

# **Fiction and Reality: The Impact of Layoff on Family Structure**

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## **Abstract**

Post-capitalist economy, which is characterized by conditions such as high competition, global circulation of capital and neo-liberal regime, forced organizations to introduce novel types of organizing strategies that aim to promote efficiency and effectiveness. Organizations tend to follow restructuring, downsizing or subcontracting strategies to become more “competitive” that causes high number of laid off and displaced employees. This fact of job loss is strikingly handled by two films. Inspired from these two films, the present study aims to argue the negative impacts of job loss on family. For this aim, in-depth interview was conducted with 8 laid off employees. Findings indicate that long-run unemployment is destructive on family structure. Separation and intent of separation of couples increase by the paternal job loss that also creates role inversion between the partner that results in self-esteem and mental health erosion of patriarch.

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**Keywords:** Layoff, unemployment, family, organizations, cinema

## **Introduction**

Layoff has been held as an instrument by organizations for enhancing the economic outcomes. Based upon these economic motives, it might seem a helpful act for organizational performance. Especially when general economy is in a recession period firms, necessarily, tend to reduce their work force for cost-saving. However, it has turned to be a trend in the post-capitalist economy in which new employment and organizing strategies have emerged.

For the sake of competitiveness, effectiveness and efficiency a “lean” structure is aimed by organizations with different packages such as restructuring, rightsizing, downsizing that brings a reduction in employed staff. The macroeconomic trends have been commonly associated with worker displacement. Those are technological change; foreign trade and the shift to production offshore to take advantage of low-wage foreign workers; immigration; firms’ greater use of outside suppliers, subcontractors, and

partners, and the paring down of the activities of the firm; the shift in consumption from manufactured goods to services; poor firm management; weakened labor unions; and regional and national economic downturn (Brand, 2015).

Based upon these trends, number of laid off employees reached a massive amount in 90s and it was announced by publishers in America and other parts of the world with striking headlines such as “The Downsizing of America” (Childs, 1997). United States has witnessed 3 million layoffs in 80s and 90s. In Germany, the country's biggest industrial company, Daimler-Benz, has shed 70,000 jobs. Even Japanese companies, known for offering lifetime employment, had plans for downsizing. NTT, the telecommunications giant, announced plans to shed 45,000 jobs in November 1995 (Dahl and Nesheim, 1998: 239).

Therefore, individual, organizational and societal impacts of job loss drew attention of various social disciplines and professions. Its consequences have been argued from different perspectives that link this phenomenon to declines in employee loyalty, motivation, and morale; labor and machine productivity; profits; product innovation and quality, individual and family well-being etc. (Quinlan, 2007; Kim, 2003; Van Buren, 2000; Budros, 1999; Childs, 1997; Spreitzer and Mishra, 2002; Cascio 1993).

Layoff has been narrated as a functional process by “managerialist” viewpoint, however, employees may intensely experience its negative impacts. It is an unwanted fact for employees that may lead to “dramatic” changes in their lives. When it happens, loss of job has an evil potential in overturning human life due to wide range of traumatic consequences from depression to violation. Even it is sometimes rationalized from the business side for “productivity” and “efficiency” and it may create new opportunities for both part, staff and business structure, layoff is still devastating for employees.

And this evil potential is reflected on motion picture screen by two films that projects the disintegration of families caused by job loss of patriarch resulting from the layoff process. The present paper, inspired by these two films, aims to argue impacts of layoff on family. In other words, by rereading the discourse of films, the study investigates, this fictional projection of job loss in the real family life of laid off employees.

### **Layoff and Job Loss**

Job loss may stem from different processes such as work displacement and job separation. Doiron and Mendolia (2011) distinguish three different types of work displacement that result in termination of employment; dismissal, redundancy and job temporary ending. While dismissals are more likely to be related to individual traits, redundancies are

based on the employer's characteristics and environment. The reasons for displacement are usually structural, for example, due to new technology, industry changes, or government regulations (Fallick, 1996; Devine et al, 2003). Displaced workers are understood to be individuals with established work histories, involuntarily separated from their jobs (Kletzer, 1998).

On the other hand, job separation includes both voluntary (worker initiated job separation, or quitting) and involuntary job termination. Job loss is generally understood as indicating involuntary separation that occurs when workers are fired or laid off, where layoffs occur as a result of firms downsizing, restructuring, closing plants or relocating (Brand, 2015: 359). Restructuring does not necessarily require job termination, while downsizing is an organization's attempt to enhance its efficiency and/or effectiveness through permanent employment cuts (Budros, 1999: 71).

In this study job loss will be used as to refer to involuntarily separation of workers who are laid off due to structural and economic reasons or dismissal. Employee reduction as a result of economic reasons tended to occur during short-term economic slumps and thus tended to be temporary in nature and aim is to adjust employment levels downward until business conditions recovered. While structural-based layoff trend that has been trendy since 80s seems to be conscious use of permanent personnel reduction to improve efficiency (Budros, 1997). On the other hand, a "person-specific" dismissal is likely to be caused at least in part by the individual's characteristics and behaviour (Dorion and Mendolia, 2011). When employers make decisions regarding whom to displace, it will be relatively less productive workers (e.g. lower levels of motivation, commitment, and ability), workers with physical or mental health issues, and socially inept workers who both are more likely to lose jobs and have worse economic and social outcomes (Brand, 2015).

Researchers have considered the effects of downsizing on employees (Bennett, Martin, Bies and Brockner, 1995; Latack, Kinicki and Prussia, 1995; Van Buren, 2000). First of all, laid off workers are exposed to remarkable earnings losses, which are expected to be more persistent than unemployment effects (Fallick 1996; Farber, 2005; Jacobson, LaLonde, and Sullivan 1993; Kletzer 1998). Since their situation is worsen by other additional negative effects, laid off individuals are often known as the "victims" due to devastation of job loss that harms on psychological and physical well-being (Fallick, 1996; Devine et al., 2003). As it is noted by Brand (2015) the impact of job loss and unemployment is not limited to economic decline; it is also associated with considerable, long-term non-economic consequences for displaced workers, as well as for their families. Displaced workers face psychological and physical distress, personal reassessment in relation to individual values and societal pressures, and new

patterns of interaction with family and peers. Much of the work on the non-economic consequences of job loss is consistent with a large literature demonstrating a strong correlation between indicators of socioeconomic status and individual life chances and well-being.

These wide range of negative effects of layoff are not only noticed and referred by literature that fueled by the contributions of different disciplines but also find a resonance in popular culture, especially in cinema.

### **The fictional representation of layoff**

Cinema can be contributive in analyzing and understanding the facts and phenomena as well as work life. It is clear that sometimes a film can frame the nature and dynamics of work life in a visible and striking way. As it is noted by Hassard and Holliday (1998) popular culture can exhibit more dramatic, more intense and more dynamic representation of works and organizations in comparison to text books and mainstream theories. Arts can teach much effectively than other materials (Nissley, 2010; Alvarez et al., 2004). While popular culture may be parallel to certain management and organization theories that play “servant of power” role in reinforcing the organizational functionalism, it may also reflect a critique on work and organization. Some intellectuals are skeptical about the popular culture however we should regard that innovative and insightful commentaries and critiques can be more visible within the popular culture (Rhodes and Westwood, 2008).

In this regard, two award-winning films, which can be categorized under the same genre, drew attention to the impacts of job loss stemming from the layoff. These films, in chronological order, “Time Out (L’emploi de Temps)” and “Tokyo Sonata”, gave an inspiration to examine the dependence of family on the employment of households.

The former was released in 2001 and the latter in 2008. “Time Out” is written and directed by French director Laurent Cantet who focuses his lens on the story of a laid off employee who decides to hide his job loss from his family and creates a double-faced life which dramatically influence his family in turn. As it is reviewed by a critic “*‘Time Out’ is a quietly introspective portrait of the self-esteem of employment and the shame of losing a job, but as he explores work and the overwhelming, defining power it has over our lives, the film reveals something more primal*”.<sup>58</sup>

Similarly, in the film Tokyo Sonata, which is directed by Japanese director Kiyoshi Kurosawa, it is narrated that a man from middle class loses his job and then his family slowly disintegrates. “*Sasaki (main character of*

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<sup>58</sup> <http://www.seattlepi.com/ae/movies/article/Time-Out-explores-man-s-identification-with-his-1086026.php> - Accessed on 28th March, 2017.

*the film) doesn't quite know what to do with either himself or his life after he becomes unemployed. He can't tell his wife and children; else, he would lose his honor and authority. He opts instead to pretend to go to work every day, while actually hanging out in libraries and parks, surrounded by indigents and dozens of other former (male) white-collar employees who apparently are just as concerned with keeping up appearances at home”.*<sup>59</sup>

Both films have many views in common. In both films, the main characters hide their layoff from their families and they pretend to still have a job that leads them to exhibit strange behaviors. Main characters in both films invent a story which sometimes seems to turn a dream fed by lies and distorted reality. Vincent (Aurelien Recoing), in “Time out”, leaves home and pretends to go to the work but sleeps in car, drives on highways, spends his time reading the paper and sneaks into the office buildings as if an important figure of the company, calls his wife to inform her about the unplanned long meetings. Similarly, Sasaki (Teruyuki Kagawa), hides his layoff and leaves home every day in the morning pretending to go to the work however spend his time in the streets and public places. He uses a feature on his mobile phone that enables periodic ring tone playing so that he seems to have calls and make others believe that he is still employed. Finally, they lose control on their fake life they produce.

The conspicuous point of both films is the shame felt by patriarchs who cannot accept the fact of job loss. They fear the stigma of being unemployed for both their self-esteem and respect of families. It is seen that the role and the authority of patriarch is associated with the employment in which the image of unemployment is attached to a useless patriarch. That is because, main characters in both films, seem to lose meaning of their life and touch with reality.

### **The Impacts of Layoff on Family Structure**

In 1996 Newsweek was published with the banner headline "Corporate Killers", heralded the downsizing companies and number of layoffs undertaken by them (Van Buren, 2000). The report was covered by such a startling metaphor to imply the negative potential of layoff in the lives of laid off workers. And also a number of research, as it is shortly noted above, refer to painful consequences of job loss in “victims” life including economic loss, physical and mental diseases, self-destructive behaviors, suicides and family disintegration (Brand, 2015; Strully, 2009; Gallo et al., 2004; McKee-Ryan et al., 2005; Eliason and Storrie, 2005; Ferrie et al.,

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<sup>59</sup> <http://www.altfg.com/film/tokyo-sonata-kiyoshi-kurosawa/> - Accessed on 28th March, 2017.

1998; Turner, 1995). The last one also dramatically represented in cinema with similar focuses.

Inspired from the artistic, virtual and fictional representation, present study tracks this issue on family life at local context, in Ankara. In this regard, in-depth interview was conducted with eight participants who were, all male, previously working in different industries and laid off in last six months and they have been still unemployed at the day of interview. Three of them were security guard hired by a subcontractor. While another three were office workers in a subsidiary of white-goods producing organization. And the rest two from the tourism industry who were previously worked in a hotel. The participants were selected with the convenience sampling method and they were offered to participate the research with the references of personal contacts (intermediary between the researcher and subject) and meetings were arranged in public places. Subjects were let to decide where to meet to make them feel comfortable. Each interview lasted 45 minutes on average.

## **Findings**

What the primarily questioned in the study is the relation between spouses after one of them being laid off. Six of the eight participants stated significant negative changes in relations with their partners while one noted slight tensions. Only one of them, on the other hand, was content since the “pain of job loss” strengthened cohesiveness and bond in the family.

Two of them, one engaged one married, were quite sad while telling they were separated. One of them, the married one earlier, was laid off at the age of 36 after nine year tenure in the subsidiary of white-goods as a sales representative. He strongly specified the links between his employment and family ties.

*“We have been married for seven years just before I lost my job. Everything was perfect at the beginning. We had a baby following the second year of marriage. My earning was not bad. I used to get a moderate salary plus commission. My wife was working in a privately-owned hospital as a nurse. After the first three years of marriage, when our baby reached her first anniversary, our relation started to swing. Actually, it is not true to say ‘our’. It was not a mutual reaction. I don’t know, I guess, it was stemming from the changes in my feelings. Her physical appearance changed apparently after giving birth. She didn’t look attractive to me. Then I was laid off since my manager didn’t want me in his team. Until I was laid off, I used to want to get separated but she used to resist and worked hard to save our marriage. But after I was laid off, this time, she kicked me out. Now I can see my daughter once in a week. This is my tragic story.”*

What he told were parallel to the findings presented by literature. Doiron and Mendolia (2011) suggest that person-specific dismissals are expected to have more severe and longer lasting impacts on divorce probabilities. The impact of dismissals is much higher and statistically significant impact on family dissolution. The longer people have been married, the smaller the probability of family dissolution. This result is reversed for the intermediate durations (10 to 20 years of marriage) where the probability of divorce is increasing. Childs (1997: 123) narrates the situation of a laid off individual in 90s' America following the corporate restructuring. *A 51 year-old loan officer who now works at a roadside tourist center for a fourth of what he once made- a man who lost his wife and the esteem of his children along with the loss of his job- the account puts a personal face on the startling figures of job cuts during the 90s.*

The other separated one in the research, 33 years old male, was previously hired by subcontractor as a security guard, left by his fiancée after five months being laid off. He was asked if his unemployment played a role in his separation. He believes so; *"I guess yes. I was depressive and stressful in this period but I didn't want to get separated. The decision was my old fiancée's. She showed the depression I was in as an excuse to leave. But I know it is not true. She was unhappy and indecisive what to do with an unemployed man. Her parents opposed to our relation at the very beginning since I was a contracted employee. When I was laid off, I am sure, they provoked her to get separated"*.

As referred earlier, the displaced and laid off employees have an increased risk of family tension, and of family disruption (Brand, 2015; Charles and Stephens 2004). Rest five participants

In the research noted that they started to have serious communication problems after job loss. What one of them told summarizes the average case experienced by each, *"We don't speak too much. Clearly, we don't speak unless there is a need to communicate. We tend to discuss and shout one another when we communicate more than required"*.

One of the participants emphasized that he left home for a temporary period due to the lack of communication and fights. Even they formally maintain their marriage, for a recovery, the male had to move to his parents' home for one month.

### **Role Inversion**

Another finding of this research is to reveal the exchange between roles played by spouses. Paternal role is undertaken by the mother of family while husband starts to perform motherhood after he loses his job. An expert of Management Information System, 42 years old male, who was previously

working in subsidiary of white-goods manufacturer expressed that he was lost in a world he never knew.

*“When I was working I was earning good enough and that is why my wife didn’t use to work. She used to take care of our 5 years old child. After being laid off I searched a new job for four months but I couldn’t find. I lost my hopes finally. Luckily we have our own flat and we don’t have to pay rental. But, despite this advantage, our economic loss forced my wife to work. She has a degree in German Literature. She started to deliver private lessons and do translation works. Now I am taking care of our baby while she works... I have been jobless for a long time. And this makes me quite depressive and smoke more and more. I have been smoking for years but I tend to smoke intensely in this period. Depression puts me in heavy smoker position and I don’t have money. It is very hard for me to want money from my wife. Thanks to her, so far, she has been patient with me. I am always at home and caring baby and I need to be financially supported by my wife. Too tough... I don’t know how long I can stand this”.*

### **The Case of Children**

The film Tokyo Sonata projects how a father loses his control on his family after he lost his job. Similarly, a number of research (Brand, 2015; Brand and Thomas, 2014; Stevens and Schaller, 2010; Kalil and Ziolo-Guest, 2008) refer to the same phenomenon focusing on case of children which is effected by parental layoff that results in academic decline, expulsion from school and lower self-esteem.

These effects are observed on a family who provides education opportunity in private-schools for their child. However, after the paternal layoff, economic loss forces the family to quit the private school and they enroll the child in a public school. This change effects the academic success of 9 years old boy who cannot adopt himself to new school and social environment. The father sadly confesses how unhappiness of his son distresses him. *“My son does not respect me now as he does once. He blames me when he faces an undesirable or bad experience at school”.*

### **Conclusion**

In 2017, unemployment level in Turkey reached the worst point of last seven years, with the rate of %13<sup>60</sup> that caused job displacement and layoffs. Some companies reduced the number of their employees. This phenomenon is also dramatically addressed by some business movies. In this

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<http://www.tuik.gov.tr/Start.do;jsessionid=WLdhZFGR0qGT6j4bZnBRQqcvGZTlzLK29nwmdSsPv2YPvgtZPFvQ!-165156326-> Accessed on 14th April, 2017.

context present paper aimed to investigate this effects of layoff on family life, practically.

Findings indicate that reality is hand-in-hand with the visual representation. And in some cases reality goes negatively beyond the fiction as it is stated by two subject of the sample who separated from their spouse. It is revealed that changing inhabitation and school of children, temporary separation of spouses and role inversion, and loss of harmony/peace between partners are other main consequences. The limitation of this paper is the sample size. The number of subjects is needed to be increased to reach more precise results.

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