

SUCCESSFUL RELOCATION

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The work reported here is based on my study of a Big Three automobile plant closing in the Midwest in 1982 and the relocation experience of a group of auto workers to jobs in a similar plant in the Deep South. Worker relocation is an important phenomenon, especially for those of us in the "Rust Belt," where we have been so hard hit by plant closings. I found it to be a very understudied topic, however, especially regarding the personal and family outcomes of such moves for working class people. There is virtually no theory that fits this sort of move – from the urban industrialized Northeast and Midwest to the more rural South. Older theory, of course, assumes a move from a simpler rural life to the complexity of the big city. Much of current labor migration turns that theory on its head. Gigantic new plants, such as General Motor's Saturn plant in Tennessee, are being built in southern places that were formerly wide spots in the road.

As a labor educator, I knew some of the workers from the plant that was to become the focus of study. In the weeks after the announcement of the plant closing and relocation opportunity, it became clear that most of the Black workers would not relocate to the South. That was a fateful decision in 1982, when the recession in auto manufacturing was at its height. No one expected to find good jobs close to home. Were those workers right not to risk a move to the Deep South, or were they paying too high a price? It seemed important to find out what the outcomes were for those few who did go.

Because I could find virtually no social scientific work on the personal and social outcomes of worker relocation, I chose a

grounded study method of data collection and analysis, a method that looks for substantive theory from data. Two years after their move, I held intensive interviews with 32 of the relocated workers, almost equal numbers of Black men, white men, Black women and white women. They were all "second generation Southerners," their parents having come north to work in factories during and after World War II. Over several hours, we focused on their lives before the plant closing; the plant closing, decision to relocate, and the move itself; and finally their lives in the new place two years after the move.

The study resulted, I believe, in two things of value. It is first a rich description, largely in the workers' own words, of a process -- or more precisely the relocation process experienced differently by four very different groups divided by race and gender. Secondly, the search for substantive theory about worker relocation was rewarding and useful. I believe many of the important variables have come through loud and clear, and future research can utilize the findings to ask the right questions. Of equal interest to me, policy and program implications can be drawn that could help ease some of the disruption and suffering dislocated workers and their families go through.

The findings are divided into those having to do with the first phase -- the plant closing, decision-making about relocation, and the physical and emotional process of the move itself, and the second phase -- the longer-term adjustment of the workers in the new community. It is those second phase theory formulations and implications that are the focus of this report.

There is good news and bad news. The good news is that it is very possible for both Black and white workers to relocate to the South and lead satisfying and rewarding lives, sometimes making substantial improvements on their old lives in the midwest cities and towns they left behind. The bad news is that relocation is a painful process for almost everyone, and there are irreplaceable losses as well as gains. Below are five of the major findings having implications for policy and practice.

1. The first year is the period of maximum stress. People have lost their old home before they have had a chance, speaking psychologically, to gain a new one. They are homeless, displaced people. The workers had each other, and many had their same familiar jobs, but families were quite isolated. Spouses had trouble finding work. Children reported being cruelly teased in school about their Yankee accents and ways. Many families had at least one member with some severe somatic or psychological stress symptoms. Then, between nine months and one year, most people settled down. The worst was definitely over.

2. The attitudes and behavior of the receiving community are very important for long-term feelings about the community. That may seem obvious, but in fact very few writers on the subject pay attention to the question of whether the natives are friendly. Yet almost anywhere in the industrial Midwest, you can talk with retired factory workers who came from West Virginia or Kentucky forty-five years ago. They will tell you with such passionate detail about their first days in the Midwest that you could believe it happened yesterday. Those experiences, many quite negative, still color the way they feel about the places where they have lived most of their adult lives. Those places are not really "home." It seems to be the same with this move. If people were welcomed and well treated, they more quickly came to feel at home and identify the new place as home.

3. The closer the values and lifestyle of a relocater to those of the receiving community, the easier the transition. This point comes through most clearly in contrasting the four groups. The white men had the best relocation outcomes. The South, even in modern New South places, is "good-ol' boy" territory. White workers can almost always play that game successfully, and most did not in fact face any serious challenge to their values and lifestyles. Many had opted out of urban life in the North, moving with their families to small places as far as possible from the multiracial cities. The group with the most problematic outcomes was the Black women. They were unable to find a community to which they could relate. Most were quite secular, having given up the churches of their childhood many years ago. In the Black South, church remains a primary social integrater. The relocated

women were not college-educated or professional, so they did not fit in with that network. They had been a power in the local union in the North. That power went with the plant closing. So they lost the things that had meant the most to them: family networks, a familiar community where they knew everybody, and the union. Luckily, they had a genius for friendship among themselves, and they made of each other an extended family that still supports them.

4. The workers ready for change in their lives had an easier relocation. The "fit" between a life task and the move was a big factor. Some of the younger workers used the relocation as middle-class people use going away to college: an opportunity to make it on your own and be an independent person in the world for the first time. That was actually the experience of 30 and 35-year-olds who had been married, perhaps divorced, perhaps had had a tour of duty in Vietnam. Through it all they had remained close and dependent on families of origin. Older workers were facing different transitions. Some were separated, or their children were growing up and out. Quite a few workers left a lot of trouble behind. They used the move to make a successful new start, to get away from heavy drinking, drugs, debts, points on a driver's license, or family hassles.

5. Almost everyone had major changes in their leisure activities. It appeared to be almost impossible to pick up and move a lifestyle to the new place. Everyone commented on "the big slowdown," the much slower pace of life in a southern town. Most approved of that change, speaking as if their lives had been spinning out of control in the North, and the move applied the brakes. A lot of people drink a lot less. When you lose your old drinking crowd, it can be hard to reestablish those patterns. The same was true for hunting or fishing or bowling. What took the place of some of the old pastimes are sports, travel, fixing up the house, and -- for a few -- religion.

There are some interesting contrasts between the behavior and experiences of the Black and white workers. The Black workers established a "relocation network" from the time the plant closing was announced. They came together in the North, took

trips down together, looked for apartments, moved together, turned arrival into a party, explored the territory for safety, and stayed together. The white workers, in contrast, moved family by individual family and were quite isolated on arrival. Many of those families experienced stress symptoms.

It is satisfying to be able to report that Black workers did not encounter any racial violence or overt discrimination in the modern southern community to which they moved. The instances of racial animosity -- the remarks or the "looks" -- were not remarkable. In fact, the Black workers did not experience the new place as particularly different from the North in terms of racist threat. The sense of territorial restriction Black people experience was reportedly about the same in the North or South. In neither region would they have wanted to get stuck after dark in a small town. A number of Black workers repeated the old line about being more comfortable with southerners because you know where you stand with them. The two-faced white northerners will smile at you while they stab you in the back. That particular sentiment was strong because the old easy relationships between Black and white in the northern plant have broken down in the South.

Black and white workers had interesting and contrasting experiences of acceptance by southerners. Many white workers had come to the South feeling they were coming home. Some had never truly felt at home in the North, always called "hillbilly," made to feel they did not belong. When they got to the South, they found they were regarded as Yankees and apparently always would be so regarded. Though they were accepted and well-treated, they were outlanders. That was a big disappointment.

The Black workers had a surprising reception. Courteously and helpfully treated by most white southerners, they were not welcomed in the southern Black community unless they had kinship ties. They did not really understand the coldness of Black southerners toward them, and I understand it even less. It does seem clear that, for whatever reasons, these assertive, secular northern Black workers are threatening to southern Black people.

The Black workers have a wonderful talent for supporting each other, and most are well satisfied with their new homes and their economic progress. But their losses are very real: community, union, family, and major leisure activities. In evaluating the relocation, however, one must ask an important question. How do you measure the success or failure of a move against a background of rapidly deteriorating communities in the North? We all know what is happening to the old inner-city and small town Black ghettos. For years, almost everyone who was financially able to get out had done so. Certainly most of these workers had. So they faced the job of maintaining or rebuilding some kind of community in the North after the breakup of the old neighborhoods where they grew up. That need to build community may not be so different north or south.

To wind up, two years after their painful relocations, the great majority of people I interviewed would not move back. They had put down roots, accepted the changes in themselves and their lifestyles and gone on, most of them with the feeling of making economic and personal progress.

I hope that gives you a flavor of the kind of substantive theory developed from the data. As a social worker, a major agenda for me was to come up with guidelines to policy and practice that would help. For workshop and classroom use, I have developed checklists of strategies for relocation. There are lists for corporations, for unions, and for the receiving community. The one presented here is the checklist for individual workers. As practitioners, we can hopefully use it to help workers strategize about this common, life-changing event and ease their dislocation.

Dealing with Plant Closing and Relocation

1. Recognize that you have been hit by one of life's most stressful events. It compares with having a severe illness or a death in the family. So make it a priority to take care of yourself and your loved ones in ways that are helpful.
2. Try to avoid making a rapid decision. Keep your options open as long as possible. You need to get over the initial shock of the plant closing before you can think reasonably about the future.
3. Visit the place where you have a chance to relocate at least once before you make a decision. Take your whole family if you can. Turn the trip into a vacation, planning a pleasant place to stay. If you cannot visit, find and talk with people who have.
4. Use your networks to get information. Call friends of friends, relatives of relatives, any contact who can tell you what the place is like today, not 25 years ago. Go to any meetings sponsored by union or corporation and take your family.
5. Stick together. Once you decide to relocate, find others who have made that decision. Share information, moving plans, housing discoveries. Move together if you can, and stay together after you get there.
6. In the new place, find a church to attend and/or join a team or league. Join *something* even if you have not joined anything for years. It is the best way to get to know and feel at home in the new community.
7. Expect some resentment from local people but don't take it personally. Don't cut yourself off and condemn whole groups - "Rednecks," "Hillbillies," "Carpetbaggers," "Damn Yankees." Get to know one or two in each group instead.
8. Understand that your family may have a harder time than you do. They don't usually have the support of fellow workers and are more isolated. Give them extra time and attention.
9. Plan to stay in the new place a year, at least. It takes that long to get over the effects of the move itself. Then you can once again make reasonable decisions about the future.