-class family whose extended family was working class and poor and had a history of unemployment and job loss. As such, she developed a keen sense of the meaning of work at a young age. The second author is a 27-year-old third-year doctoral student who grew up in a two-parent, middle-class home with one parent who was continuously unemployed and between jobs. As a child, she experienced incidents in which she remembers hiding her caregiver's unemployment for fear of being stigmatized by peers, teachers, extended family members, and religious leaders. The third author is a 26-year-old Academic Advisor who works with underrepresented undergraduate students. She is a recent graduate from a Counseling Psychology master's program and was a first-generation college and graduate student. She grew up in a two-parent low-income household where her parents emphasized the importance of an education as a means to access employment. The fourth author served as an auditor. He is a 32-year-old Associate Professor of Industrial/Organizational Psychology. He grew up in a two-parent, upwardly mobile household that was lower-middle class during childhood and upper-middle class by late adolescence. His immediate and extended family heavily emphasized the importance of education and work.

### Procedure

All participants were enrolled as undergraduate students at a large, research-intensive, public university located within a mid-size city in the midwestern United States. The unemployment rate was 8.5% in the United States and 7% in the state during the time in which data were collected (BLS, 2011). Participants were re-

cruited via mass e-mails and flyers that were sent through university organization and support program listservs and posted in campus buildings. Recruitment information indicated that the study sought undergraduate students who had a primary caregiver who had been or was currently involuntarily unemployed for at least 8 months (*long-term unemployment* is defined as 6 months or greater; BLS, 2012).

Interested students called or e-mailed the third author in order to participate in a brief (i.e., 10-min) telephone screening to determine whether the person met criteria for the study; they were asked to identify the unemployed caretaker, report the length of involuntarily unemployment, and to briefly describe their experience of the VU. In total, 24 individuals contacted the third author to express interest in the study (four did not respond to a follow-up request to schedule the phone call to learn more about the study and participate in the screening). Twenty individuals completed the screening interview, and 19 met study criteria (one indicated that she was unemployed but did not have an unemployed caregiver). Ultimately, 17 students scheduled an interview time and participated in the study (two canceled their interview ahead of the scheduled date due to conflicts with exams and did not wish to reschedule).

Participants were provided with a $25 gift card to a local grocery or drug store, reviewed the informed consent with the interviewer, and then completed the demographic questionnaire. The 45- to 90-min interview was audio-recorded. Upon completion of the interview, participants were offered a resource guide and indicated their willingness to be contacted in the future (all participants but one agreed). Interviews were completed during fall 2011–winter 2012.

**Interview protocol.** Open-ended questions and probes were developed on the basis of previous literature (e.g., Cinamon, 2001; Schliebner & Peregoy, 1994). These questions guided data collection, but consistent with GT (Charmaz, 2006), the questions and probes (e.g., "Can you tell me more about that?") developed and changed as data emerged and the need for clarification of new subject matter became relevant. Specifically, the question: "What meaning do you and your caretaker have towards unemployment?" and the clearinghouse question: "Is there anything else that you want to share about your experiences?" were added after the first interview. Interview transcripts and content were discussed and coded by the researchers after each interview was completed, allowing for questions and probes to evolve through the data collection process (see the Appendix for a final list of all questions). In order to maintain consistency, the second author completed all interviews.

**Data analysis.** Data analysis was conducted through the methods described by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and later clarified by Charmaz (2006). Interviews were transcribed verbatim and were coded in three phases that led to the emergence of core themes through an interconnected storyline. The initial phase, open coding, involved a line-by-line level of analysis in which individual responses were coded into more concise statements, and each member of the research team identified concepts very close to, or using, the participants' words. The first three authors independently completed the open-coding process and met weekly to share codes, reflect upon implicit meanings of the emerging statements, discuss potential biases, and examine how the units of meaning were similar to or different from one another.

After six transcripts were coded using open coding, the team moved into the axial phase where these codes were placed into higher order categories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Each team member created higher order categories that directly referenced the open codes. All higher order codes were merged, and data were grouped and arranged on the basis of parallels and theoretical connections across the transcripts. These higher order codes were used to code the remaining 11 transcripts, but team members remained open to new codes as they emerged across all 17 transcripts and avoided forcing data into already created categories (as recommended by Glaser, 1978). All opinions regarding coding were included in the coding document rather than debating to consensus. This culminated in the construction of 48 distinct codes across the 17 transcripts.

Selective coding was the final phase and involved combining and narrowing axial codes to be incorporated into a theoretical model. The axial codes are synthesized, and the main themes are extracted (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Selective coding began when it was apparent that new and unique themes within the data were no longer emerging (which coincided with the time when the final three transcripts were coded). We examined all 48 codes, revisited participants' incidents within codes, and extrapolated the main themes that brought together the relationships and connections within the data. Throughout each phase of coding, we moved toward the development of a theory, and our analysis shifted between levels of abstraction (i.e., line-by-line interview data, higher order codes, and thematic coding). This flexibility is especially important when considering whether or not *theoretical saturation* has been met (Charmaz, 2006).

Several techniques were implemented to maintain quality and rigor. The first three authors coded each transcript and identified themes during selective coding independently before meeting as a group, where codes were modified or added to satisfy all ideas. The research team maintained a detailed audit trail that included meeting notes, field notes, and discussions of biases throughout data collection and analysis (Creswell, 2007). We also attempted to use member checks to enhance the reliability of the data. The 16 participants who agreed to be contacted were offered the opportunity to provide feedback on the results. No participant provided feedback or requested changes. Finally, our auditor was used to limit or control for bias, offer "investigator triangulation" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p. 17), and put forward alternative perspectives on the data. He reviewed interview questions, completed line-by-line coding for four transcripts, reviewed the 48 axial codes, and reviewed three iterations of the emergent theory during selective coding. He presented feedback throughout in order to represent an impartial analysis of the data. After discussions, revisiting transcripts, and reflection of the emerging findings, there were no issues of discrepancy between the auditor and the researchers.

## Results

The 17 participants represented varied backgrounds along a number of cultural dimensions (e.g., gender, race/ethnicity, immigration status, family social class, family structure). They differed in how their caregiver became unemployed (e.g., layoffs due to declines in the economy or the outsourcing of jobs, physical or mental health concerns, experiences of oppression and discrimination that culminated in termination) and in whether the unem-

ployment was chronic or acute. The prevalence of unemployment within their communities also varied. Despite these differences, the stories converged. Participants acknowledged that VU experiences are different for each individual yet share common features. For example, Fey stated, "Unemployment looks different for everybody. Employment is a huge part of our lives. Once you've lost that, you've lost a part of yourself."

Throughout the interviews, participants articulated the many ways that they have been affected by their caregiver's unemployment. For example, Natalie said:

> I take it personally when people say things about my mom. I guess when she's going through hard situations being unemployed, I feel like I'm going through what she's going through exactly the same way even though I'm not in her situation.

Many were tearful as they reflected upon painful experiences associated with the VU. They also expressed difficulty discerning the meaning of these experiences. Cassie summarized it in this way:

> I guess society makes it seem like it is bad people that are victims of it [unemployment]. I didn't do anything bad to be put in that situation. My brothers didn't do anything bad to be put in that situation. My mom didn't do anything bad to be put in that situation, but we are all victims of it.

The GT that emerged from the data depicted the nuanced nature of participants' experiences with VU. Although their individual circumstances differed, all described VU as an event that has mattered to their relationships, life as a college student, and aspirations for the future. The experiences related to the VU were complex, and participants perceived that it has had negative, positive, and neutral implications for their lives. Results converged around two main themes and four subthemes. The theme of struggle included participants' experience of increased family stress and their individual struggles with stigma. In the midst of the struggle, however, participants highlighted the lessons that they have learned from their caregiver's unemployment. These lessons occurred via increased financial and job market awareness that facilitated their desires for future stability and to contribute to others.

## Struggle

Throughout the interviews, participants repeatedly described struggles that were related to the unemployment. At the family level, they shared stories of family stress, including increased financial strain and changes in their relationships with their caregivers following the unemployment. Family struggle was depicted as the context that informed participants' individual struggles. Participants reported feeling stigmatized because of their caregiver's unemployment, which led several to judge their caregivers and themselves. Many shared stories of their struggle to connect with others, which contributed to some participants taking great efforts to conceal the VU in an effort to avoid further isolation.

## Family Stress

All participants except one (Bob, who reported that his mother's unemployment had no effect on the family financially because his father owns a business and the family is well-off) noted that financial stress increased as a result of the unemployment. Some described a history of financial struggle and "money problems." For those participants who grew up in middle- or upper-middle-class families, the downward social class shifts following the unemployment were depicted as drastic and arduous. Others noted that stress built up over time when, at first, it seemed that the unemployment would be temporary. Although two participants expressed gratitude for the increased time that they were able to spend with their caregiver following the unemployment, most depicted portraits of families whose opportunities to engage in bonding activities (e.g., eating together, dining in restaurants, engaging in recreational activities, traveling) decreased postunemployment. This was the result of limited funds, increased tension, or other family members working several jobs to compensate for the job loss.

The unemployment event, coupled with heightened family stress, contributed to changes within caregiver relationships. Participants used words/phrases such as *strained*, *distant*, *tense*, and *burdened with hardship* to depict these relationships. Many described caregivers who became withdrawn and self-focused, which led to them neglecting familial needs and concerns. For example, Ashley summarized her father's response to the unemployment in this way:

> He lost his pride because he's not making the money that he was making . . . he changed as a person . . . he's more stressed and absentminded and lost in thought trying to figure things out all the time rather than focused on what I am saying or anything like that.

Feelings of neglect fueled resentment among those participants who, at the time, did not understand the reasoning behind the unemployed caregiver's reactions. Several expressed "anger," "disgust," and "irritation" toward their caregiver. Perceptions that their caregiver acted "selfishly" and did little to mitigate the detrimental effects of the unemployment exacerbated these reactions. For example, Cassie blamed her father's "stubbornness" in hiding the unemployment and refusing to seek support for her family's struggles. Upon losing his job, Cassie's father hid the unemployment until the family's financial assets had been depleted; they lost their house and accrued significant debt due to a lack of health insurance. This had implications for Cassie's education (she was forced to switch schools in the midst of high school) and prevented her brother's enrollment in college. She summed up the implications of her father's actions in this way: "It seemed our futures were taken from us because of decisions he made without letting us know."

Participants' ability to perceive their caregivers positively or negatively was influenced by the family context, the caregiver's reactions to the unemployment, and participant's ability to make sense of the unemployment and its effects within the family. Whereas a few participants expressed continued support and admiration for their unemployed caregiver, many reported their belief that they can no longer view their caregiver as a positive role model. They struggled to understand the meaning of these negative perceptions for their continued familial relationships as well as for their own futures. For example, Brigit reasoned, "I love my dad, I love his personality, he is a great person but I don't want to become him . . . People live up to their parents, and I can't. I don't

want to because that would be horrible!" Many expressed their internal struggle to make sense of their desire to love and respect their caregiver and view her or him positively while simultaneously feeling "let down" and "disappointed."

## Individual Struggle With Stigma

In addition to the heightened stress within the family, participants shared painful memories in which they felt judged and criticized by others because of the unemployment. The stigma associated with unemployment emanated from news outlets, teachers, peers, and extended family members. Some participants described experiencing judgment indirectly via their caregiver who sought emotional support from them after being criticized by others. Most recounted the difficult and common experience of listening to harsh messages about individuals who are unemployed from those who may not have known that their caregiver was unemployed or who may not have intended to direct criticism toward the participant. For example, Brigit stated: "I lived in a small town . . . There were so many people that were anti-unemployment/social security and they would just go off. And I'd have to sit there." Several also described facing direct insults from people who did know of their caregiver's unemployment. Stephanie shared stories in which she experienced judgment from peers who criticized both Stephanie and her parents as being "undeserving" because her family relied on government aid and "didn't make [their] own money."

In combination, the depth of the family struggle and the frequency of stigma contributed to the extent to which participants internalized stigma associated with the VU. An implication of internalized stigma for most participants was judgment toward their caregivers or toward themselves. For example, several reported their belief that their caregiver was "lazy" and must deserve the unemployment because they "should be able to support themselves." Some judged their caregivers for being dependent on others and questioned whether they were "cheating the system" by accepting unemployment benefits or other aid.

Participants revealed painful and complex emotional reactions related to their self-judgment. Many reported that their VU experiences have contributed to feelings of "embarrassment," "shame," and "guilt." Some indicated that they have been surprised by the extent of their internal struggle and feelings of shame despite the fact that they did not frequently experience judgment from peers. For example, Vickie stated, "It [the unemployment] is not something my friends brought up. It is something I fought between myself, which is more weird. No one teases me about it." During the interviews, most participants expressed frustration or confusion regarding the extent to which they continue to experience shame given that they are now mostly independent from their families.

Experiences of stigma and internalized stigma contributed to a belief among many participants that they and their families did not and do not "fit in" or "belong" within their communities, that they are "worlds apart" from others, and that they are "not as good" as their peers. Although a few participants indicated that unemployment was common within their communities and that they were able to find support from friends with similar experiences, most described past and present difficulties connecting with others. Many believed that this was a result of being judged by their friends, whereas others attributed the disconnection to their friends

being unable to understand the implications of VU. For example, Brigit summarized interactions with her friends following her father's unemployment in this way:

> They stopped being supportive because it was just too much for them. . . . They just wanted to live a carefree life, and I don't want to necessarily loosen up. So I am too serious for them or whatever. I just don't know how not to be serious. They just didn't want anything to do with me at a certain point.

Other participants indicated that their feelings of isolation resulted from their own inability to relate to peers with different familial social class statuses, access to resources, and employment histories. For example, Stephanie said, "even if I tried making that connection, I still couldn't." Many cited continued struggles to connect with peers upon entering college as well as continued occurrences of perceived judgment from peers and university staff.

The continued experiences with stigma, coupled with participants' internalized feelings of guilt, shame, and embarrassment related to the VU, contributed to many participants' efforts to conceal the fact that their caregiver was or is unemployed. The interview itself represented the first time that many had discussed the unemployment outside of their family. Most were cautious when determining with whom they would share the VU so as to protect themselves from judgment. Whereas many described their continued efforts to mask their experiences (e.g., "I do not want to show my emotions. I do not want to cry or be sad about [the unemployment]. I would rather hide it than really talk about it"—Sam), Glenisha, one of the older participants, shared her recent realization that disclosing the VU was useful. She said, "If you continue to avoid it, it will keep eating away at you."

## Lessons Learned

In addition to describing the struggles associated with the VU, participants shared their appreciation for the valuable lessons that they have learned from their experiences. Enrollment in college was characterized as a critical transition time for participants who reported increased independence from their families. For many, this independence has provided opportunities for further reflection on the meaning of the VU for their lives. Most noted that experiences related to the VU (e.g., financially providing for their families, assisting their caregivers in financial processes, witnessing firsthand the negative consequences of a poor economy) have contributed to their increased financial and job market awareness. For many, this awareness has fueled their belief that they have learned valuable lessons from their struggles that provide them opportunities to attain a future that is different from their caregivers and free from the day-to-day constraints associated with unemployment. Celia said it in this way:

> If my dad's unemployment taught me anything, I would say that the unemployed can't do anything. You are dependent on other people, and you are like a child. And I stopped being a child a long time ago. I want to go to school, get a good degree, find a job, and provide for my family. I want to end the cycle.

In addition to a desire to cultivate a life that is free from struggles experienced within their families, they are motivated by their hope that they will achieve financial stability and careers that will allow them to positively contribute to society.

## Financial Awareness and a Desire for Stability

As participants reflected on their VU experiences within their families, many indicated that they felt as though they had been forced to become financially aware. Heightened family stress related to the VU contributed to most participants' inability to have their basic needs met or to "be a kid" who was free from responsibilities to support the family. Many were enlisted by their caregiver to assist with filing paperwork for financial assistance (e.g., unemployment compensation, food stamps, bankruptcy). Several participants noted that they felt burdened by an expectation to act as a caregiver to their family systems and to financially provide for their families. For many, the financial pressures did not end upon entering college; they reported an expectation that they maintain employment in order to send money home. Some described this as a challenge to their academic success (e.g., "Last year, it was a strain on my education because I was always tight on money. So it was hard to be tight on money and not have enough to eat and try to have the energy to go to school."—Ana). A few participants indicated that their desire to financially provide for their families is a primary source of motivation for their own success. Many, however, described this as a source of tension that holds them back from their primary motivation toward stability for their own futures. They struggled to balance their seemingly disparate desires to continue to support their families with their longing for independence from the day-to-day challenges endured within their families.

Regardless of the source of the motivation, all participants yearned for stability in their futures (e.g., "I just want a better future and a better life and I try to strive for that."—Shandra). Most acknowledged that their firsthand experiences with the negative implications of poor fiscal decisions by their caregivers increased the salience of money to their daily choices. Because of this, they learned to take care of themselves and to function independently. All participants expressed pride in their ability to make wise financial decisions (i.e., discerning needs and wants, budgeting, saving money, pursuing mutually supportive relationships).

Participants also articulated confidence in their ability to navigate financial processes in order to attain financial security. Although some reported that they continue to wrestle with navigating their feelings of guilt associated with pursuing independence from their families, they are proud of their individual successes. All participants noted their value toward career success in their futures and cited their motivation to make enough money to ensure financial security.

## Job Market Awareness and a Desire to Contribute

Participants' financial knowledge coincided with their increased awareness of the job market. Witnessing the impacts of unemployment on their caregivers and families amplified most participants' fears regarding unemployment. Whereas one participant indicated his certainty that he will find a job because of his connections to his father's business, many reported feeling anxious about their job prospects and believe that they must be in the "top percentage" in order to be successful. Most cited these fears as contributing to their belief that they must be vigilant to ward off the negative consequences experienced within their families. Jung explained,

Seeing my family go through those different things, it makes you think, well maybe I should just be prepared to pull out my aid kit in case something happens. So it does make me think a lot about preventing certain things from happening, just being careful. These things make me worried a lot, and I think sometimes it holds me back.

Participants explained that these experiences have heightened their awareness of what it takes to be successful. Most expressed their belief that they must be conscientious in their choices in order to put themselves on "a road to success." All participants indicated their plan to graduate from college, and many viewed degree completion as the foundation that will provide their "way out" of the day-to-day constraints associated with unemployment. In addition, all participants described their belief that it will take more than a college degree to ensure success. For some, this meant choosing a major after diligently researching and identifying high-growth job areas (e.g., "I know my field is supposed to grow 15% every year."—Jose). Others described the importance of developing "back-up plans" given their recognition that "things never go perfectly" (Jung). Most indicated confidence in their understanding of factors that contribute to success in the job market above and beyond a college degree. For example, they noted the importance of pursuing additional education and training (e.g., graduate school, volunteer work abroad, career-specific trainings), developing skills to increase their marketability (e.g., fluency in languages), and pursuing jobs that will allow them to get their "foot in the door."

Participants credited their experience of VU and the lessons learned from the struggle as contributing to their realistic understanding of what it takes to be successful. In addition to a desire for individual-level financial stability, many relayed their passion for giving back, or contributing to the lives of others who experience similar struggles. They are motivated to "make change." For some, this entailed pursuing careers in helping professions (e.g., teacher, Peace Corps member, social service worker). For others, this meant aspiring to a high-status position that will provide a platform for change (e.g., diplomat, journalist, politician, professor, military medical doctor).

## Discussion

These findings describe the vicarious experience of unemployment among 17 diverse undergraduate students. The stories converged around the depiction of VU as a dynamic process by which caregiver unemployment, over time, relates to experiences within multiple domains of participant's lives. VU was highlighted as a complex contextual experience that contributes to familial and personal struggle. Although the actual unemployment event occurred in the past for most, the VU was identified as salient to their present lives and future aspirations. The college years represent a transitional phase during which participants are wrestling with their identities and attempting to make sense of the VU in the context of their futures. Participants acknowledged that the future may be difficult, but believed that the VU provided them with insights, resources, and motivation that will allow them to have a life that is different from that of their caregivers. They hope for financial security and an ability to do work that will allow them to contribute to positive change in the lives of others.

The qualitative nature of our results contributes to the emerging body of literature on VU by highlighting the phenomenological

experience of it among undergraduate students. Participants explicated the transition in their relationship with their caregiver following the unemployment and described a deeply personal internalization of the struggle and stigma associated with the VU. Even in the midst of these challenges and the internalization of a concealable stigmatized identity, participants reported that they have learned valuable lessons that they believe have facilitated resilience and will relate to their future careers.

Participants depicted the process by which unemployed caregivers transitioned from a positive to a negative or neutral role model. For many participants in this study, their caregiver's self-isolation and disengagement from the family (a finding from prior research on unemployment; e.g., Diener & Seligman, 2004; Paul & Moser, 2009; Price et al., 2002) engendered pain and confusion. They struggled to understand their caregiver's reactions to the unemployment and, consistent with attribution theory (Weiner, 1986), many responded by attributing negative feelings to their caregivers. Further research is needed in order to examine the extent to which negative perceptions of the caregiver relate to individuals' continued struggle to understand their VU experiences and to understand the degree to which these negative perceptions impact career, health, and familial outcomes for the individual.

Results from this study also illustrated the multiple roles that participants adopted due, in part, to their VU experience. They reported facing role conflict as a function of increased responsibility to care for their families while simultaneously attempting to connect with peers, assert their needs, and pursue academic success. This finding suggests that role theory (Turner, 2001) may be important to consider within the context of VU. For example, future research is needed in order to examine the multiple roles that individuals who experience a VU are likely to adopt (e.g., caregiver, breadwinner, student), to understand how they manage conflicting roles, and to identify factors that contribute to success in negotiating multiple roles.

The process by which caregiver unemployment became internalized among those who experience it vicariously was also illuminated through these data. Participants described incidents of being judged by others that, over time, contributed to them similarly judging their caregivers and themselves. The feelings of shame and embarrassment noted by participants may be characterized as self-conscious emotions that occur when people make internal attributions of responsibility for an event (Tracy & Robins, 2007). According to this perspective, participants' internalization of shame may have transpired because they identified with their unemployed caregiver, viewed unemployment as a negative or stigmatized state, or assumed some personal responsibility for the experience of VU. The experience of these self-conscious emotions among participants in this study appeared to have contributed to their belief that they must hide the VU from others. Most participants indicated that they felt unable to reach out for needed support for fear of judgment from others. VU may, therefore, be conceptualized as a concealable stigmatized identity (Pachankis, 2007) that warrants further exploration.

As participants projected into their futures, they reported motivation to pursue a life that will look different from that of their families. The experience of VU may facilitate increased awareness of the job market and of fiscal responsibilities. Many of the participants' statements suggested that they had adopted a prevention, rather than a promotion, regulatory focus and are consequently vigilant about their decisions in order to satisfy security and safety needs (Scholer & Higgins, 2012). Although most participants perceived this as an asset, they also realized that their increased knowledge came at a cost. Future research is needed in order to explore potentially detrimental consequences of a prevention orientation among adolescents who have experienced VU. For example, the tendencies of prevention-focused adults to focus more on avoiding failure than attaining success, commit early rather than explore options, and struggle with taking risks (Scholer & Higgins) warrant exploration within samples of individuals who have experienced a VU.

All participants indicated that overcoming the struggles associated with the VU has contributed to their confidence in their ability to persist in the face of obstacles in the future. They are motivated to successfully complete college and to attain jobs that will provide opportunities for freedom from the day-to-day constraints associated with unemployment, financial security, and the ability to support others who struggle. This finding seems consistent with ecological process theories of resilience and posttraumatic growth (e.g., Gunderson, 2000; Woodward & Joseph, 2003) that highlight the ability of all living beings to learn and grow from challenging climates or situations. This finding is particularly noteworthy because participants highlighted these positive, or growth-oriented, responses even without explicit prompting from the interview questions (see the Appendix). Further research that identifies factors that may contribute to resilience, including coping with adverse consequences and experiencing hope in the face of obstacles, among individuals who undergo a VU appears warranted.

## Limitations

Although we followed GT practices (e.g., Charmaz, 2006) by developing initial interview questions on the basis of previous scholarship (e.g., Bacikova-Sleskova, Madarasova Geckova, van Dijk, Groothoff, & Reijneveld, 2011; Cinamon, 2001), the inclusion of some questions and the exclusion of others may have influenced responses. Relatedly, data collection occurred during a time period in which attention to issues of unemployment and social class warfare was prominent at both state and national levels, which may have heightened sensitivity to experiences related to unemployment for participants.

The second set of limitations relates to characteristics of the sample. All participants were recruited from the same mid-sized, predominately White, 4-year university in the midwestern United States. Although the diversity of the sample allowed us to explore VU among individuals from a variety of racial/ethnic backgrounds, non-European American students may be overrepresented. The sample also was limited in its inclusion of men and of individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender. These findings cannot be generalized to students enrolled in other types of higher education institutions (e.g., community college, 2-year technical programs), and the findings represent an incomplete understanding of the experience of VU given their reliance on students enrolled in a higher education institution. All participants had access to social capital (e.g., financial resources, community support, academic support) that facilitated their attendance in college and that may differ substantially from individuals who do not have access to these resources. Finally, these results should be interpreted within a national context as unemployment rates

by nation vary across the world. Further research with more diverse samples (e.g., geographic region, noncollege students, rural communities) is needed.

The extent to which these findings account for complexities related to the identities of the adolescent and the caregiver is also unknown. Some prior research (e.g., Bacikova-Sleskova et al., 2011) has indicated that caregiver unemployment may have differential effects depending on the gender of the caregiver and the adolescent. It seems possible that the process by which the caregiver transitions from a positive to a negative role model may differ depending on characteristics of the caregiver and adolescent. Future research may also highlight potential buffers against these detrimental effects that could offer useful points for intervention.

Finally, any interpretations of these findings must be tempered by the fact that our data were inherently limited. Specifically, the experience of VU is likely to vary on the basis of a number of characteristics, including the family's overall level of financial security and strain, the duration of the caregiver unemployment (acute vs. chronic), and the reasons for the unemployment (controllable vs. uncontrollable, the impact of the economy vs. the result of a change in health status). Furthermore, these data summarize the experiences of 17 individuals who self-selected to participate in this research. It may be that these individuals differ from others who have experienced VU in important ways that may have impacted the findings (e.g., more intense reactions to the VU, limited prior experience discussing the VU). Future research is needed in order to further elucidate differences in the experience of VU depending on these, and other, relevant characteristics.

## Implications for Counseling

These findings indicate that VU is a unique cultural experience that has implications for practice. Scholars have argued that career counseling and psychotherapy overlap such that career concerns often surface within individual psychotherapy, and mental health concerns arise within career counseling (e.g., Anderson & Niles, 1995; Blustein, 2006). The experience of VU may be one contextual experience in which the overlap is particularly relevant. Participants in this study described VU as a salient experience that has relations to their interpersonal and familial relationships, identity development, and career decision-making processes.

Career practitioners and psychotherapists are encouraged to consider familial experiences with unemployment when gathering client histories. Clients who have a VU experience may benefit from unpacking the internalized messages and expectations regarding the world of work and the meaning of a college degree that they have learned from caregivers, teachers, school counselors, and the media. Facilitating space for clients to share their VU experiences and associated emotions seems particularly important given the tendency among this sample to hide their VU out of shame or embarrassment. According to Pachankis (2007), suppressing experiences with internalized stigma demands mental control and vigilance, which may lead to cognitive consequences (e.g., rebound effects), interpersonal costs, and psychological distress. Practitioners are encouraged to invite exploration of emotional reactions related to VU in the context of career planning, interpersonal relationships, and mental health. Psychoeducation or support groups may offer opportunities for decreasing feelings of isolation and stigmatization associated with family histories of unemployment.

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## Appendix

### Interview Questions

Tell me about your relationship with your caregiver.

Tell me about 3 specific memories you have regarding your experience with your caregiver's unemployment?

What emotional reactions did you have to your caregiver's unemployment?

How did having an unemployed primary caretaker affect your view of yourself?

What messages have you received about unemployment?

What meaning do you and your caretaker have towards unemployment?

How did people in your life respond to you having an unemployed caretaker?

How has your caregiver's unemployment affected your family?

How does your knowledge and/or experience of unemployment impact your career development/trajectory?

What are your career goals or aspirations upon graduation?

What are your perceptions of the job market outlook upon graduation?

Is there anything else that you want to share about your experiences?