

## Underemployment and Household Livelihood Strategies Among African Americans

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Underemployment is a labor force concept that refers broadly to inadequacies in employment or employment related hardship. Several researchers (Briggs,1981; Sullivan, 1978) define "employment-related hardship" as employment that is inadequate with respect to training or economic needs. Theorists and empirical researchers are converging in their agreement that three important dimensions of underemployment are time, income and use of the worker's skills(Sullivan and Hauser,1980). Unemployment is the limiting case of underemployment:no work time,no work-related income and no use of the worker's skills(Sullivan and Mutcher,1985). Moreover, there is substantial consensus that symptoms of underemployment include involuntary part-time work, working poverty, the misfit between educational credentials and employment opportunities,and discouragement(Clogg and Sullivan,1983). The Labor Utilization Framework (LUF) developed by Hauser and Sullivan (1975) and associated with several researchers (e.g., Clogg,1979;Clogg and Shockey,1984; Sullivan, 1978; Sullivan and Mutcher,1985; Shockey, 1985; Mutcher ,1985; Clogg and Sullivan,1983; Jones Johnson,1986 and Lichter, 1987) has been used to examin demographic composition and racial disparities in underemployment. These studies reveale that minorities and women are overrepresented in all forms of underemployment. The Labor Utilization Framework was extended to operationalize underemployment among African-Americans using data from the National Survey of Black Americans(JonesJohnson,1989a,1989b,1989c,1990,1993; Herring and JonesJohnson,1990).The National Survey of Black Americans (NSBA) (Jackson et al.,1980) is the first rigorous,nationally represented cross-sections of the adult(18 years and older) Black population in the continental United States.The sampling and field procedures resulted in 2,107 interviews,representing a response rate of approximately 69 percent. JonesJohnson,(1989) found that underemployment and underpayment along with minority status jointly influence rates of distress,which provides further insight into the relationship between minority status and mental health. Similarly, Jones Johnson(1990) investigated the effects of underemployment and underpayment on self-esteem among African American men and found that underemployment heightened the self-esteem of Black men because of their perceptions of structural barriers.Jones Johnson (1989) examined reference group comparisons of underemployment for African American men. The results revealed that Black men use other Black men rather than white men when assessing underemployment.Based on a modified version of the LUF, Jones Johnson and Herring(1993) measured types of underemployment among African Americans. They found that a larger percentage of Black females compared to Black males are subunemployed or discouraged, underemployed by low hours,and underemployed by low income. However, mismatch of

occupation and skill was the most prevalent underemployment type for both males and females. Herring and Jones Johnson (1990) examined political responses to underemployment among African Americans. The results of their study showed that there are differences between the underemployed and those with adequate use of their skills, and there were significant differences among those with different types of underemployment. Those workers with mismatch underemployment are less likely than the adequately employed to be political dropouts, and roughly 12 per cent of the mismatched underemployed are dualists. The uncertainty, economic marginality and undesirable job characteristics linked to contingent work, will increase the visibility of underemployment and may impact public policy related to underemployment issues. The growing contingent workforce of part-time and temporary workers, especially in the service industries and among clerical workers, constitute a new pool of low-wage labor. Contingent work is any work arrangement in which workers lack an explicit or implicit contract for long-term employment or in which working hours fluctuate unpredictably. Because females, the elderly and minority groups are disproportionately at risk of temporary and part-time contingent work, they tend to be economically vulnerable. As economic opportunities continue to contract and African American workers become increasingly marginalized, understanding how they cope with the disadvantaged economic circumstances of underemployment become even more crucial. Because the service-oriented economy does not produce jobs that provide an adequate level of living, many workers are working two to three marginal jobs to survive. Moreover, there may be several marginal job holders in one household. This household livelihood strategy may be adopted as a response to the socioeconomic environment. For example, compared to native-born Blacks, Black immigrant households bring in more money because they have more people working. Fewer than half of American born black households have two or more earners; but in every other immigrant group, at least 60% do. Multiple household workers may serve as to filter the opportunities and constraints presented by the larger economy. In this instance, the household is conceived of as an intermediate unit linking the behavior of individuals to the larger socioeconomic environment.

The household reorganization that accompanies a family's "facing up" to employment-related hardship, and the stresses experienced by family members has become increasingly important for comprehending the patterned responses of African Americans to the economic hardship of underemployment. Engaging in household livelihood strategies may be how African American families cope with the changing and difficult economic circumstances and marginal employment in the mainstream economy. Prior research on underemployment has neglected to investigate households as the appropriate targets for constructive intervention. Davidson (1991) noted that a household is not a "thing" but a specific set of social relations defined as a group of individuals (rarely one) associated with a particular domicile whose livelihood activities, in the broad sense, are directed toward some sort of "mutual" survival. Prior definitions of household strategies are based on an idealized imagery of the decision-making process (Wolf, 1991). Clay and Schwarzweller (1991) suggested that "household strategies" are best regarded as a general rubric or umbrella concept that refers to both deliberate action relative to goals as well as to normatively guided "unplanned" responses by the household group and its members relative to changing circumstances both internal and external to the household group. The use of household as an organizing concept can provide a means to draw together society and the individual or structure and actor. Because the actions of individuals are integrated into the broader underlying structural dynamics, the analysis of households becomes an important structural unit which mediates the two (Davidson, 1991).

The goal of my present research is to understand the role of household survival strategies for

coping and adjusting to employment-related or economic hardship among African Americans. Households are situated according to the collective class location of the members. For example, the household is assessed against a backdrop of gender, kinship, age and employment relations. These structures afford the normative framework that will affect the strategies its members can and do adopt and affect the form and operation of the household. Within the household strategies framework, my research applies the family stress model used to study middle class white Iowa families to African-American families. The methods, which were developed for the Iowa Youth and Families Project, include surveys, questionnaires, videotaped interviews and recruitment techniques. They result in reams of information about family members' behavior, thoughts and feelings. As part of the methodology, the father, mother, children fill out questionnaires that pertain to their work histories and attitudes about family, there is also a variation of the questionnaire procedures to apply to single parent families. The methods help researchers collect and analyze information from families, plus evaluate programs aimed at helping families address their problems. If these research methods can be adapted to African American families, it provides a way to study how African-American families deal with hard times. It also may provide recommendations for ways that black families can cope and support each other during economic hard times.

In my research, I am studying 10 single-parent black families in Des Moines and 10 two-parent families in Ames, Iowa. After workers were trained by the Rural Health Center's staff in data-collection techniques, they conducted interviews with the families, including videotaping of problem-solving discussions. One thing that we have learned is that African-Americans need to be involved in coding the videotapes. Coding involves viewing the tapes to interpret family processes. Black coders are helpful in understanding language and actions that may be unfamiliar to other coders. Family interactions can be different too. African-American families can be very expressive verbally and nonverbally. What family members say to each other may be interpreted as ridicule or hostility for some, but would sound normal to an African-American. The research on Des Moines single-parent families reveal that these families share many problems with similar low-income, single-parent black families in larger cities. For example, there are concerns about gangs, teenage pregnancies, racial tension, substance abuse and truancy. These families also demonstrated a pronounced tension or hostility toward the missing father or fathers. In many cases, the mother and father were never married. But kids often talk about their fathers as if he's someone who is around. I am working now with an agency in Des Moines that works with African-American families on a regular basis to conduct a pilot study with two-parent African-American families. The purpose is to find out whether family structure makes a difference in how African-American families cope with economic hardship and underemployment. In the two-parent families conducted in Ames, the data indicate that just having a father present is very important to the household livelihood strategy of coping with economic hardship and underemployment.

A major goal is to gather more data on African-American families across a range of incomes. I will spend the 1996-97 academic year at the University of Georgia (UGA), where I will work with professors and staff researchers at the Institute for Behavioral Research (IBR). My research program focuses on the psychosocial consequences of underemployment, economic stress and family functioning for minority rural and urban populations. These are precisely the types of issues addressed by Dr. Eugene Brody and his colleagues in their work at the Institute for Behavioral Research. Dr. Brody has done extensive research on African-American families in rural Georgia. While I am on leave at UGA, I will be involved with Dr. Brody's research team in the data collection phase. I will particularly focus on techniques for observing and coding African-American families and capturing household survival strategies for coping with economic

hardship. My primary goal is to collect data on African-American families and their household survival strategies across the socioeconomic spectrum (i.e., middle, working and poor) socioeconomic status, single and two-parent families. To this end, I plan to conduct intensive in-depth, qualitative and quantitative analyses of these data.

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