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Beyond the Income: The Normative Effects of Unemployment in the Goldfields of Welkom, Free State, South Africa

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ABSTRACT

"Beyond the income" puts emphasis on the need to go beyond income loss to understand the meaning of wage labour, and the effects that unemployment and inequality have on people. This ethnographic and in-depth interview-based research focused on the experiences of unemployment among South African black men—ex-mine workers in their fifties and sixties who had worked on the Welkom goldfields—and found that they suffered three types of loss: economic loss, psychological harm and social exclusion. These findings illustrate that, while income loss is crucially important for workers globally, unemployment has far-reaching effects other than income loss. Income loss interconnects with other types of loss (psychological and social). E. Durkheim (1964, *The Rules of Sociological Method*. New York: The Free Press) and G. Therborn (2013, *The Killing Fields of Inequality*. Wiley) foreground the importance of taking into consideration income loss, but they also demonstrate the need for approaches that take into consideration anomie and existential inequality to understand that unemployment has greater effects on its victims than only income loss. The research has relevance for the debates on basic income grants. Because the loss involved in unemployment is greater than income loss, ex-mine workers' loss cannot be solved only by the income support offered through a basic income grant. The basic income grant would only go to the extent of responding to income loss, but it would be limited in relation to the normative aspects that were fulfilled by wage labour. The paper concludes by suggesting that going beyond the income broadens our understanding of the effects of wage labour, unemployment, and inequality, and that this understanding should inform research, policy (social and economic), and movement building.

KEYWORDS

Wage labour;
unemployment; masculinity
loss; inequality;
mineworkers; South Africa;
Welkom goldfields; basic
income

Introduction

I begin this article with an illustration that draws on two vignettes of retrenched ex-mine-workers. The emasculated Ntate Sefako and Ntate Sekobela, the latter whom we shall call the farmer who was able to protect his masculinity beyond wage employment. Ntate

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Sefako, on the other hand, was a mining team leader who came to work on the mines in the 1970s in his twenties. Migrating from Lesotho where he left his wife and children, he lived in a single-sex hostel on the mine premises and sent monthly remittances to his family. He grew up in Lesotho in a family that survived on subsistence agriculture. He had little education and completed Standard 4 (Grade 6). I met him in 2012 during my fieldwork, through a snowball sampling referral by another ex-mineworker, but Ntate Sefako quickly became a key informant in the study. He, and other mineworker men were collectively retrenched in the goldfields of Welkom in 2010. He recalls this day as the day everything changed, like a sudden dark cloud hovering above his life. After he was retrenched, he had to leave the single-sex hostel as this accommodation was linked to mine employment. He built a shack in an informal settlement called Hani Park in Welkom where most of the retrenched workers settled in the early 1990s. He received his severance package, and used a portion of it towards his house back home in Lesotho. Unfortunately, he lost most of this package through an investment in a scam that promised unbelievably high returns. Unemployed and broke, he remained in Welkom, where he searched for employment. A day in the life of Ntate Sefako, a 55-year-old black man, starts at 4:30 a.m. The night before, he may have had dreams in which he saw himself, and his former mineworker workmates, working underground in the goldmines as before. He stays awake in bed thinking nostalgically about those days when he worked and earned a salary, and was a provider, but now he sits worrying about his current unemployed life and how he is going to provide for his family. Now in Hani Park, he does not stay alone; he stays with another woman, herself a widow (also unemployed) of an ex-mineworker and her grandson, her late daughter's son. An hour later, at 5:30 a.m., he would listen to the radio while boiling water for bathing and for making a cup of tea. Between 6:00 a.m. and 6:30 a.m. he can hear outside noises of neighbours leaving for work. The day would be long, interspersed with self-made work around the yard—mending the fence, clearing the grass or just sitting outside for fresh air and sunlight. Sometimes he would undertake intermittent job searches in town (Welkom) at the factories or complain about the high bribes “agents” charged for helping one get a job on the mines.

We now turn to Ntate Sekobela, the farmer. He was a stopping team member in the goldmines, the son of an ex-mineworker who died underground due to earth fall. He had been recruited to replace his father. Visiting his home in Thabong one early morning for an interview, I began observing around the yard vegetables, livestock, farming equipment, a tractor and a van. I also observed his wife making fire to prepare food for the day. His attire was that of someone going to undertake agricultural work. He wore an overall and boots. During the interview, he told me that, for him, being a mineworker was a job he would only do for a limited period; it was a stepping stone towards accumulating resources to support agricultural production. He saw his days as a wage labourer on the goldmines as an opportunity to save, and utilize the wages to buy land, animals and farming equipment in preparation for life as a farmer. Making the transition from mineworker living off wages to farmer was not difficult because agricultural work is what he grew up doing. He knew how to plant and how to care for animals. Indeed, he had a sizeable herd of livestock, and fields which he had begun harvesting while he had worked on the mines. In his livestock, he kept goats, sheep, cattle, hard-body chickens, pigs and a horse. In his fields, he cultivated tomatoes, corn, butternut and spinach. He sold some of his produce using his van in the community. He also

gathered farming equipment—spades, shovels, a rake, axes, a sickle, a wheelbarrow, a hoe and a tractor. In comparison to the other former mineworkers, he was an outlier who was relatively better off as far as livelihood was concerned. Unlike Ntate Sefako and other ex-mineworkers, he had not been roaming around factories, mines and the roadside on intermittent job searches. He filled his days with subsistence farming activities and selling off some of his produce. He did not look for wage employment.

These two vignettes illustrate two different orientations towards wage labour: a high orientation and a low orientation. In the first, we encounter a man who saw wage labour as a crucial aspect of identity, dignity and the creation of community. This even showed up in his dreams. In the second story is a man who viewed wage labour as an instrument, as a means to an end, to create work (not wage labour) through which he could produce food and generate income to support his family. In the research sample, he was an outlier in two ways. First, he was better off, materially at least, than all the other ex-mineworkers I interviewed (all had a high orientation to wage labour). Second, he was an outlier in his instrumental orientation towards wage labour. For all the other men I interviewed in the study, the dominant approach was the first orientation, the high orientation, embracing the centrality of wage labour in conceptions also not only of income, but crucially also of dignity and manhood.

Mineworkers are not ordinary men; they are men who played a crucial role in South Africa's path to industrialization (see Fine and Rustonjee 1996 on the mineral energy complex). My research investigated the lives of migrant and South African black men in their forties and fifties who worked on the goldmines of Welkom and were retrenched into long-term unemployment. It sought to answer the questions—what happened to the men who were at the heart of South Africa's industrialisation after they got retrenched? How do they experience unemployment? And what do their experiences tell us about the meaning of wage labour and unemployment?

I divide the paper into five sections, including the introduction which has highlighted two contrasting vignettes about “ways of seeing and experiencing mineworker unemployment”. In the second section, I begin with a discussion of the theoretical debates on the meaning of wage labour in South Africa's changing political economy. The theoretical debates have premised, I suggest, their understanding of the meaning of wage labour on the experiences of workers in various forms of employment as “core and non-core”, with insufficient attention paid to the experiences and voices of the unemployed. I develop an argument that wage labour is the *hegemonic imaginative social norm* in the current epoch for how people create livelihoods and experience masculine confidence as breadwinners and providers, and how they understand social inclusion. Wage labour has displaced and peripheralized pre-capitalist forms of work that organized social life and gender relations around household agricultural production. In the third section, the paper describes the methods used in data collection and the context of the research by weaving Welkom's history, goldmining employment dynamics, and the mineworker's relationship to wage labour as it relates specifically to South Africa's changing political economy in relation to its “mineral energy complex”. The fourth section draws on the fieldwork, ethnography, observations and in-depth interviews amplifying the voices of the unemployed. I argue that their voices illustrate how unemployment was *experienced as loss*. But to grasp the nature and extent of this loss, I emphasize a need to go beyond the economic aspect (income loss) by probing the normative,

social and existential dimensions that arise around the experience of unemployment. I discuss three themes in the experience of unemployment, namely: (i) economic loss, (ii) psychological harm and (iii) social exclusion. I draw on Emile Durkheim's (1964) concept of anomie, rethinking anomie as a concept of loss caused by the abrupt disintegration of social norms (wage labour and meanings associated with it) without a feasible alternative at hand, and Goran Therborn's (2013) idea of existential inequality to describe unemployment as a condition of unequal allocation of personhood, respect and dignity due to subtle status hierarchies that structure society. Durkheim and Therborn offer a framework that takes into consideration the economic aspect (income loss, resource inequality and poverty), but their theoretical approaches also delve into the social and existential by accounting for norms and values that govern the unequal distribution and allocation of personhood. Ex-mineworkers, however, did not passively accept their unemployed status; most, not all, responded through informal work—scrap metal collection and day labour—but these informal activities failed to replace the loss of wage labour as the values (identity, dignity and social inclusion) associated with wage labour could not be redeemed through informal work (cognisant that informal work is not homogeneous but highly differentiated), with the exception of the subsistence farmer Ntate Sefako who was seemingly able to develop a non-wage-centred alternative conception of self. Finally, the paper concludes by suggesting that going beyond the economic aspect of loss (income loss) broadens our understanding of the real effects of unemployment and inequality, and that this understanding has implications for the debates on basic income grants and other policy issues. I therefore conclude that the “beyond the income” approach should inform research, social, economic and development policy and importantly, movement building.

Theoretical debates on the meaning of wage labour in South Africa

The industrial revolution in Europe in the eighteenth century began a new period where an attempt was made to fashion development in the image of Europe (Isbister 2006; McMichael 2008; Rodney 1973). Indeed, colonialization, which facilitated the underdevelopment of Africa, Latin America and Asia, was premised on three aspects: race, dispossession and extractivism (Mignolo and Walsh 2018). Racism framed stereotypes of colonial conquest in which being white was constructed as being superior over non-white people. This system took an extreme form in South Africa under “grand apartheid”. The destabilization of rural economies was achieved through land dispossession and the introduction of various taxes, paid in cash, which compelled black people to enter wage labour. Mineral extraction was one of the key reasons for labour migration, especially in Southern Africa (Bezuidenhout and Fakier 2006; Wallerstein, Martin, and Vieira 1992).

Industrialization reconfigured social relations, displacing “traditional” ways of life and production. The labour migrant, typically a black man, left his wife and children in the rural areas to undertake subsistence agriculture while he travelled far distances to work on the mines for wages. He was the central figure of the labour migration system. The mineworkers, who initially stayed on the mines on short contracts of typically 3–6 months before making a return to the rural areas to continue with subsistence farming (Moodie and Ndatshé 1994), ultimately stabilized in the 1970s. They settled closer to the mines as rural subsistence declined and wages improved on the mines (see Crush,

Jeeves, and Yudelman 1991 for a fuller discussion on labour stabilization policies). Wage labour was emerging as the central and hegemonic dynamic of the modern world including in South Africa.

But what was not clear was what wage labour meant, as it evidently arose through colonialization and dispossession linked to capitalist industrialization. Given this historical background, it was inevitable that the meaning of wage labour would become contested. I discuss the theoretical debate on the meaning of wage labour in South Africa between two traditions. One of the traditions views wage labour as being crucially central to human consciousness, identity, dignity and the creation of communities even though they do critique wage labour as part of capitalist exploitation of labour power (Fakier and Cock 2009; Mosoetsa 2011; Naidoo 2011; Langa and Von Holdt 2011; Webster 1995, 2012). The other tradition critiques wage labour as a capitalist system of subjugation and domination of one class by another for profit (Barchiesi 2011a; Gorz 1999; Weeks 2011).

In the first tradition, wage labour is a hegemonic social institution of modern society, which is an important source of human values, identity and social inclusion. Wage labour, Ghidima (1992) argues, gives people the opportunity to contribute to society, to construct the meaning of life and build social relations while providing people with an opportunity to generate an income. Webster (1995, 52) further argues that “work [wage labour], and the social relations structured around work, lie at the centre of contemporary society”. Work [wage labour] is, Offe adds (cited in Webster 1995, 52), a “fundamental social experience”. But work is not the only institution able to provide those values to people in society. It is, however, more important a source of values than ethnicity, religion or political ideology alone in defining status and social relations—at least for men who were at the centre of the industrial and wage labour system from the beginning (Ghidima 1992).

Writing about wage labour and unemployment, Littler (1985, 1) argues that the importance of wage labour is not only its material and economic importance, which allows people to construct their own livelihoods and achieve independence, but also that it confers on individuals and collectives social and personal meanings and a sense of self-worth.

In a classic study of unemployment, *Marienthal: The sociography of an unemployed community*, Jahoda, Lazarsfeld, and Zeisel (1972) make the point that wage labour is crucial in defining aspects of personal status and identity and meets human needs of a more enduring kind. A key finding of Jahoda et al. is that long-term unemployment leads to a state of apathy in which the unemployed lose interest in ceasing the few opportunities left to them. This leads to a vicious cycle between reduced opportunities and reduced levels of aspirations. But wage labour, Jahoda argues, serves the important role of social order by structuring time and expanding human interaction beyond the family, and it does this while connecting individuals with their aspirations, goals, and the meaning of life. Wage labour, importantly, gives structure to time, and this is most acutely highlighted in unemployment. In unemployment, there are possibilities of creating their own time structure and social relations, “but the psychological input required to do so on a regular basis under one’s own steam is colossal” (Jahoda, cited in Kumar 1984, 15). Many unemployed people find it challenging to maintain a rhythm and routine on their own. An unstructured, scattered and unpredictable use of time therefore emerges from one day to the next.

In a study of ex-coal mineworkers in Scotland, Bostyn and Wight (1987, 150–151) observed that the unemployed men would organize a “fishing expedition; [in which] their failure to keep the basic guidelines of this activity showed a greater concern to pass time than actually to catch anything”. In Senegal, Micheal Ralph (2008) observed that young Senegalese men who did not have jobs spent time drinking tea, as a way of slowly snipping away the day while anticipating a meaningful social event.

In recent years, there has been growing interest in the study of unemployment with a focus on youth in Africa, Latin America and Asia. This has emphasised important struggles of young people striving for adulthood but trapped in waitthood—a condition of restlessness among underemployed and unemployed youth buying time in informal activities of hustle and make-do—who encounter crises of masculinity caused by anxieties of unfulfilled breadwinning responsibilities. These are crucial depictions of the pressures linked to wage labour and patriarchy in the contemporary period. In this literature on youth, invigorating young scholars within both traditions of wage labour was evident (Dawson 2021; Fouksman 2020, 2021; Matlon 2023; Thieme 2018; Castel-Branco 2021; Nkosi 2023).

Nevertheless, the discourse emphasizing the centrality of wage labour in conception of what it means to be a full, productive citizen is emphatically pursued by the state and government officials. Job creation is at the heart of development policy in South Africa. But job creation is also used to denounce demands for income distribution to the poor through cash transfers. Entrepreneurship, on the other hand, has over the past few years also gained policy prominence because job creation has failed to gain momentum and is confronted by the growing challenge of unemployment. The state has used entrepreneurship to shift the responsibility of job creation to citizens.

From the perspective of the critical approach to wage labour, the glorification of wage labour misses the ways in which wage labour is at the heart of many problems in the modern world, particularly the capitalist world. This provides a basis for the reasons wage labour should lose its centrality (Barchiesi 2011; Gorz 1999; Weeks 2011). Andre Gorz, an Austrian–French autonomous Marxist, in his book *Reclaiming Work: Beyond the Wage-Based Society* points to the central dilemma facing job creation and the centrality of wage labour in contemporary society when he said:

Never has the “irreplaceable”, “indispensable” function of labour as the source of “social ties”, “social cohesion”, “integration”, “socialization”, “personalization”, “personal identity” and meaning been invoked so obsessively as it has since the day it became unable any longer to fulfil any of these functions. (Gorz 1999, 57)

In the South African context, the book that has been central to these debates is undoubtedly Franco Barchiesi’s widely cited classic *Precarious Liberation: Workers, the State, and Contested Social Citizenship in Apartheid South Africa* (2011). Much of what I describe in the rest of this section draws on this book.

Barchiesi’s main task in precarious liberation is to problematise the relationship between “employment and emancipative politics” (2011, 1) in the context of post-apartheid, capitalist South Africa in which labour ideologies held by scholars in the first tradition, the state, trade unions and progressive forces are intertwined with citizenship. By precariousness, Barchiesi does not only mean labour market insecurities as scholars and analysts understand the notion (Scully 2016; Standing 2011; Webster 2012).

Precariousness is defined by the contrast between, on the one hand, social policies and governmental discourse that imposes the search for a job, any job, at any condition, as the virtuous way to gain social inclusion (also due to privatization, commodification and fiscal austerity) and, on the other hand, the reality of jobs that are mainly insecure, which hardly provide adequate incomes even to meet basic needs (Barchiesi 2011b).

The central questions Barchiesi addresses are: Has employment fulfilled its promise of emancipation and dignity in democratic South Africa? Is it still possible to think of labour as a progressive subject of social transformation? To these questions, based on interviews with manufacturing (Ekurhuleni) and municipal (Johannesburg) workers and various labour and government officials, Barchiesi answers that wage labour has failed on both fronts because of its decline in the face of increasing precariousness. What has been decisively broken, he argues, is the nexus of work and social citizenship, where “imagined connections between waged employment, emancipation, and social advancement were no longer obvious” (2011, 8). But this work–citizenship nexus is also a “contested field of signification involving official discourse, organized labour ideologies, and worker’s meanings of work”. He observes that government, organised labour and, indeed, the sociology of work upheld wage labour conterminously with “hope and fulfilment” (2011, 22). This attitude, he argues, represented the melancholic yearning of wage labour’s propensity to fulfil its promise (similar to the welfare state), despite the growing chasm between its promise of emancipation and the utterly precarious realities in which workers find themselves. Melancholia describes a “mournful attachment” or, rather, the inability to mourn, while clinging to the illusion that the dead or lost object will one day make a return. Barchiesi, argues, that the days of full employment are gone, and will never return. What is called the “politics of worker’s melancholia” therefore describes the predicament of looking back to a past where wage labour meant stability but doing so in the face of the current status of employment.

The precarious realities characterizing workers’ lives, not just working conditions, are leading to shifting identities in which wage labour is losing its centrality in the lives of workers. Wage employment is “losing its importance across the board both as a vehicle of collective identities and solidarity and as an avenue for further advancement and development in life” (2011, 246). But workers are aware that these crises are politically and structurally produced and thus are “calling for systematic change” (2011, 256). What this systematic change will look like, however, is unclear. His findings, affirming wage employment as the master signifier of social existence in post-apartheid South Africa, provide an “alternative imaginary of radical social mobilization” (2011, 256). What is clear, according to Barchiesi, is that precariousness presents political possibilities for structural change by opening the future to “unintended outcomes and unforeseen conflicts”.

However, both traditions premise their understanding of the meaning of wage labour on the experiences of workers in various forms of employment (core and non-core, stable and precarious), while paying insufficient attention to the experiences of the unemployed. This article contributes to this important debate by centring the voices and experiences of the unemployed in the debate on the meaning of wage labour. The article discusses the lives of migrant and South African black men in their forties and fifties who worked in the goldfields of Welkom and were retrenched into prolonged unemployment after the fall of the global gold prices in the 1990s. It addresses the question of what happened to the men who were at the heart of South Africa’s path to

industrialization after they were retrenched and rendered jobless. It responds to how they experience and think about unemployment and describes what their experiences tell us about the meaning of wage labour. Before I discuss their experiences, however, I make a detour to discuss the research methods and the context of the study.

The dying South African goldfields: research methods and context

The central aim of the inquiry was not concerned with the question of livelihood strategies, identifying structures of how people manage or cope with unemployment, identifying or explaining causes of unemployment. Neither was I concerned with finding solutions to unemployment (identifying job creation sectors and strategies). What I aimed to do was, simply, to develop an understanding of how retrenched ex-mineworkers (black men) think about what wage labour has meant to them. Put differently, how they experience and think about what it means to them to not have wage labour, and to draw on their voices to reflect on the meaning of wage labour, and the debate in which their voices and experiences have been largely excluded.

This section introduces a discussion of Welkom's history and men's relationship to wage labour in the context of South Africa's changing political economy.

The first time I went to Welkom (Free State, South Africa), some 260 km away from Johannesburg, was on 6 July 2012. Welkom city is located in the Lejweleputswa District Municipality and Matjhabeng Local Municipality in the Free State province of South Africa. My first contacts were provided by Dr Kally Forrest, a renowned South African labour historian, author and former editor of the labour publication, the *South African Labour Bulletin* (SALB). Dr Forrest knew activists in the area attached to the Gold & Uranium Belt Impact Censoring Organization (GUBICO). After meeting up with the activists Mojalefa Rabolinyane and Thabo Khoeli, they took me around old mine shafts such as St Helena. Another initial contact was a mineworker, now retired, who worked on the Welkom goldmines, Masimong No. 5 shaft to be specific, who happened to be a front opposite neighbour of my parents' house in Limpopo. Through these two streams of contact, I initiated my non-probability snow-ball sampling into what was to be a life-changing twelve months or more of ethnographic fieldwork, in-depth interviews and participant observations. I interviewed over sixty-six ex-mineworkers in Sesotho, a language I speak fluently. I had conversations with not only ex-mineworkers, but also a number of their partners, children and officials of their union, the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), officials from the Department of Mineral Resources (DMR), the Local Municipality offices responsible for economic planning and the general population of Welkom. I sought to obtain a multilayered perspective of the dynamics in the area. For ex-mineworkers, interviews were mostly conducted in their homes, which allowed me to observe where and under what conditions they lived. For most of my fieldwork, I stayed in Hani Park, a black informal settlement that emerged when mass retrenchments started in the 1990s, and mineworkers lost residence in the mining hostels. Gay Seidman (1993) highlights that, in the 1990s as mineworkers were being retrenched and faced with inadequate housing, the desire to remain close to the mines for employment prospects led to their opting to build there. On the shoulder of Hani Park lies a coloured township called Bronville. I stayed in a shack on the black side, Hani Park.

Hani Park lies adjacent to the N1 Carriageway towards Bloemfontein, and is also adjacent to Welkom City, the former white suburb which is some 10 km away. Welkom City (including Thabong—black, Bronville—coloured) and the surrounding towns such as Virginia (Meloding) and Odendaalsrus (Kutloanong) can be regarded as examples of “apartheid spatial planning” (Buhlungu and Bezuidenhout 2011): each urban area had a nearby township planned for the rapid influx of African migrant workers in the 1950s. I straddled all these areas during fieldwork, but I also followed migrant ex-mineworkers to Lesotho (in areas such as Makola, Teyateyaneng, Mapoteng and Ha-Ratau in the Berea district outside Maseru) to interview them. I wanted to also understand how “place” and the resource that “place” provides shaped experiences of unemployment, as many interviewees alluded to the rural areas as a “friendlier” place to face unemployment when compared to “rough and tough” urbanized and semi-industrial places such as Welkom.

The gold industry was the mainstay of the South African economy for much of the twentieth century, and, indeed, it can be argued that goldmining provided the model for South African capitalist industrialization with low-wage migrant black labour. Goldmining played a pivotal role in South Africa’s economic growth and the creation of opportunities for industry, businesses and individuals alike (Nel and Binns 2002; Seidman 1993).

Welkom was established as the centre of the growing Free State goldmining industry in the early apartheid period after World War II. This attracted migrant labour mostly from South Africa, Lesotho and Mozambique. These African men left their rural homes, parents, wives and children in the rural areas to undertake dangerous and often deadly wage labour on the mines. Their fears and anxieties, as they travelled to the Free State Goldfields (FSG), were illustrated in the way in which they had to adjust their “selves” to embrace a braver persona for wage labour as they drew closer to the mines. They were becoming different men, men who worked for wages, rather than what they were in the rural areas, men who survived through subsistence agriculture (Coplan 1994; Moodie and Ndatshe 1994). Nevertheless, in the 1970s in Welkom, there were eight operating goldmines each with multiple shafts, and approximately forty-six shafts accounting for about 35 per cent of total gold production in South Africa, and some 21 per cent of global gold production. In 1988, direct mine employment peaked at 150 000 workers. Goldmining and support industries and services underpinned Welkom and the area’s tremendous industrialization process. Goldmining sustained businesses (mainly white-owned) and economic growth for over thirty years. By the 1980s, over 80 per cent of the jobs in the area were mine-related (Nel and Binns 2002). Clearly, Welkom’s economy was incredibly dependent on a single economic sector (Centre for Development Support 2005), and the collapse of this sector would have catastrophic consequences. Table 1 shows the goldmining employment figures across different years.

Table 1. Estimated South African goldmine employment. Developed by the author and drawn from different sources (Marais and Cloete 2013; Nel and Binns 2002).

Year	Estimated South African goldmine employment
1988	150 000
1996	97 914
2001	36 505
2011	30 000
2022 onwards	28 000

In 1989, the gold boom came to an end. The gold price plummeted suddenly from an estimated US\$900 per ounce to about US\$300 (Strambo and Atteridge 2021). This global economic event had significant consequences for the local economy, as mining companies restructured production and reduced their workforce, whereas other mines closed as it became uneconomic due to, among other factors, aging infrastructure and the exhaustion of accessible ore (Nel and Binns 2002). In addition to the falling global gold price, South Africa was reaching the end of apartheid and was entering a new period of transition. Globalization increased competitive pressure and, at the same time, labour reform (including higher wages), and the rising costs of electricity and mechanization of production contributed significantly to the fall in gold production (Crankshaw 2002).

Mine downsizing and closure have been particularly catastrophic in the FSG (Marais 2013; Seidman 1993), with dire socioeconomic and environmental consequences. Out-migration began, including skilled white labour to seek opportunities elsewhere. Currently, official South African unemployment is estimated at 37 per cent (StatsSA 2023) and poverty is estimated at 45.9 per cent, while economic growth stands at -0.04 per cent (StatsSA 2023).

Welkom's political economy has significantly changed over time given the large-scale downturn in the mining industry. What impact did this have on the men who worked for wages on the goldmines? What happened to them after they were retrenched? By investigating the relationship between men's wage labour and the changing political economy of mass unemployment, the article brings the voices and experiences of the unemployed into the debate on the meaning of wage labour. The next section focuses on three major themes related to the experience of unemployment that arose from my fieldwork: (i) economic loss/income loss, (ii) psychological harm/distress and (iii) social exclusion.

Beyond the income: the normative effects of unemployment

This section foregrounds, from my more than sixty in-depth interviews in 2012–14, the voices and experiences of African men in their forties and fifties who worked for wages in the goldmines and were retrenched into prolonged unemployment. The central themes of discussion emerging from the research include economic loss/income loss, psychological harm/distress and social exclusion.

Economic loss/income loss

Economic loss, unsurprisingly, is the most obvious impact that unemployment had on its victims. Indeed, income loss has been a central focus of unemployment studies in economics and sociological paradigms that mainly focus on the material aspect of deprivation. My study confirms that, indeed, ex-mineworkers experienced unemployment, first and foremost, through income loss, but my central argument in this paper is that it is important to notice that the impact that income loss has on the unemployed is not purely a result of income loss in isolation, but a result of its "interconnections" (See Amartya Sen 1999 on the idea of interconnections) with other forms of power it gave the male wage earner. Evidently, the quotes below suggest that income loss was so acutely felt not only because it caused poverty (which of course it did, and this matters a lot), but it was acutely felt because it disrupted their ability to yield another form of power:

patriarchal power in their gendered relationships with, especially, women in their households and through remittances sent to the rural areas (see Bhengu 2014). It is therefore crucially important to focus on not only income loss in isolation, but also locating it within the relationship it has to other values (such as status) and forms of power (social and patriarchal power). Ntate Raseboko (10/04/14¹) said:

Unemployment has taken away my status as a man. A man gets his status from providing for his family. If I cannot provide for my family, what status is there?

In the above quote, the participant makes the connection between income and his masculine status as a breadwinner for the family. Income was the spine of his masculine status and, without it, his status as a man faced an eminent threat. Indeed, ex-mineworkers who were unable to fulfil the breadwinning role felt the profound impact of unemployment on their sense of self and their place in their homes and communities.

Pride is connected to income because it links men to the “patriarchal bargain” and what Mark Hunter (2012, 41) calls “provider love”. One can be proud of oneself as a man if he can secure the livelihoods of his family as a provider. But if he cannot provide, and has to witness them going hungry, this caused unemployed men a great deal of embarrassment and shame. What is even worse, however, is the failure to achieve self-reliance, which the wage gave to an extent, and to have to depend on kinship to help an adult man in his fifties to support his own family. The assistance provided by next of kin is not only seen as a useful source of support, but it also comes with the meanings of “failing men” (Hunter 2012). Men who have lost not just their income, but their status and credibility as independent male providers:

You don't feel proud of who you are. Your family is struggling in front of you and there is nothing you can do. Sometimes I get help from my relatives but I feel embarrassed because, as a man, I am supposed to work for my family. I have lost my status [because of unemployment, I am unable to provide]. (Ntate Raseboko, 10/04/14)

Capitalism shifted gender relations through the wage economy to the shoulders of men. Predating the wage system, manhood within agrarian African society was tied to the idea of “male integrity” (Moodie and Ndatshe 1994). This was linked to presiding over the household as a family but also as unit of production. However, responsibilities were more equitably shared between men and women. The inception of industrialization in Southern Africa reorganized social relations; it disrupted the household as a family and as a unit of production by recruiting men into wage labour on the mines and factories through the system of labour migration. Industrialization reconstructed male integrity by importing the western ideology of the male breadwinner and making it a hegemonic ideology.

Manhood is not fixed. Different contexts can generate different conceptions of manhood—in the current context of capitalist industrialization, manhood is strongly tied to wage labour and provision. This ideology is not only upheld by the men, but also by women, children and members of society more broadly.

Indeed, men cannot be studied in isolation from women because gender identities are constructed and reconstructed in relation to each other (Khunou 2006). Most men, argues

¹All quotes in the paper are by me as translated from the original Sesotho during my discussions with interviewees. All the names I provide throughout are pseudonyms.

Khunou (2006), live with women and narrate their life stories in reference to these women. The reference to “family” in these men’s narratives in fact centres the women in their lives. This became clearer when men who had lost their wives, through separation or divorce, spoke of losing their family.

Expectations, as Lenkwe describes below, are shaped within the realm of gender and social relations with the wife and children. When there is no food in the house, the expectation to ensure there is food in the house does not appear to be equally shared between both genders. Instead, as Lenkwe experienced it, the greater degree of expectation to provide food and clothing fell on him as the man. It is a gendered social order in which, if he was able to provide food, the wife would cook and prepare the meal for the family. However, because he had failed to provide food, he felt that nothing was the same again in the household.

Unemployment changes everything, even your family. There is no food in the house. You cannot buy your children clothes. All these things are expected from you as a man. (Ntate Lenkwe, 26/08/13)

The failure to provide was often cited as the source of household gendered tensions. It is a serious issue that several men who had lost their families controversially felt that women had left once the income was lost and, with it, the ability to provide. Some believed that their wives went out to find other men who could provide for them. This was due, however, to the fact that, in addition to income loss, there had also been increased couple bickering and possibilities of aggravated gender-based violence (GBV). Molakolako controversially stated:

When you work [employed], you can stand for yourself. You can do things for yourself. I was retrenched in 2002 and divorced in 2010. When I ran out of money, it affected my marriage. She was cheating on me with a working man. We decided to divorce because I was going to kill her. She left me when I was sick [silicosis]. (20/02/14)

Income loss, however, did not only affect men in the context of the household and the family. It affected them outside the family in the community and society. It also affected their ability to participate in community organizations, and even the church. The wage was seen by men not only as money for consumption, but as a powerful broker of social relations on which the distribution of social recognition and respect was allocated. Kenny (2018, 198) also observed in her research that the significance of the wage was not only limited to the quantitative money aspect, but how the wage served as a “conduit to building and maintaining ties and relationships of obligation”.

A man out of work is a man without a wage, and a man without a wage is a man that is not given the same level of respect and recognition as men who have jobs, even if those jobs are low-wage jobs. Thus, it is not just about gender relations between men and women, but also how men treat other men based on their employment status. As Ntate Morena remarked from his experience:

You are nothing to people [men and women] when you do not have a job. They take you as nothing. (27/03/14)

Participation in community-based organizations, such as stokvels and burial societies, church and also the relations with the local mashonisa as well as access to money were

adversely transformed by income loss. Participation in community-based organizations was eroded as contributions were harder to come by. At church, they know the contributions of the unemployed are minimal and mostly in the form of coins. This was Modise's (06/03/14) sentiment, who claimed that he stopped attending church because they disrespected and undervalued him. They asked him to come and cut the grass and trim the tree branches. He associated this request with the fact that he was unemployed because, according to him, why couldn't they ask someone with a full-time job who contributed more money to the church? Were they asking him because they had assumed he had so much time on his hands that he needed to be given tasks to keep him occupied, he thought to himself.

Psychological harm/distress

Unemployment also stirred up psychological distress, which manifests in different forms. In this research, it manifested as stress, suicidal thoughts, loss of confidence, dreams, bodily derangement and sickness. Beginning with stress and suicidal tendency, my research shows that these symptoms were clearly interconnected with income loss. The quote below draws our attention to the idea of pressure generated by the capitalist patriarchal norm of provision. The pressure to fulfil familial obligations of provision tied to wages caused a lot of stress, as he was unable to fulfil the obligations of provision. He suffered from a diminished sense of masculine confidence and negative self-perception. He felt that he was someone useless, no one of importance to his family. This strongly suggests that the usefulness of a man, according to him, is measured most importantly by his ability to fulfil the pressures of provision:

The pressure from my family, the stress, made me think about suicide. I felt that I was nothing, no one important to my own family. (Ntate Letsie, 19/03/14)

Jordana Matlon (2022, 2023) explores the idea of pressure tied to wage labour. She describes how changes in political economy in postcolonial African cities "induce a permanent state of pressure among young men at the interrupted point of social becoming". The salary, she continues, "was both an entitlement and source of intense pressures" because it produced "a novel form of patriarchal privilege but also the social and domestic responsibilities that came to collapse manhood with this exceptional, and exceptionally rare, form of economic activity". Indeed, as Matlon says about pressure, it demonstrates the vital role of "race-making and racial difference in the emergence of financial expectation and deeply personalized societal failure among contemporary urban African men".

Pressure, as the participant shows, is interconnected with the wage, breadwinning masculinity and patriarchal power. This suggests that the only feasible alleviation of this pressure that he can imagine could be through the recovery of wage labour. Pressure, as Matlon (2023) suggests, is often assumed to be a "temporary condition of frustrated masculinity in a neoliberal African city" but, through the perspective of what she calls the *longue durée*, pressure is an "entrenched reality produced by the economic and social transformations of the long twentieth century". Thus, ex-mineworkers who are experiencing prolonged unemployment, and who face the daily uncertainties of provision and the realities of pressure, have to endure it.

Next, I look at sleep dreams as a form of the manifestation of psychological harm. Taking a Freudian (1999) perspective of dreams as wishful thinking, I interpret the meaning of the men's dreams as psychic residue of longing, wishing and aspiring for wage labour to return. But this longing, I maintain, is more than a longing for the lost wages and material losses. Rather, it's a longing for specific social orders that were ordered and maintained by wage labour as a structuring force. What came up in their sleep dreams was not the miserable experiences of unemployment; what came up in their sleep dreams was their having returned to employment and, most importantly, having recovered an income, social relations and the capacity to be a provider:

[in my dream I] was back at work. We were at the hostel with my Xhosa friend. We were sitting and talking like we used to during the old days. (Ntate Sefako, 16/05/13)

I knocked off from work. I was at Checkers buying groceries. In the dream I was happy, my family was happy. I wake up, just to find myself lying on the bed. It makes me very sad when I open my eyes, and all I see are sunrays piercing through the window curtains. (Ntate Tumelo, 13/07/13)

I dream a lot about my work. I was underground, blasting rocks, my workmates were there with me. The captain was saying I should not have blasted the way I did. I explained to him why I did that. After that, it was knock-off time. I was about to go home. Then I heard my wife's voice saying, "where are you going?" In my dream I said "We have knocked off". I woke up and realised I had been sleep-walking. (Ntate Tumelo, 13/07/13)

Dreams, I suggest, signified a longing for wages but also patriarchal privilege, social relations and community formed through work and residence in the single-sex mining hostels.

Finally, ex-mineworkers experienced unemployment as bodily derangement and sickness.

The problem with unemployment is that it is like a sickness. I don't know how it can be treated. I am suffering from this sickness. It is not my choice that at this time of the day, I am just sitting here. Sometimes, I sit and watch others go to work in the morning and come back at noon. This is not my body; I used to wear size 36, now I am like this because of my sickness that is making me suffer. (Ntate Sefako)

Likening unemployment to sickness, Ntate Sefako draws attention to the embodied nature of wage labour. Wage labour was not only about the income, nor was it instrumental, but it was far greater, and also shaped how he related to his own body. The body that used to exude strength and integrity during the days of employment now stands in the shadow of its former self, sick beyond recognition. Indeed, the nature of mine work positions the body central to the production process, and often mineworkers incurred injuries, great and small, and many even paid with their lives.

Ntate Tumelo (13/07/13) likened unemployment to disability through images of lost limbs and lost arms. Unemployment challenges ex-mineworkers' ability to imagine and see themselves as fully capable and productive human beings. This experience reflects, perhaps, the hegemony of the wage labour ideology to shape human experience and embodiment. This is most acutely felt in unemployment which is experienced as the lack or absence of a core aspect (norms and values) of what it means to be human:

If your leg is cut off, you will always feel there is a part of you that is missing. That is how it feels to be unemployed. It feels like there is a part of me that is missing. And I hope that it is possible to get my leg back. (Ntate Tumelo, 13/07/13)

Social exclusion

Unemployment was a disruption of shared moral values. Such shared moral values were embedded in family relations (often gendered), social life and work life that shaped identities (crisis of masculinity). For Durkheim (1964), the result of these kinds of disruption of the prevailing social order is anomie. The evidence of anomie, Durkheim would argue, is illustrated by the presence of stigma. Stigma arises when an individual or a group does not conform to the moral regulations of industrial (wage-based) society (practically or imaginatively). In the research, stigma operated in at least two ways. First, there was a moral judgement about a person's social status in a set of social relations for defying the dominant social norms and values (Goffman 1963) and second, stigma also operated as a sanction for contradicting the collective conscience. The collective conscience refers to the ideas and sentiments that are our object of attachment that characterize the moral structures of society. Wage work is an idea and sentiment to which society is attached. Durkheim (1964, 2–3) describes the process of contradicting the collective consciousness and the social recursions that follow attempts to re-embed the offending individual back into the prevailing dominant social conventions. This illustrates the point I am suggesting that unemployment works in similar ways:

If I do not submit to the conventions of society, if in my dress I do not conform to the customs observed in my country and in my class, the ridicule I provoke, the social isolation in which I am kept, produce, although in an attenuated form, the same effects as punishment in the strict sense of the word. [Durkheim 1964, 2–3]

Unemployment is the antithesis of wage labour. It represents the abrupt disruption and loss of shared collective moral values; the disturbance of a collective order or collective consciousness.

Ex-mineworkers described how unemployment shaped the distribution of respect; that respect was also distributed in relation to what one did for a living. They were called *bo-mahlalela* (a vernacular word meaning the unemployed), which they saw as a label, or a mark put on them to show their blemished identities (tarnished moral status). They were insulted, and made to feel that they were nothing, useless in society. This reflects them as individuals and the contradiction of the dominant societal wage labour norms and values:

You are nothing to people when you do not have a job. [They] take you as nothing. (Ntate Morena, 27/03/14)

Responses to unemployment

Ex-mineworkers were not passive in the face of unemployment, but they tried to respond to the economic loss, psychological harm and social exclusion. I return to the two vignettes at the beginning of the article to illustrate two different types of response developed by ex-mineworkers. The vignettes show two different orientations towards wage labour.

The first (Ntate Sefako) showed a high attachment to wage labour as central to attaining social values (masculine dignity enmeshed in ideas of provision tied to wages), and another (Ntate Sekobela) showed low attachments to wage labour, instead viewing wage labour as a temporary activity through which to raise money to support subsistence agriculture, which would then be tied to notions of masculine dignity. The two orientations led to two very different implications and outcomes. In the first, men with high attachments to wage labour sought employment and, when this failed, they resorted to the informal economy where they pursued day labour or collected scrap metals to resell at recycling centres, activities which were extremely limited in helping them to overcome any of the three dimensions of the experience of unemployment (economic loss, psychological harm and social disruption):

Many of us [ex-miners] collect scrap metal because we are really struggling. I can spend the whole day, from morning to noon, looking for those metals. They [scrapyard staff] put them on the scale and give you R10. (Ntate Moloi, 05/03/14)

Men with high levels of attachment to wage labour contrasted their informal livelihood activities with the “proper job”, which they not only found to be inadequate, but they also found to be “dirty” and “embarrassing”. They pursued it because of their circumstances compelled them to “make-do”, to “try” and generate some income.

You cannot say someone who walks around the whole day looking for scrap metal is working [counted as employed]. Working is when you get paid and have a payslip, medical aid, and working hours. Now I have a piece job, I don’t have a payslip, I cannot access loans like working people do. I belong with mahlelela because often you cannot do what employed people do. (Letsie, 19/03/14)

Conversely, the participant with low attachment to wage labour did not go job hunting or engage in day labour or even sell recyclable metals. Instead, he focused on growing his livestock and crops which he also sold to the community. These activities gave him a sense of purpose and dignity.

In conclusion, responses to unemployment (for men with high attachment to wage labour) failed because they were responding to the economic loss, whereas the nature of the loss exceeded the economic aspect, drawing in normative aspects which were left utterly unfulfilled.

Conclusion: beyond the income

The case of Welkom ex-mineworkers described in this paper is a Durkheimian-inspired critique of capitalism’s tendency to cause abrupt disruptions in the lives of individuals and communities.

Wage labour was affirmed by most ex-mineworkers, in its absence, as the most desirable and sustainable social institution for the attainment of social reproduction, social inclusion and masculine dignity. Unemployment was a social fact that had profoundly debilitating effects on men’s sense of self and their place in their homes and communities. Unemployment reflected disruption of the shared moral values associated with wage work. Such disruptions resulted in anomie for men with high attachments to wage labour.

The paper shows that while unemployment causes economic loss (which as I have shown from interviews is an important loss in itself), it also has greater effects that go beyond economic loss. Economic loss interconnects with other losses (psychological and social). Emile Durkheim (1964) and Goran Therborn (2013) foreground the importance of taking into consideration income loss (resource inequality and economic deprivation), but they also emphasize the need to take into consideration anomie and existential inequality to understand that unemployment has greater effects on the victims than just income loss.

The research has relevance for the debates on policies such as (but not only) basic income grants, the Covid-19 Social Relief of Distress (SRD) grant. Because the loss involved in unemployment is greater than income loss, the ex-miner's loss cannot be solved by the income support offered through grants such as the basic income grant and the Covid-19 SRD grant. The grants would only go to the (albeit partial) extent of responding to income loss, but it would be limited in relation to the normative aspects that were fulfilled by wage labour.

I therefore conclude that the "beyond the income" approach broadens our understanding of the real effects of wage labour, unemployment and inequality, and that this understanding should inform research, social policy, and economic and development policy and, importantly, movement building. This means that research (e.g. academic, social and economic, etc.), policies (e.g. Basic Income, Covid-19 SRD grant, etc.) and movements (e.g. unemployed movements, men informal workers' movements, etc.) focused on the lives of the unemployed should, in framing their demands for income support, equally put emphasis on the interconnectedness of income loss (resource inequality and economic deprivation), with other losses (psychological, social, anomie and existential inequality etc.) experienced in unemployment.

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