AUSTRALIAN CHILDREN’S ACCOUNTS OF THE CLOSURE OF A CAR FACTORY: Global restructuring and local impacts

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Abbreviated title:
AUSTRALIAN CHILDREN AND GLOBAL RESTRUCTURING

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ABSTRACT (177 words)

This paper presents children’s accounts from Adelaide, South Australia, about parental job losses from automotive manufacturing: an industry that is being restructured globally. The research is informed by the “new sociology of childhood” and nests within a longitudinal, mixed-method study of 372 displaced workers. We interviewed 35 boys and girls aged 4 to 19 from 16 families. Findings support calls for children’s voices to be heard. Many children did not see the job loss as a major problem, some felt they now had a better life, and many valued not moving for new work. While some reported social, health and financial impacts, others were shielded by parents. Parents consented to their children’s involvement in 23% of in-scope families and those who had moved interstate were not included. Nevertheless, the accounts contribute knowledge of adult domains showing the value of family-friendly work patterns and of gaining children’s perspectives. Economic and policy settings that may have limited the job loss impact include the welfare state, trade unions, a low unemployment rate and government intervention to manage job loss.

Keywords: children, job loss, manufacturing restructure, globalisation, Australia

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article présente les comptes des enfants en Sud-Australie auprès de la perte d'emplois de leurs parents de la fabrication automobile: une industrie qui est en cours de restructuration au niveau mondial. La recherche est informée par la «nouvelle sociologie de l'enfance” et est partie d'une étude longitudinale de 372 travailleurs déplacés qui utilise la méthode mixte. Nous avons interviewé 35 garçons et filles âgés de 4 à 19 dans 16 familles. Les résultats soutiennent des appels de faire entendre les comptes d’enfants. Beaucoup des enfants interviewés ne voyaient pas la perte d'emploi comme un problème majeur, certains ont estimé qu'ils avaient développé une vie meilleure, et beaucoup appréciaient ne pas avoir se déplacer pour les travaux neufs. Alors que certains ont indiqué des impacts sociales, de la santé et financières, d'autres étaient protégés par les parents. Toutefois, les parents ont seulement consentis à la participation de leurs enfants dans 23 pour cent des familles, et les personnes qui ont déménagé interétatiques n'ont pas été incluses. Néanmoins, les comptes contribuent connaissances des domaines adultes et montrent la valeur des schémas de travail FAMILY-FRIENDLY et de l’acquisition des vues des enfants. Les paramètres economique et politiques qui ont limité les impacts de la perte d'emploi comprennent de l'Etat-providence, les syndicats, un faible taux de chômage, et l'intervention des pouvoirs publics à gérer la perte d'emploi.

Mots-clés: les enfants, perte d'emploi, la fermeture de l'usine, la mondialisation, l'Australie
AUSTRALIAN CHILDREN’S ACCOUNTS OF THE CLOSURE OF A CAR FACTORY: Global restructuring and local impacts

Introduction

This paper presents children’s accounts of the planned closure of a car factory in metropolitan Adelaide, South Australia, and the impacts of parental job loss on themselves and their family. ‘Job loss’ occurs when employers terminate employment in relation to a planned closure or downsizing, which may result from changes in the economy, a company’s organization, or increasing technology use (Parker, Thomas, Ellis & McCarthy 1971). The backdrop of this research is the restructuring of world economies over recent decades as traditional manufacturing in developed countries has wound down, closed or moved offshore. Manufacturing in Australia peaked in the late 1950s and early 1960s, then declined as service industries gained significance (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2007a). The increasing global mobility of capital and technology means that labour cost and quality weigh more strongly in companies’ location decisions and ability to restructure on a global scale (van Liemt 1992) The car industry is being restructured on both meta-regional and international scales (Larsson 2002). Australian car manufacturing has been concentrated in particular regions, therefore its closure is likely to affect whole regions. Governments either tolerate large scale job losses and argue for market readjustment, or contribute to schemes to support industrial change or planned redundancy. Australia’s car manufacturing industry has traditionally been unionized and had wage rates and benefits that are difficult to replace, especially for those with limited formal education and/or who are long-term employees.

Recent qualitative research has studied the experiences of workers and their families, with only few asking children’s views (e.g., Wauchope 1994). No qualitative studies in Australia document children’s accounts of job loss impacts. This paper starts by reviewing the literature and showing how the traditional quantitative focus on workers is being supplemented by qualitative research that includes their partners. The paper’s second section argues for increased attention to the
neglected area of involving children in research. Next, the paper describes the project within which the children's component nests, and then describes the methodology and results. Finally, it discusses the major themes from children’s interviews and, drawing on the literature, makes some conclusions about the value of children’s accounts in exploring the global phenomenon of industrial restructuring.

**Background**

**Research on job loss impacts on children**

Most research investigating the impacts of unemployment or job loss has focused on the economic, social and psychological impacts on children and families measured by quantitative methods. Such research usually surveys workers (and sometimes also partners/spouses) to explore associations with childhood distress, or changed child or family behaviour or functioning as measured by psychological, behavioural, and academic measures (e.g., Bowman 1988; Broman, Hamilton and Hoffman 1990; Dew, Penkower & Bromet 1991; Kalil & De Leire 2002; Liem & Liem 1988; Rayman 1988; Rege, Telle & Votruba 2007; Voydanoff & Donnelly 1988; Yeung & Hofferth 1998). Emerging research incorporates qualitative methods and asks workers and/or sometimes also partners about feelings, reactions and experiences. Researchers have investigated the impact of social and economic change accompanying economic rationalism and globalisation in the 1980s and 1990s which often led to large-scale redundancies from one location. Much of this investigates the impact of job loss on the family’s overall functioning and coping mechanisms, but some seeks adults’ views about the impacts on children’s lives (e.g., Armstrong 2006; Christoffersen 1994; Dew, Penkower & Bromet 1991; Gaillie, Marsh & Vogler 1994; Grayson 1983; Karlsen & Mjaavatn 1995; Lobo & Watkins 1995; Morris 1985; Nasman & von Gerber 1996; Perucci & Targ 1988; Vickers & Parris 2007). Yet reviews by Hanisch (1999) and Kalil (2005) argue for more research on the social and psychological impacts of parental job loss on families and children. We also argue that this research should involve children themselves.
Methods

Acknowledging children as active research participants

Jensen and McKee (2003) believe there is limited empirical evidence focussing on children’s experiences of social transformations in general and how children react, experience and potentially influence them. This suggests room to increase research from children’s perspectives within the context of the “new sociology of childhood” which acknowledges the self-agency of children (MacDougall, Schiller & Darbyshire 2004). We used qualitative methods and viewed children as active participants in the research process, so that we centred on research with, rather than about, children. This provides new sources of data (Darbyshire, Schiller & MacDougall 2005).

The sample and interview procedures

This study nests within a larger longitudinal, mixed method and multi-disciplinary study with an initial sample of 372 workers made redundant from a major car factory in southern Adelaide, which collected three waves of survey data and two waves of in-depth interview data. In May 2004 the company announced approximately 700 redundancies from its engine foundry and 400 from its assembly site (Beer et al. 2006). The 372 workers were mostly male (90%), older (mean age 48 years), had lower education levels (51% secondary education or less), and were lower skilled (78%). Three-quarters were married or in a de facto relationship and most had above-average incomes for metropolitan Adelaide (AUS $37,000 in 2004: ABS). A large proportion had been with the company for 10 to 20 years (43%), just under a fifth for 20 to 30 years (18%) and 14% for 30 years or more. Of those with children aged 8 to 18 (in scope for the children’s study) 39% had only one breadwinner in the family. Three-quarters of all workers said their family life had been affected in some way by their job loss, either positively or negatively.
The first survey form asked workers about consenting to their children’s participation in a further study. Of the 372 respondents, 194 had children in the house from under age 1 up to 32. Of these, 102 had children in the age range for interviews (8 to 18); an additional nine parents consented but had children out of this range (mostly under 8). This left 23 families with children in range and consenting to interview (22.5% of 102). There was no statistically significant difference in general or mental health between parents with children in scope who did and did not consent. ¹ This discounts potential bias in sampling whereby parents with health problems might be more or less likely to consent to children’s interviews. We likewise tested for differences in whether parents intended to move house after the job loss, and whether they were a single parent or a single breadwinner family, and none of these were statistically significant. Two of the 23 workers who consented had moved interstate before the children’s recruitment and the researchers deemed it inappropriate to interview children by telephone; another had had their telephone disconnected and another was uncontactable despite repeated calls; one said they were too busy, another said they were busy caring for a disabled child, and one had changed their mind about participating. The research team therefore located and interviewed 35 boys and girls aged 4 to 19 from 16 families. Children under age 8 were included in interviews if they wanted to sit in with older siblings, and indeed they often wanted, and were able, to make informative comments.

One limitation of the selection process was potential bias from recruiting children via parents. Since the children’s study was nested in the broader study child recruitment had to be via parents, despite the potential limitation of parents being gatekeepers to recruitment (see MacDougall & Fudge 2001). This is less problematic if researchers can contact children directly via schools (see MacDougall et al 2004), giving them an opportunity to advocate for their own involvement. However, this was impossible in the current study because there was no single school, cluster of schools or other child-focused structure through which to recruit workers’ children. In contrast with Backett-Milburn and Harden (2004), the broader research project was not designed as a family study; if it had been presented to workers this way then a greater proportion of parents may have consented to their children’s involvement. Women have the major responsibility for child-caring in Australia (Pocock 2003), so we may also have had greater uptake had we been able to ask mothers about consent; but in our study 90% of the surveyed workers were male.
Table 1 outlines characteristics of the interviewed children. In all cases only one parent lost their job, and most interviews were conducted a considerable number of months after the job loss. For confidentiality reasons pseudonyms are used for interview excerpts, except where it was unclear which child was talking, in which case a general indication is given e.g., “younger boy”.

Table 1: Characteristics of the interviewed children

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Boys</th>
<th>Girls</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>4 - 8 years</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>9 - 13 years</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>16</td>
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<tr>
<td>14 - 19 years</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>15</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>15</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>35</td>
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<td><strong>Redundant parent</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>16</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>35</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

We involved children in the study design by conducting a focus group with four girls and four boys aged 10 to 16 to generate interview questions for subsequent children. In-depth semi-structured interviews were then conducted with children at their home and with the parent either present in the room or (for older children) elsewhere in the house. The ethical norms for research with children in South Australia are that adults such as parents or teachers should be either nearby or in line-of-sight during interviewing. It is therefore normal to find parents nearby during a one-off interview. This is not to say, however, that parents were exerting power during interviews. Often they were out of the room for some time, were passing through or were engaged in tasks such as housework. Our judgment was that parents were not listening to children’s answers and exerting power. It is also important to acknowledge the most common house design in the area, with one large open-plan kitchen/family-area/lounge rather than separate rooms. This leaves the only option for a private interview as the child’s bedroom, which is clearly inappropriate on ethical grounds. However, because these spaces have multiple uses, and there was often a television or radio in the background, it is reasonable to assume that these multiple uses occur with some element of privacy. Our analysis is that our data do reveal
children discussing potentially uncomfortable issues, such as negative impacts on parental health. Our reflections are that researchers must negotiate sensitively the potentially competing forces of interviewing in a space encouraging children to provide authentic accounts; ethical norms and requirement for adult presence or line-of-sight; house design; and the researcher’s position as a visitor when the family is engaged in a variety of tasks.

Interviewees received a cinema voucher in thanks for participating. Interviews lasted an average of 30 minutes and were audiorecorded alongside field notes. Interviews were analysed to generate codes and themes, using the interview schedule and taking account of issues raised spontaneously. Since interviews were not long and conversations generally not complex, line-by-line coding was conducted directly on the hard copy transcripts; codes were then compared across transcripts and built into themes. The focus group, research approach and interview schedule were approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee at Flinders University. The semi-structured schedule asked: How do you feel about the factory closing? Was there any significant change in your family life because of the job loss of your mum/dad? (Prompt to see if positive, negative or neutral changes). How is your dad/mum coping since they lost their job? Have they been able to find another job? When they lost their job did a lot change around you? (How? Do you know how it has affected your family financially?). Has it affected how much your parents can buy you, or the places they take you? (How do you feel about that?) Do you get to spend more or less time with your parents? Do you know any people who have had to move house or make big changes? Do you know how other children or families have coped? Have you spoken about it as a family? Is there anything else you would like to tell us? Are there other questions we should have asked you?

Results

How children found out about the planned job loss

Some children said their parents had talked to them about the fact that one of them was going to lose their job, either specifically or during general discussions:

*He was telling us he was going to get made redundant. We knew the factory was going to close down. It didn’t really bother me... We...*
knew dad was going to get redundancy but we didn’t talk that much. He worries but he doesn’t show it (Ricky Thorngrove, age 16).

I sat and listened and they just talked. Normally we talk at tea time and the topic comes up (John Teller, age 16).

They just said he was going to lose his job. [Interviewer: They must have done it in a way that made you feel relaxed, cos you said you just “went with the ride”]. Yeah (Matthew Johnson, age 11).

They told us on the last day that it was his last day and he had to look for a new job, and he found a job at [x] (Younger girl, Potter family).

The Cooper and Goodings children had overheard their parents talking, while others, like some of the adult workers, had heard it first through the media:

I saw it on the news, that lots of people from [the factory] had lost their jobs. And I heard that my mum could choose whether to keep on working or quit. (David Teller, age 12).

I think it was just a general conversation that we had [with our parents] because it had been on the news and in the paper and all that. We knew it was going to close soon, but not when (Older boy, Tippett family).

One older boy understood quite a degree of complexity about job loss and workplace relations:

From what I know, people were given the option of taking the package there and then, or wanting to stay and taking the risk of possibly being sacked and getting no package. This is how I heard it... I think what she [Mum]believed after that, was that she’d been put on the list to go (John Teller, age 16).

Feelings about the factory closing

When children were asked to think back to first hearing about the job losses and when they actually occurred, most did not describe it as a memorable or negative event for themselves:

It was pretty much the same, we didn’t find too much different... I suppose there was some worry that he wouldn’t get another job (Matthew Cousins, age 11).

I noticed he was looking for a job, that’s about it. He wrote on the calendar “job interview” (Older girl, Cooper family).
Some said they or the family were “sad” or “upset” because they did not know what would happen. Others – mainly older children – talked about their or their parents’ “worries” or feelings of uncertainty about the future:

*It was a bit scary cos he didn’t find a job for a while. It wasn’t that long, but it did take time (Younger girl, Woods family)*

*I didn’t know how she was going to get another job… she didn’t do Year 12 so it would have been harder for her to get another job (David Teller, age 12).*

*I think it was hard on everyone. Just the money aspect of it, where was our next meal going to come from and all that. Just when it was leading up to dad losing his job, that’s when I was starting to get worried, just the money aspect of it, would he get another job. I kept to myself and knew mum and dad would figure out something, but still worried (Older boy, Potter family).*

In another family one older girl said it had been hard on everyone and she had worried about money, but had also not told her parents about her worries.

A younger boy in one family said he didn’t really care at the time because “I wasn’t into jobs… I thought it would be all right” (Younger boy, Potter family). Some said they now had a better life. Another said she trusted things would work out and her parents would organise things. The Johnson children (aged 10, 12 and 14) said they were less worried once the job loss actually happened, and that they also felt no need to worry once they saw that their dad was less worried. One father present at interview clarified however that workers had suspected for several years that the factory would close, so that it might already have been in children’s minds and had therefore not been a complete shock. This was also mentioned by one of the girls (aged 16) in the Cooper family who said “we’d been expecting it for a while, so we knew what was going to happen”.

**Impact on social networks**

The most commonly noted social change was missing the factory’s Christmas Parties:

*We do get to miss out on the parties that were really fun… every year… You just go into the [factory] and look around at what they do at work and get a little showbag. They show you some cars and how they make them (Matthew Cousins, age 11).*
At the Christmas things they had these big parties for the families (Younger girl, Woods family).

One mother explained that the Christmas Parties had been a major social event in the children’s year. The company would hire a big park or fairground for thousands of workers and their families.

A few children were sad because they or their parent would not see workmates as frequently:

I did feel a bit sad because Dad had lots of friends at [the factory] and they felt like part of the family. We knew them pretty well (Younger girl, Woods family).

However, few knew of other children whose parents had left the factory. One boy had only had a superficial conversation with children on the bus (Younger boy, Potter family), and another (aged 7) vaguely remembered a girl telling his school class about her dad’s job loss. Justine Goodings, aged 14, said she knew a girl whose uncle worked at the factory although he had not lost his job, and one boy said he would not discuss his feelings with other children anyway. Most children interviewed did not report having mixed with, or knowing what happened to, other workers’ children except at major events like the Christmas Party.

How mum/dad reacted to the job loss

a) The redundant parent

Some children were aware of how the job loss affected their parents’ mood, even if parents tried to hide this. The Johnson children (aged 10, 12 and 14) talked about dad being “grumpy”, “sad” or “moody” for several months before leaving, although he had then found a new job within two weeks. The Teller boys believed their mum had wanted to stay at the factory so was sad to leave, but they also perceived mixed feelings in understanding that she hadn’t wanted to stay either in case she got sacked without a package.

Some older children were aware of parental stress from looking for new work, from the uncertainty about finding new work, or from being in new work with worse conditions (eg longer hours and less pay). The Davidson children, aged 14 and 16, had noticed their dad’s insomnia
becoming worse since the job loss, while Laura Matheson, aged 14, said the main change she noticed was her dad being more tired now he had further to travel to work. She also felt he was not particularly happy in his new job.

Although the father in the Potter family felt he had been less grumpy since leaving, his daughters (aged 10 and 11) said they noticed no difference, while the older children in the Cooper family felt that there had been some positive impacts:

I think he became more excited because he was doing something [study] that he wanted to do. The only negative thing that I can think of [is] he might be a bit stressful at times, like with the stuff he’s doing now. Like when his exams come up (Older girl, Cooper family).

[Mum comments: Dad was really worried about losing his job and what was going to happen]. Oh, I didn’t know that (James Thorngrove, age 7).

He didn’t like it to start off with, but he really liked having time away from work, it sort of relaxed him. He’s still happy now but he’s had his time off. He doesn’t get a lot of time off now (Justine Goodings, age 14).

Others felt differently about the job losses once their parent found new work:

I just think Mum’s a lot happier where she is now. It’s all in the past now (John Teller, age 16).

b) The other parent

Children also observed job loss impacts on their other parent:

Mum was pretty happy that we could go [on holiday] to Tasmania (Older girl, Cooper family).

Some noticed negative impacts from their other parent worrying about the future or the pressures of increasing their own paid work, rather than worry about the actual news of the loss:

Mum was shocked but I don’t think she was that upset. We didn’t have as much money and it stressed out my mum a bit cos she had to work more till my dad found another job. She was working every day except Saturday and Sunday, but sometimes she had to work Saturday as well. She started work a lot earlier in the mornings, about 6am, and then wouldn’t get home till 6pm (Justine Goodings, age 14).
Ricky Thorngrove (age 10) had noticed his mother being more tired from increasing her paid work to full-time (and from 1 to 3 jobs) to compensate for financial uncertainty. While the children saw their mother more now that she worked at their school, they saw her less at home as she needed daytime naps to recover from so much time in paid work. The Davidson teenagers said their mother’s usual panic attacks had worsened since their father’s job loss. One mother in particular had not seen any benefit in her husband being around the house more:

"Mum was frustrated cos dad was around so much. Me and mum like our time away from Dad. He gets very frustrating, pushes you to do things, rushes you. And he sits down and pokes us cos he’s got no-one else to talk to (Justine Goodings, age 14)."

Some children had not noticed much difference:

"I didn’t see much [change]. I think she worked later a bit (David Teller, age 12)."

c) The parental relationship

Children in one family (the Samsons, aged 12 and 18) observed that the job loss had affected both parents, who had argued more because of the stress. However, the older daughter said she had brought her parents together to discuss the issues. Otherwise, most children did not mention changes to the parental relationship, but parents may have hidden this from their children.

Changes to family life

a) Amount of time and time of day spent with parents

The main change children reported in relation to job loss were changes to the family’s daily or weekly routine, particularly the times of day when parents were at home or work. This depended on whether the parent had found new work and whether the other parent’s paid/unpaid work routine had changed.
Where workers had not yet been able, or had not wanted, to find another job, children often noticed that the redundant parent was “around more”, they sometimes had more time with them, and generally they liked this:

*It’s a better life... cos he’s home more... He used to be home when we went to school and he never used to be home after that, only when he had days off. So now we see him more (Matthew Cousins, age 11). We play a lot of sport and Mum not having a job just freed up a lot of time. Now she’s rushing and stressed out more [now she’s got another job] (John Teller, age 16).*

*Well it was better cos my dad was home more so we could play with him (Younger boy, Potter family).*

*He was home more and we got to spend time with him when we got home from school... Since he’s been home we’ve all gotten to connect more and we play games together (Younger girl, Potter family).*

For some children this was a permanent change:

*Now it’s even better cos he’s got his own business and he works at home. So if we want to do something with him we can just go out there [to his shed]. He fixed my skateboard for me today. When he usually came home he had a sleep, he was on nightshift (James Thorngrove, age 7).*

For teenage children, job loss or changed work hours did not necessarily mean more time together:

*We noticed he was around [laughs] and it was good to spend a little bit of time with him on a holiday, but we spend most of the time with friends (Older girl, Cooper family).*

The Potter girls (aged 10 and 11), whose dad had been on the afternoon shift (3pm to 11pm), found that his new earlier work shift meant he was now around times which they felt offered more quality interaction than the previous “before school” slot. Nevertheless, one teenage girl was not as happy:

*I guess [I felt] annoyed because my dad would be home so much because it would take him ages to find a new job, and I like having time to myself (Justine Goodings, age 14)*

However, others were disappointed that they now saw their father less. Men who had worked on the factory’s early shift (7am to 3pm) had often collected children after school, or were home
afternoons and evenings (although this had apparently only happened since regular overtime had disappeared). In the Johnson family the father’s new work hours (9am to 5pm) and workdays had changed family time in several ways:

We don’t see him as much. He’s working longer hours, and he works on Saturdays. He used to take us to sport, now he sometimes takes us if he’s not working. He [used to pick] us up from school every day. It didn’t really affect me cos I catch the bus but these two [younger siblings] now go to Nana’s and Papa’s (Older boy, Johnson family).

The Samson children reported their family’s total reorganisation since their mother had felt the need to return to paid work after 17 years out of the workforce raising them. They disliked the fact that she was not always with them now in school holidays. The most consistent finding, however, was that children appreciated spending more time with their father, expressed as time in general rather than tied to particular activities or outings.

b) Desire to maintain continuity of people and places

All children interviewed appreciated that they had not changed houses, schools or friendship groups because of the job loss. The Davidson children said the job loss had forced their parents to reconsider the children’s private school fees, and the children had been relieved when the parents decided they were still affordable because otherwise they would have moved to a new (public) school and lost friends. Cassie Samson, aged 18, said after the job loss her family had trialled a move to another state (Queensland) and that for her any permanent move would have meant disrupting her final year of high school and her relationship with her boyfriend. Consequently, she was pleased that her mother had disliked being away, so that the parents had decided not to move. Some children echoed their parents’ comments about arranging things deliberately so that children’s lives would not be unduly affected by the job loss:

It wasn’t too much different for me. I just kept going to school and doing what I did (Matthew Cousins, age 11).

Impacts of changing finances
Most children did not notice reductions to the family budget. However, the girls in the Samson, Davidson and Cooper families observed that their mothers had felt increased pressure to budget well and watch family expenditure. Most children did not feel their parents had bought them less since the job loss, and some children were pleased if they thought the redundancy payout might bring one-off or ongoing benefits:

“Our house is a lot better than we used to have. We improved it [using the redundancy payout for renovations]” (Matthew Cousins, age 11).

“I felt a bit excited cos I knew we’d get something out of it, like a holiday... We went to Tasmania” (Older girl, Cooper family).

“He wanted to have a break and go on holiday before he started a new job. We went to Perth” (Abbie Johnson, age 10).

Feelings could also be mixed and some children felt that temporary or permanent changes to the family income had implications for regular or special outings, activities or pocket money:

“It wasn’t too bad but we didn’t go out to dinner as much. We had to have a bit of a budget” (Younger girl, Woods family).

“Mum wasn’t earning as much money... so we had to cut back on a few things... we didn’t get any special things in the lunch box each week. Get rid of the extras and keep the main things I think. But it wasn’t much cut-back really. We didn’t stop any of [our sport]” (John Teller, age 16).

“I didn’t get pocket money because we didn’t have the money to give it to me, and I couldn’t do the leisure activities that I like to do... I used to go to the movies every weekend and I couldn’t do that because we didn’t have the money, and I couldn’t go shopping” (Justine Goodings, age 14, only child).

One of the Cooper girls (age 16) said she felt excited that a redundancy payout might lead to a holiday, but that she and her sister were also somewhat worried because they knew their dad wouldn’t have a job and then they wouldn’t be able to “do as much stuff, like going to the movies - once a month might have changed to every three months”. Her sister said the family had become more money-conscious once they knew about the job loss, and some children felt they wanted to help out using their own money:

“I knew that, because I have a job, I’d have to pay for more stuff out of my own money. I do a paper round... Going to the cinema and
that, we could pay for it out of our own money instead of mum and dad paying... or we go halves (Older girl, Cooper family).

I did help out mum and dad a bit cos I do have quite a lot of money. People give us money, like Grandma, birthdays. We just lend money and then they [mum and dad] pay us back (Younger girl, Woods family).

Since the job loss one teenage girl said she had turned 16 and this had changed how the family received government family payments (Centrelink) so that she now regularly phoned in to report her own casual income (AUS $30 per fortnight). The older children in the Samson family commented that their family had had difficulties dealing with Centrelink because one parent was now out of work. However, Justine’s mother felt that children might have less fear of job loss if they ever faced it themselves because they would know that “dad got through it OK”.

**Discussion**

Our results extend findings from the few studies which have investigated children’s accounts of parental job loss in middle class professional families, to children of workers in the automotive industry. These children were aware of family strategies to adjust to job loss, were able to perceive parents hiding negative feelings about the changes and noticed changes to the parental relationship, and reported both detrimental and beneficial impacts on themselves and their family (Lippold & Beachy-Quick 2003; Nasman 2003; Wauchope 1994).

The children were also generally well aware that their parents’ employment status has a significant impact on their lifestyle. The negative factors noted were not considerable and none reported a dramatic decline in living standards. However, none had been dislocated from their home or school and so experienced stability related to school, home, suburb and friends. For some children job loss was even followed by a better life, after some initial worries. Some talked about “going with the flow”, going along for the ride, or moving on to a better life. This may represent a family story or a coping strategy used to interpret change positively. However, we note that we were not able to contact families who had moved house and recommend that further research compares the accounts of children whose families have and have not moved following job loss.
Wauchope (1994) found that parents mediate how children experience parental job loss, and our results augment this extremely limited area of research. Some parents who were present or nearby during children’s interviews commented on their concerted effort to shield their children from any potentially negative effects by trying to maintain as normal a life as possible, for example by reworking the family budget or by discussing the issue after children were in bed. While some children heard the news of the job losses in a sudden way in the media, others heard it from their parents. Furthermore, workers had suspected for some time that the job losses would occur and so families may have had time to prepare, including time to think about how to minimise impacts on the children. A reciprocal effect of parental protection was trust by some children that their parents would make good decisions to help the family cope, and that their role was to trust their parents and do what they could to help.

Children in the study were not just passive beneficiaries of their parents' coping mechanisms. We found that children not only accepted financial changes for the family’s good but also took active steps to contribute themselves. This is consistent with one of the principles of the new sociology of childhood, that children are active agents who can contribute to changing their environment (MacDougall, Schiller & Darbyshire 2004). Our findings are interesting when considered alongside Wauchope’s (1994) finding that middle-class children with no previous experience of paternal job loss experienced more changes and perceived the changes as more threatening, yet responded more actively to manage their stress, than did children in working class families who had experienced repeated parental job loss. In our study, children of the factory workers were also active in managing job loss effects on the family.

The issues raised by Pocock and Clarke’s (2004) research relating to parental work-life balance, that children value having parental time rather than receiving goods or money in compensation for time, were evident when the children in our study spoke of the value of having parents around at times when they could interact. They presented this as the value of “just being there” time, particularly with fathers. These accounts provide good guidance for the value of family-friendly working patterns and indicate the benefits of gaining children’s’ perspectives on this vexed question at a time when concern is being expressed that workplaces are becoming less
family-friendly. Children’s accounts of daily routines and parents’ new work hours showed that the car factory’s shift system had often allowed fathers’ more involvement in children’s care than do standard 9am to 5pm jobs.

Methodologically, our findings support recent calls for children’s voices to be heard (Dockett 2000). The children in our study appreciated being looked after by parents, but far from being passive actors they initiated strategies to contribute to the family. Furthermore, younger and older children alike were able to make insightful contributions, counteracting the view held by some that children cannot contribute to debates about the needs of themselves or other children because they lack the capacity for abstract thinking that characterises later adolescence and adulthood (MacDougall et al. 2004). Furthermore, the fact that children in this study not only responded well to interview questions but also wrote the questions themselves contradicts the suspicion that standard research methods (such as interviewing) may not be applicable to children and that the most appropriate methodology is to seek the opinions of significant adults such as parents and service providers (Kalnins et al. 1992; Sandbaek 1999).

In terms of practice implications, it has often been assumed that children can be treated like “mini-adults” in human service campaigns and interventions (Kalnins et al. 1992). Children in our study spoke about the importance of remaining in local areas, school and friendship networks. This suggests that government policy which sees relocation assistance as a key way to help redundant workers find new work (Costello 2006; Foley 2007) may be problematic for their children, who should not be treated as mini-adults. We suggest the desirability of extending the scope of child-centred research beyond the narrow concentration on matters directly affecting children, such as child care, education, play and sport (Darbyshire et al. 2005). Children in our study contributed to our knowledge of what might be considered more adult domains, such as family functioning, government policy about redundancy, and the impact of working hours and working conditions on family wellbeing. In this way, we hope that our serious dialogue with children about quality of life contributes to what has been described as not only a basic right, but also a precondition for the promotion of health and wellbeing (de Winter et al. 1999). A particular insight from the children’s accounts is their focus on the effects at the local level of industry restructuring at the global level, and the ways in which they are personally affected.
Conclusion

Our findings must be considered in light of the economic and policy environment within which the job losses occurred, in 2004 and 2005, a time when the automotive industry was experiencing a downturn, the Australian economy was growing, and there was significant real income growth and improved productivity growth (ABS 2007b). There was also a low unemployment rate, with annual average unemployment peaking at 10.7% in December 1992 and then generally falling over the later 1990s and early-2000s to 4.9% in June 2006, with the proportion of people experiencing longer term unemployment also declining (ABS 2007a). This increased the chances of re-employment for redundant workers, and may explain why breaking the news about the job losses was not a major event for these children or parents. Experiences might have been different if parents were losing work at a time of general economic downturn and high unemployment.

The other crucial factor in a global context is that Australia still has a welfare state providing payments to workers experiencing structural job loss, which provides a strong safety net for families such as those of the children interviewed. Furthermore, the company provided reasonably generous payments that resulted, in part, from the negotiations of trade unions. Thus the relative lack of major impact on the children may be explained by the existence of a welfare state and trade unions. The situation of these children contrasts strongly with that of children in middle- to low- income countries where trade unions have no power and welfare state safety nets are non-existent (for accounts of families and children in these settings see Heymann, 2006). Research by Kalil & De Leire (2002) also suggests that paternal job loss is more detrimental on families of lower socio-economic status. The accounts of the children in our Australian study therefore provide a powerful argument in favour of supportive institutions.

Our research reflections also add to the skills and strategies needed for research approaches that explore children’s accounts of social and economic change. We did not include children in families who had moved house, who may have experienced greater disruption to their lives, and future researchers may want to include a travel budget to visit children living at a distance in order to overcome the ethical problems of phone interviews. Our study also highlights some
limits to methodological flexibility of a children’s study nesting within a larger adult study rather than being designed in its own right. A higher response rate may have been obtained if the main-carer had been asked or if we had had flexibility to recruit children other than initially via parents. One interesting methodological finding was that parents preferred interviews during school holidays. One of the study’s strengths was that children’s focus groups developed the interview schedule and that, despite the possibility of power issues with parental presence during interviews, children did discuss both negative and positive experiences. However, we suggest the need to negotiate ethical spaces within the home environment which allow children the space to talk without parents exerting power influence over the conversation.

This study has reported the accounts of children from families with above average incomes who experienced job loss in an affluent country with a welfare state, where trade unions offer protection to workers’ rights, and with currently high economic growth and low unemployment rates. Thus these children were shielded from many impacts of job loss in a way that is not common globally. The global challenge is to make this experience available to all children. As one boy said when asked what governments can do: “Try and give the parents a payout that will cover their children as well. Try to help the families after the plant closes”.

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Notes

1. General health was measured with the SF-1 where people self-identify their health in general as being ‘poor’, ‘fair’, ‘good’, ‘very good’ or excellent. In accordance with standard practice
people were grouped as having either ‘good’/‘very good’/excellent health or ‘fair’/‘poor’ health. Mental health was measured using the GHQ-12 (General Health Questionnaire). On the GHQ scores range from 0-12, with higher scores indicating worse mental health. We used the threshold of 2 or more to indicate at least minor psychiatric disorder, based on recommendations by Goldberg et al. (1998) who examined GHQ thresholds in a range of countries and primary care settings. They recommend that if the setting’s mean is below 1.85 then a threshold of 2 or more should be used. According to the 1997 Australia National Health Survey the national mean was 0.85, so we applied a “2 or greater” threshold for our sample.
References


