Learning Through Uncertainty: A Phenomenological Study of Older, Professional Men Coping with Involuntary Job Loss

Brian Hentz

University of Connecticut - Storrs, brian.hentz@business.uconn.edu

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Since the 2007-08 global financial crisis, older, professional men have suffered their fair share of job losses (i.e., “mancession”). Involuntary job loss presents a challenging life transition that requires coping skills, and learning through the uncertainties of later-life job loss is a major part of the coping process. The challenge for facilitators of adult learning is to understand how these men learn from and through this life transition, and what types of learning experiences relate to adaptive coping.

The conceptual framework for this phenomenological study was developed by synthesizing research literature on coping and job loss. This framework informed the interview protocols for the study, which was guided by the following research questions: What is the meaning that older, professional men make in coping with involuntary job loss? How do older, professional men cope with involuntary job loss? What roles does learning play in their coping with this unanticipated life transition?

Interviews with ten participants revealed that older, professional men who coped adaptively with involuntary job loss: a) came to see their newly acquired time as an asset that helped them think creatively and create value differently; b) focused their attention on aspects of their circumstances that they could control to help them remain optimistic about the future; c) came to understand their disrupted lives were open to restorying, as they envisioned “future chapters” in their lives could be written; and d) surrendered to the limits of “rugged individualism” in their quest to move forward with their lives, instead embracing a “rugged interdependence” as they
learned from—and remained accountable to—others coping with the same life transition. In sum, older, professional men who coped adaptively with involuntary job loss demonstrated an adaptive mindset—one characterized by creativity, curiosity, and connectivity—that promoted “positive thinking,” a developmentally complex, nuanced way of meaning making conducive to learning through uncertainty.

Recommendations address ways to help older, professional men self-regulate their time and emotions in ways that promote cognitive well-being and, hence, meaning making during this unanticipated life transition.
Learning Through Uncertainty: A Phenomenological Study of Older, Professional Men Coping with Involuntary Job Loss

Brian Scott Hentz
BS, West Chester University (PA), 1992
MA, University of Oklahoma, 1996
MBA, Iowa State University, 2005

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APPROVAL PAGE

Doctor of Philosophy Dissertation

Learning Through Uncertainty: A Phenomenological Study of Older, Professional Men Coping with Involuntary Job Loss

Presented by

Brian Scott Hentz, BS, MA, MBA

Major Advisor

Dr. Alexandra A. Bell

Associate Advisor

Dr. Robin S. Grenier

Associate Advisor

Dr. Marjoe T. Keirhahn

Associate Advisor

Dr. Laura K. McDonoffio

University of Connecticut

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I reserve my final words of thanks for my spouse, Arthur Masi, who wholeheartedly supported this project from the onset. As I reflect upon our own journey so far, I can’t help but defer to Eduard Lindeman, the adult learning pioneer who mused in *The Meaning of Adult Education* (1926), “we are not all equipped by temperament, organic integration, or environmental surroundings to produce works of art, but we can all live artistically” (p. 94). From one artist to another, thank you, my love. I wish you potentia.

This study is dedicated to Doug Hentz and Michael Flanigan.
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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

The global financial crisis has caused scores of professionals to experience job loss, a life event in which paid employment is involuntarily taken from individuals (Latack, Kinicki, & Prussia, 1995). Unlike the case in prior financial downturns, professional men—especially older professionals—are suffering their fair share of job losses. Men comprised 75% of job loss casualties between 2007-2009 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012), and—in stark contrast to prior downturns—a large number of professional men lost jobs. For example, more than 5% of college-educated men aged 35-64 were unemployed through the first fiscal quarter of 2011, whereas only half as many college-educated men were unemployed during the 2000-2001 recession (Marin & Dokoupil, 2011). In particular, older, professional men—those over age 50 whose employment requires a 4-year college degree—have experienced unprecedented high unemployment rates since the 2007 global financial crisis (Rampell, 2009).

Dubbed the “mancession” (Marin & Dokoupil, 2011), the phenomenon reflects the relative novelty of professional men losing jobs with such frequency. Between 1969 and 1991, male employment fell by an average of 3.1% during the five recessions in this period; female employment, meanwhile, tended to rise by an average of 0.3% during these recessions, and women in general now have a much larger presence in the work force than between 1969 and 1991 (Wall, 2009). In large part, then, the “mancession” appears to be more a matter of women reaching higher levels of parity with men, thereby competing equally and successfully with men for jobs. This trend—coupled with global trade agreements and automation that continue to eliminate jobs (Donkin, 2009; Rifkin, 1996)—helps explain why professional men are not so “exempt” from job loss during economic downturns as they once were.
Problem Statement

Forced and involuntary job loss can trigger a major life transition (Latack & Dozier, 1986; Schlossberg, 1981). Because such an event has many uncontrollable aspects, individuals often experience negative emotions as part of the transition (Ranzijn, Carson, Winefield, & Price, 2006; Vickers & Parris, 2007). In particular, older, professional men who experience involuntary job loss may perceive this transition negatively, for these transitions coincide with a time in their lives when they likely have developed maturity and expertise as professionals. Negative perceptions towards the life transition can also contribute to lower levels of mental and emotional well-being, as job loss is associated with greater self-reports of depressive symptoms (Burgard, Brand, & House, 2007) and social alienation (Vickers & Parris, 2007). Hence, older, professional men who experience involuntary job loss can be challenged to cope with negative emotions that negatively influence their attempts to come to terms with the major life transition and the uncertainties that underpin this transition.

Many older professional men coping with job loss are attempting to reenter the workforce, knowing that they are either financially unready to retire (Employee Benefit Research Institute, 2013) or unwilling to retire (Freedman, 2011). However, these professionals arguably face the most challenging reentry into the workforce, largely because of potential employers’ ageist assumptions that presume older adults lack creativity or curiosity (Johnson, 2009) or are simply too expensive to hire (Lahey, 2008; Scott, Berger, & Garen, 1995). For professional men seeking to reenter the workforce, ageism is likely to amplify negative emotions that arise from this forced and unanticipated life transition (Ranzijn et al., 2006). Hence, coping adaptively with the major life transition challenges members of this group to make meaning of their circumstances at a time when negative emotions are likely to influence their meaning-making.
An integral part of meaning making of lived experiences is learning (Brookfield, 2004; Jarvis, 2007; MacKeracher, 2004), as adults make sense of their experiences and their responses to their circumstances. Learning, then, becomes a major part of the adaptive coping process for older, professional men who have experienced involuntary job loss. Men experiencing this life transition may require more complex ways of meaning making to make sense of their circumstances, especially as they may come up against the limits of their own mental complexity (Kegan & Lahey, 2011) and encounter a “crisis in unknowing” (Bauman, 2007).

A related problematic aspect of the phenomenon is the relative absence of learning supports to help this group of men learn through the uncertainty of involuntary job loss and, in turn, help them learn to cope adaptively with the life transition. Retraining and recareer opportunities for older, unemployed might exist, but there is no certainty that employers would be willing to employ such men. Hence, learning supports are required to help this population cope adaptively with the life transition, especially in ways that transcend instrumental and/or technical approaches to simply “getting a job” in a rapidly changing lifeworld.

If left unchecked, the problem poses a range of troublesome societal and public health implications. For example, adults who are not able to cope adaptively experience poorer physical functioning, as well as poorer mental health (Gallo, Bradley, Siegel, & Kasl, 2000). Families are affected, too, to the extent that financial insecurity, stress, and uncertainty may negatively impact important relationships (McDaniel, 2003). More broadly, a society itself suffers when its citizens are unable to find meaningful roles and responsibilities that contribute to its welfare, as long-term unemployment is an indicator of more unequal—and less healthy—societies (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009).
A variety of educators may be charged with designing and facilitating later-life learning interventions for unemployed, older professional men. For example, to foster growth and learning, educational gerontologists and career counselors may find themselves helping such men challenge assumptions about the role and purpose of work in later life. Meanwhile, trainers and classroom facilitators may find that uncertainties stemming from later-life job loss impede learning, for ageism causes barriers to workforce re-entry and makes future employment highly uncertain (Rothenberg & Gardner, 2011). The challenge for educators, then, is to understand how these men learn from and through their circumstances, and what types of learning experiences relate to adaptive coping, for doing so will allow educators to assist these adults—as well as adults in similar situations—make adaptive changes. The purpose of my study was to address the challenge by examining the lived experiences of older, professional men coping with involuntary job loss, so that facilitators of adult learning may design learning interventions and create learning contexts that support men as they cope with an unanticipated life transition.

**Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework for this study, summarized graphically in Figure 1, consists of several interrelated behavioral attributes that influence how adults appraise, or make meaning of, job loss. Because adults frequently display “grief-like” responses to unemployment (Archer & Rhodes, 1993, 1995) and job loss has been identified as the life event with the most detrimental effect on men’s psychological well-being (Iwasaki & Smale, 1998), older, professional men who experience job loss can be expected to engage in “grief work” as part of the coping process. Specifically, appraising, or making meaning, of job loss is central to adults’ coping with job loss (McKee-Ryan & Kinicki, 2002).
Coping refers to cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage the demands associated with situations that tax or exceed an adult’s resources (Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter, DeLongis, & Gruen, 1986). Further, coping generally falls into two categories: problem-focused coping, which describes adults’ efforts to directly address a stressor (e.g., problem, loss), and emotion-focused coping, which describes adults’ efforts to manage the emotional response to the stressor (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Within a dual process model of coping with loss, coping extends across two domains: a loss orientation, which entails grieving and attending to the loss itself, and a restoration orientation, which entails attending to life changes as a result of the loss (Stroebe & Schut, 1999). Both of these orientations include problem- and emotion-focused aspects, and adults coping with loss distribute their energies and attention across these domains as they appraise, or make meaning, of the loss (Stroebe & Schut, 1999). As adults appraise their situations, they not only attend to the loss itself, but also attend to life changes that result from the loss, including the possibility of potential and future selves as they prepare to transition and resume their lives (Rossiter, 2007a). In the conceptual framework, I focus upon two particular sets of coping resources—personal (including cognitive and affective well-being) and social—that influence adults’ appraisal of job loss (McKee-Ryan & Kinicki, 2002).
As the conceptual framework for my study indicates, key interrelationships exist among concepts that help explain the ways in which adults appraise, or make meaning of, their experiences with involuntary job loss. Specifically:

- Cognitive well-being influences affective well-being. Adults who are more optimistic and confident in their ability to handle the uncertainties that accompany job loss are more likely to experience positive emotions that promote higher levels of overall, or subjective, well-being.
- Affective well-being influences cognitive well-being. Adults who experience negative emotions about involuntary job loss—and, importantly, fail to regulate their response to these negative emotions—will be less likely to keep their coping problem-focused.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework
• Adults who cope adaptively and report higher levels of well-being are more likely to use time well to help them manage an unexpected life transition; in turn, time use can promote higher levels of cognitive well-being.

• Adults with prior experience with job loss can, when coping adaptively with involuntary job loss, use their experience in ways that promote higher levels of affective well-being that, in turn, can positively influence cognitive well-being.

• Social supports—be they from the immediate family, one’s larger social networks beyond the family, or even the community in which one lives—all influence well-being and can support effective time use. In turn, higher levels of well-being, effective time use, and prior experience with job loss all influence the quality of social supports that adults receive to cope with job loss.

I use the following section to illustrate how key concepts within the conceptual framework are supported by themes in the literature on coping and unemployment. In my statement of each theme, I use the term “adults,” for the empirical studies I reviewed include both men and women as study participants. That said, I focused my interpretations of empirical findings—whenever possible—on the experiences and perceptions of male participants when authors made those findings clear in their research. Also, because researchers do not consistently specify in their studies whether participants cope with voluntary or involuntary job loss, I use the phrase “job loss” in my themes to reflect a broad representation of the phenomenon.

Adults Who Cope Adaptively with Job Loss Demonstrate Behaviors That Reflect Higher Levels of Cognitive Well-being

Well-being refers to the ways in which individuals experience and assess the overall quality of their lives. In large part, well-being, also referred to as subjective well-being,
comprises individuals’ emotional responses and cognitive judgments with respect to circumstances in their lives (Diener, 1984). Moreover, individuals’ ability to self-regulate or choose how to think or react in situations with respect to these responses and judgments is an integral component of well-being (Baumeister & Vohs, 2003). Hence, well-being is necessarily comprised of thoughts and emotions, and well-being can be conceived as two distinct yet interrelated domains: cognitive well-being and affective well-being.

Cognitive well-being refers to an individual’s thoughts about a particular life event or situation. This particular type of well-being assumes that individuals cognitively process life events (Scarr, 1988), evaluating and interpreting events rather than experiencing such events passively (Bruner, 1986; Ross, 1990). Cognitive well-being includes, among other characteristics, an individual’s outlook for the future in response to life events, as well as an individual’s levels of contentment and disappointment to circumstances arising from life events (Gilboa & Schmeidler, 2001). Also, cognitive well-being includes a problem-solving orientation, as individuals assess what actions can be taken to address a set of circumstances (Folkman et al., 1986). Hence, individuals who demonstrate higher levels of cognitive well-being in coping with unanticipated life events are more confident in their abilities to assess what the event and its attendant circumstances require of them.

A strong sense of coherence (SOC)—a strong sense of self, as well as one’s life story about one’s self (Surtees, Wainwright, & Khaw, 2006)—reflects higher levels of cognitive well-being and helps explain higher levels of adaptive coping among adults dealing with unemployment and similar stressful circumstances. In other words, adults with a strong SOC can mitigate stressful situations, inasmuch as what happens in their lives is comprehensible, manageable, and meaningful to them (Surtees et al., 2006). To test their hypothesis that SOC
helps explain adaptive responses to adverse life experiences, Surtees et al. (2006) invited participants \((N = 20,579; \text{age range: } 41-80 \text{ years})\) to complete the Health and Life Experiences Questionnaire (HLEQ), a survey instrument designed to measure SOC’s influence on responses to adverse events in adulthood. Those participants with a weak SOC reported that their event experiences upset them more than for those with a strong SOC \((ESSM = .23)\); however, the largest difference was observed for adaptation scores, whereby those with a weak SOC reported that they had not got over the events experienced to the same extent as those with a strong SOC \((ESSM = .37)\) (Surtees et al., 2006). Additionally, SOC was found to be strongest for older adults (ages 60-69) in the study (Surtees et al., 2006). Meanwhile, in a quantitative study of Israelis \((N = 211; \text{men } 69\%)\) from the high-tech sector who lost their jobs during the global financial crisis, unemployed adults who reported greater levels of self-continuity (i.e., a strong sense of personal identity) also demonstrated more adaptive coping strategies (Sadeh & Karniol, 2012). Also, in a mixed methods study of adults (51% men; mean age: 49.6 years) over 30 consecutive days to examine the association between daily stress and negative affect and explore the role of risk and resilience factors as adults cope with daily stress, participants with lower SOC would fluctuate more in negative affect from day to day than participants with higher SOC (Diehl & Hay, 2010). Moreover, SOC and reactivity to daily stress in terms of negative affect was not significantly different across age ranges in Diehl and Hay (2010), suggesting that SOC was an equally important coping resource for adults of all ages. Collectively, these empirical studies on SOC underscore that a strong sense of self and of one’s “story” reflects higher levels of cognitive well-being, which is central to adaptively coping with adverse life circumstances.

Adults who appraise unforeseen or unwelcome circumstances in their lives more positively demonstrate higher levels of cognitive well-being, helping to curb the negative
impacts of involuntary job loss. In a meta-analysis that examined the impact of unemployment on worker well-being across 104 empirical studies, unemployed adults who appraised job loss more negatively faced diminished mental health ($r = -0.38$), but unemployed adults who reported positive expectations for future reemployment were related to higher levels of reported well-being ($r = 0.29$) and life satisfaction ($r = 0.54$) (McKee-Ryan, Song, Wanberg, & Kinicki, 2005). Also, in a survey-based study of unemployed Germans ($N = 104; 48\%$ men) that explored the relation between job search behavior and social supports, job search behavior was positively correlated with optimism ($r = 0.25$), a form of positive appraisal (Slebarska, Moser, & Gunnesch-Luca, 2009). Focusing on previous spells of employment, Clark, Georgellis, and Sanvey (2001) investigated the psychological impact of past unemployment in order to offer a better psychological explanation for persistent unemployment; specifically, they used 11 waves of German panel data from the German Socio-Economic Panel (GSEOP) to examine the impact. In the study, participants reported that being out of the labor force had a negative effect on reported life satisfaction for men, as men who experienced higher unemployment rates over the previous 3 years, as a proportion of their total active time in the workforce, reported lower life satisfaction scores ($ES_{SM} = 0.31; ES_{r} = 0.15$) than those men who experienced lower unemployment rates over the previous 3 years ($ES_{SM} = 0.14; ES_{r} = 0.07$) (Clark et al., 2001). Hence, positive appraisals of job loss contribute to higher levels of cognitive well-being, which results in higher levels of optimism for the future, as well as greater life satisfaction.

Also, adults who cope adaptively with job loss exercise higher levels of personal control in responding to job loss, and this control reflects higher levels of cognitive well-being. In several studies, adults who coped adaptively with unforeseen life events assumed a dispassionate, problem-solving perspective that deflected attention from negative emotions and, instead,
focused attention upon problem-solving behaviors. For example, in their survey-based study of unemployed Israelis from the high-tech sector, Sadeh and Karniol (2012) asked participants to answer Likert-scaled questions with respect to coping strategies they used following job loss. Participants who coped more adaptively with their circumstances demonstrated two particular types of adaptive coping strategies: rational (i.e., problem-solving) coping and detached coping, both of which suggest a dispassionate, problem-solving perspective (Sadeh & Karniol, 2012). Also, for participants in Diehl and Hay (2010), the association between daily stress and negative affect was stronger on days that participants experienced low control ($beta = 1.5$) compared with days they experienced high control ($beta = 1.1$); hence, personal control was key to participants’ effectively buffering their reactivity to stress. With respect to cognitive well-being, coping adaptively with life stressors—job loss being one example of these stressors—can then best be described as a rational, problem-focused process typified by feelings of control and emotional detachment.

In sum, higher levels of cognitive well-being help adults cope adaptively with involuntary job loss. Adults who cope adaptively demonstrate a strong sense of self and their respective life stories about themselves in relationship to unexpected life events. Further, adults who cope adaptively report more optimistic outlooks on the future, exercise greater control over their responses to unexpected life events, and engage in more problem-solving behaviors in addressing these life events.

**Adults Who Cope Adaptively with Job Loss Demonstrate Behaviors That Reflect Higher Levels of Affective Well-being**

Affective well-being, also known as emotional well-being, refers to the emotions individuals experience as they cope with unforeseen circumstances in their lives. With respect to
affective well-being, individuals can experience either negative emotions (e.g., anxiety, anger) or positive emotions (e.g., enthusiasm) (Daniels, 2000). More specifically, affective well-being describes individuals’ ability to understand their emotions and use them productively, and—in so doing—demonstrate “emotional intelligence” (Goleman, 1995). Importantly, positive emotions tend to broaden individuals’ decision making and meaning making, leading to more creative actions and responses to unanticipated life events (Frederickson, 2001). Higher levels of affective well-being help explain higher levels of adaptive coping with unforeseen or negative life events (Frederickson & Joiner, 2002). Therefore, individuals who cope adaptively with job loss demonstrate higher levels of affective well-being in both regulating their responses to negative emotions and employing positive emotions to strengthen their cognitive well-being.

Adults who cope maladaptively with life events demonstrate lower levels of affective well-being. In their mixed methods analysis of older adults across three linked studies, two of which included adult men (Study 1: \(N = 27, 52\%\) men, ages 62-80; Study 2: \(N = 40, 50\%\) men, ages 60-85), Ong, Bergeman, Bisconti, and Wallace (2006) surveyed and interviewed participants to investigate the functional role of psychological resilience when participants responded to stress in later life. In addition to completing a trait measure of psychological resilience, participants in these two linked studies completed daily diary entries in which they described the most stressful event of each day and then rated their perceptions on their stress level. Participants in Ong et al. (2006) who scored low in psychological resilience tended to have difficulty regulating their emotions, as exhibited in their heightened reactivity to stressful events. In a separate study of job search intensity among unemployed adults in Israel, 559 participants (44% men)—a majority of whom were unemployed for at least 3 months (81%)—responded to Likert-scaled questions that addressed not only participants’ job search intensity,
but also their attitudes with respect to unemployment (Kulik, 2001). Participants in Kulik (2001) who reported emotion-focused coping behaviors also reported negative job search outcomes, and strong problem-focused coping during the first few months of job searching devolved into emotion-based coping for some participants, as constant rejections during job search made emotional regulation more challenging. Collectively, these studies suggest that strong negative emotional responses to unemployment and similar stressors can weaken coping strategies, unless adults can demonstrate higher levels of affective well-being and regulate their responses to negative emotions.

With respect to coping to unforeseen life events, lower levels of affective well-being also contribute to lower levels of subjective (or overall) well-being, including cognitive well-being. Examining two large, population-based longitudinal samples of US workers, Burgurd et al. (2007) used respondents’ self-reports of reasons for job loss, as well as information about the timing of job losses and acute negative health shocks, to distinguish health-related job losses from other involuntary job losses. Using results from interviews and survey results, Burgurd et al. (2007) reported that involuntary job loss was associated with poorer subsequent self-rated health and increased depressive symptoms, even after adjusting for a wide array of potentially confounding factors. Moreover, although the impact of losing a job for health reasons was greater for self-rated poor health ($\beta = .34$) and depressive symptoms ($\beta = .46$) than the impact of losing a job for other reasons ($\beta = .12$ and .15, respectively), both impacts had significant negative effects (Burgurd et al., 2007). Finally, in a qualitative study of 27 middle-aged unemployed and underemployed Australian adults (63% men) that were at least 45 years old, study participants experienced negative self-assessments—ranging from humiliation to lack of self-respect—in response to involuntary job loss (Ranzijn et al., 2006). In sum, lower
levels of affective well-being contribute to lower levels of subjective well-being that fail to promote more positive, problem-focused responses to job loss.

The emotional shock of unanticipated unemployment, in particular, appears to heighten the influence of lower affective well-being on subjective (or overall) well-being for adults coping with job loss. In a phenomenological study of 10 middle- and senior-level executives coping with involuntary job loss, participants reported feeling both angry and sad with respect to the ways in which they were asked to exit their workplaces, describing the humiliation of packing up their things and quickly being escorted off the premises abruptly and without warning (Vickers & Parriss, 2007). Similarly, in a qualitative study of 517 senior executives (74% men) who lost jobs due to corporate downsizing, participants reported that the suddenness and unexpectedness of job loss made coping adaptively with their job losses particularly challenging, for the abrupt disruption of social networks and perceived loss of their professional status helped explain participants’ shaky self-confidence and lower sense of self-worth (Feldman & Leana, 2000).

Arguably, individuals who suffer job loss unexpectedly might be more vulnerable to subsequent health-related setbacks in their life, which might explain Burgard et al.’s (2007) finding that participants who experienced unexpected health setbacks after losing their job showed much more substantial health decline, compared with those who lost a job but failed to experience such setbacks.

Positive emotion (i.e., higher affective well-being) leads to higher levels of cognitive well-being that positively influence adaptive coping. Positive emotions, those emotions that broaden and build an individual’s response to stressors (Fredrickson, 1998), influence individuals’ appraisal of loss and lead to more adaptive (i.e., constructive) coping outcomes. In their mixed methods analysis of older adults, Ong et al. (2006) reported that when positive
emotion was included in the analysis of participants’ emotional recovery from stressful events, virtually no relationship existed between stress and the next day’s negative emotion (Study 1: \( r = .08 \); Study 2: \( r = .03 \)), although a small positive relationship existed between stress and next day negative emotion without positive emotion (Study 1: \( r = .31 \); Study 2: \( r = .27 \)). In both studies, positive emotions helped participants rebound from daily stress, but those participants who scored low in psychological resilience struggled to regulate negative emotions and exhibited heightened reactivity to stress. To explore the physiological components of resilience in order to better understand the role that positive appraisals and positive emotions have in regulating bodily responses to stress, Tugade and Frederickson (2004) asked participants in 3 linked studies to complete a perceived challenging task and then respond to surveys and rate their cognitive appraisals for both completed and upcoming tasks. In the study, participants’ positive appraisals of challenging tasks were found to offer both physical and psychological benefits to subjective well-being, for positive emotions and cognitive appraisals help adults recover quickly from negative emotional arousal (Tugade & Frederickson, 2004). In particular, participants’ resilience was positively correlated with positive mood (\( r = .38 \), study 1; \( r = .44 \), study 2; \( r = .29 \), study 3) (Tugade & Frederickson, 2004). Also, higher resilience was associated with greater positive meaning making (\( r = .27 \)), and resilience was no longer a significant predictor of positive meaning making when controlling for positive emotions (Tugade & Frederickson, 2004). Thus, positive emotions appear to be critical in helping adults find positive meaning in negative situations.

Finally, adults who report higher levels of affective well-being cope more adaptively with stress in their lives, regardless of the perceived severity of the particular stressor. For example, positive emotion was found to mediate the relationship between stress and next day negative
emotion in Ong et al. (2006). After accounting for trait resiliency, the relationship between stress and next day negative emotions was moderate ($r = .31$). However, when positive emotions were entered into the model, the relationship was non-significant ($r = -.08$), indicating the mediating effect of positive emotions on stress and negative emotions. Further, the more frequently individuals incorporated these types of adaptive coping skills into their lives, the more likely they were to cope with future stress (Ong et al., 2006). Both Ong et al. (2006) and Tugade and Fredrickson (2004) concluded that recurrent experiences of positive emotion and appraisal will likely increase individuals’ possibility to find positive meaning and make positive appraisals in future stressful events. Hence, positive emotion positively influences cognitive well-being, helping to mitigate the negative impacts that often accompany circumstances that adults perceive as threatening.

In sum, adults who cope adaptively with job loss demonstrate behaviors that reflect higher levels of affective well-being. Specifically, adults who cope adaptively assume a more problem-focused orientation to the life event, and positive emotions promote adults’ ability to assume this orientation. Hence, positive emotion promotes higher levels of cognitive well-being for adults who cope adaptively with job loss. Moreover, the more that adults integrate positive emotions into their lives as they cope with life stressors, the more likely they are to cope with future life stressors.

**Adults Who Cope Adaptively with Job Loss Use Time in Ways That Promote Higher Levels of Cognitive and Affective Well-being**

Adults who use time well following job loss report higher levels of adaptive coping. To examine the roles of culture and time structure with respect to unemployment in two distinct regions in Italy, Martella and Maass (2000) asked participants ($N = 229; 52\%$ men) to complete a
Likert scale questionnaire on variables linked to well-being. Participants were grouped into three different categories: unemployed ($n = 85$), employed ($n = 52$), and students ($n = 92$).

Unemployed participants in the study who could make more structured use of their time reported higher levels of well-being; among unemployed study participants, time structure was positively correlated with life satisfaction ($r = .47$) and negatively correlated with hopelessness ($r = -.46$), both indicators of cognitive well-being (Martella & Maass, 2000). Further, in a meta-analysis of the diverse unemployment literature to examine the impact of unemployment on well-being, unemployed individuals who could make more structured use of their time reported higher levels of well-being ($r = .31$) (McKee-Ryan et al., 2005). Thus, adults who made more structured use of their time following job loss coped adaptively, and the structured use of time positively influenced well-being.

Interestingly, adults who spend available time searching for new employment following job loss can, in ways, actually contribute to lower levels of well-being, thanks to stressors related to job search. For example, actively engaging in job search activities—what one might naturally anticipate as a beneficial use of structured time—was actually found to be correlated with lower mental health among the unemployed, for inevitable constant rejections created additional stress (McKee-Ryan et al., 2005). Moreover, available unemployment protection benefits—however generous and important—failed to protect displaced workers from detrimental effects of job loss on well-being; rather, the length of time out of the workforce seemed to influence participants’ well-being more, as their meta-analysis revealed that the detrimental effect of job loss was higher in studies in which individuals were unemployed longer (McKee-Ryan et al., 2005). Hence, although unemployed adults who can make more structured use of their time tend to cope more
adaptively, time devoted solely to job search does not necessarily lead to higher levels of cognitive or affective well-being.

Meanwhile, adults who cope maladaptively with job loss tend to use time in ways that are neither structured towards problem solving nor conducive to well-being. Avoidant coping (i.e., escapism), in particular, was a particular type of emotion-focused, maladaptive coping that some unemployed high-tech professionals demonstrated in a quantitative study on coping and unemployment (Sadeh & Karnial, 2012). Similarly, in a qualitative, focus group study of “mature-aged” (i.e., 45 years of age and older) adults coping with job loss, avoidance was identified as a theme among participants who struggled to cope adaptively with job loss in later life (Ranzijn et al., 2006). Specifically, participants in the study were challenged to get beyond the shock of unanticipated employment, pining instead to enjoy comforts at a stage of life they anticipated would be exempt from job search challenges (Ranzijn et al., 2006). Further, in their survey-based study of problem-focused and emotion-based coping among displaced, semi-skilled workers from a high-tech U.S. firm, Kinicki, Prussia, and McKee-Ryan (2000) studied the impact of duration of time on unemployed adults by inviting participants (n = 100; 33% men) to complete surveys on coping strategies and job search at two separate points in time (separated by 4 months). In the study, participants who demonstrated emotion-focused coping during the early stages following job loss perceived the quality of their reemployment negatively (what the authors call the “dissatisfactorily reemployed”) (Kinicki et al., 2000). As these studies suggest, avoidance—especially in the initial time periods following job loss—points to an inability to address directly (or think clearly about) an unforeseen life event, and this time use reflects lower cognitive well-being.
In certain circumstances, avoidance can become so acute that some unemployed adults more or less “shut down” and fail to use time in structured ways to promote adaptive coping; such adults then become either indifferent to future employment or the quality of future employment. Many participants in Ranzijn et al. (2006), for instance, perceived the future as extremely frightening and simply gave up looking for paid employment; this indifference, in turn, reflects lower levels of cognitive well-being, inasmuch as the disposition points to a bleak future outlook. Moreover, Kulik (2001) observed that although some newly unemployed may view their situation as temporary (still “fresh”) and even an opportunity for relaxation, unemployed adults can easily become accustomed to their situations, which can then lead to indifference regarding future employment prospects. Hence, adults who demonstrate an inability to use time to promote adaptive coping with job loss also experience lower levels of well-being, as indifference towards employment prospects suggests lowered optimism for the future.

In sum, adults who cope adaptively with job loss use time in ways that promote higher levels of cognitive and affective well-being. Although more structured use of time reflects optimism and higher levels of cognitive well-being, time use dedicated to searching for new employment can actually contribute to lower levels of well-being—especially in the early stages of job search—due to its attendant series of rejections. That said, unproductive uses of time—especially avoidance—fail to promote adaptive coping and contribute to lower levels of cognitive and affective well-being. In some cases, unproductive time use influences the quality of individuals’ reemployment, which leads to the “dissatisfactorily employed.”

**Adults Who Cope Adaptively with Job Loss Benefit from Prior Experiences with Job Loss, But Only If Reemployment That Followed Prior Job Loss Was Perceived Positively**
Adults’ prior experiences with unemployment help explain the extent to which they cope adaptively with job loss. Scarring, or the influence of previous spells with job loss on current spells, influences not only individuals’ attitudes about reemployment, but also their concerns about future spells of unemployment. Specifically, many participants in Ranzijn et al. (2006) expressed concerns about succumbing to the “peg down” phenomenon, in which unemployed adults—realizing they may never obtain positions that make full use of their talent—secure jobs at slightly lower levels. However, these concerns helped prime individuals for job search, as they considered long-term implications of reemployment on potential job offers, should they experience future job loss. Thus, adults who coped adaptively with job loss were concerned about the quality of future reemployment and its potential impact on possible future job loss; these concerns promoted higher levels of cognitive well-being inasmuch as they prepared adults for future job search objectives.

Although job loss presents adults with a range of challenges, unemployment appears to “hurt” less for those who have experienced more frequent spells of unemployment in the past, and the passage of time helps reduce this “hurt” as well. Life satisfaction was lower not only for all unemployed adults in Clark et al. (2001), but especially so for those with less experience with unemployment compared to those participants with histories of more frequent unemployment. Using a sample of men drawn from the British Household Panel Study, Mandemakers and Monden (2013) examined the impact of involuntary job loss on psychological distress, and they conducted face-to-face interviews to investigate the role of successful reemployment and downward mobility by incorporating information on each participant’s lost job with respect to social status and relative income. Although job loss was found to increase participants psychological distress, the study also reported that “time heals,” as after about four years, there
was no longer an effect on psychological distress, and the effects of job loss ultimately wore off over time (Mandemakers & Monden, 2013). Thus, the more experience adults have with job loss, and the greater the passage of time with respect to the job loss itself, the more adaptively adults tend to cope with job loss.

If reemployment does not allow adults to use full range of their present skills or grow into more challenging roles, then reemployment—essentially, underemployment—negatively influences coping strategies and well-being. For example, 36% of participants in a qualitative study of downsized senior managers experienced some type of demotion in rank when they took new jobs, and 44% of participants also experienced a salary decrease in these new jobs (Feldman & Leana, 2000). Further, participants who self-identified as underemployed demonstrated lower job satisfaction and organizational commitment, and spoke of concurrent job-hunting even after accepting replacement jobs (Feldman & Leana, 2000). In addition, in a study of displaced semi-skilled workers, dissatisfactorily reemployed participants reported lower levels of life satisfaction, although more satisfactorily reemployed participants reported marginally higher life satisfaction over time (Kinicki et al., 2000). Hence, the extent to which adults cope adaptively with job loss appears to be influenced by the quality of reemployment, and reemployment influences cognitive well-being.

For some adults coping with job loss, underemployment is sometimes a more preferable option to remaining unemployed and, therefore, is perceived positively. For some downsized executives in Feldman and Leana (1980), participants (74% men) bypassed employment offers with higher pay and status in the short-term and, instead, accepted positions with lower pay and status than their previous positions if they sensed that long-term job security might be compromised. That said, although reemployment that amounts to underemployment appears to
be correlated with less adaptive coping, a few studies underscored that underemployment is preferable to no employment to mitigate negative well-being (Kinicki et al., 2000; Mandemakers & Monden, 2013). Moreover, securing employment after a job loss was found to be most important in helping adults maintain their status as employed adults, aside from the necessary and welcome income that new employment provided (Mandemakers & Monden, 2013). Hence, underemployment appears to positively influence adaptive coping with job loss, inasmuch as new employment is perceived positively and promotes higher levels of cognitive well-being.

Conversely, adults who do not perceive reemployment positively cope maladaptively with the experience of job loss. For example, reemployed participants in Feldman and Leana (2000) expressed lower trust in subsequent employers and were more cynical about the nature of their careers. Also, the negative effects on self-confidence for many reemployed adults remained even after they returned to work, contributing to their felt sense of uncertainty and fear (Vickers & Parriss, 2007). In fact, Kinicki et al. (2000) explicitly encouraged researchers to examine job loss as a transition that extends into—rather than simply ends with—reemployment. Speaking to this transition, Vickers and Parriss (2007) noted that adults’ prior successful turns at overcoming unemployment did not necessarily make future job loss any easier. In their study, some participants, who learned during previous spells of job loss the importance of “fail-proofing” their work lives, expressed anger and frustration that they lost their most recent jobs, despite their deliberative attempts (e.g., ongoing professional development) to protect from future job loss (Vickers & Parriss, 2007). Hence, coping with job loss can best be conceived as an ongoing process that extends into reemployment, and the perceptions of reemployment influence both cognitive and affective well-being.
In sum, adults who cope adaptively with job loss benefit from prior experiences with job loss, but only to the extent that subsequent reemployment is perceived positively. Adults who coped adaptively with job loss were concerned about the quality of future reemployment and its potential impact on possible future job loss. As much as job loss can “hurt,” prior experiences with job loss can help mitigate lower levels of affective well-being, especially with the passage of time. The extent to which adults cope adaptively with job loss appears to be influenced by the perceived quality of reemployment, and this reemployment influences both cognitive and affective well-being.

**Perceived Social Supports Promote Adults’ Coping Adaptively with Job Loss**

Adults who cope adaptively with job loss benefit from others’ presence and support. For example, in their survey research of unemployed German adults, Slebarska et al. (2009) investigated the relationship between the adequacy of social supports—both emotional and instrumental (i.e., job search strategies)—and participants’ job search behaviors. Social support had a small positive correlation with expectations of finding a job \( (r = .22) \) and resilience \( (r = .20) \), leading to higher levels of well-being (Slebarska et al., 2009). Also, job search behavior had medium-to-small positive correlations with self-esteem \( (r = .29) \), resilience \( (r = .35) \), and optimistic expectations for finding employment \( (r = .25) \) (Slebarska et al., 2009). These results revealed that participants’ received support promoted adults’ adaptive coping, and led to higher levels of cognitive well-being (e.g., expectations of finding a job); these expectations were then made manifest in job search behaviors. Further, McKee-Ryan et al. (2005) found that unemployed workers with greater social support had a positive relationship with mental health \( (r = .26) \) and life satisfaction \( (r = .43) \). Thus, social support does appear to positively influence adults’ adaptive coping skills during unemployment.
The quality of social supports in the immediate family help to explain unemployed adults’ quality of coping with job loss. To examine gender role differences in response to coping with unemployment, Forret, Sullivan, and Mainiero (2010) collected survey data from 1,095 participants (42% men; average age of 42 years) who were currently unemployed (60% voluntary); of these participants, 70% reported being married or in a long-term relationship. In the study, participants who viewed unemployment as a defeat were more likely to be male \((r = .19)\) and single \((r = .10)\); thus, single men were more likely to perceive unemployment as a defeat (Forret et al., 2010). Conversely, viewing unemployment as an opportunity was significantly correlated with being female \((r = .23)\) and being married \((r = .12)\) (Forret et al., 2010). Also, Christensen, Schmidt, Kriegbaum, Hougaard, and Holstein (2006) and Ranzijn et al. (2006) both concluded that living alone and/or being single are associated with lower levels of problem-based coping and, thus, lower levels of cognitive well-being. Thus, marital status and gender appear to influence adults’ quality of coping with job loss.

However, even if family support is available, men may be reluctant to receive support that might otherwise promote adaptive coping with job loss. For example, married men in Ranzijn et al. (2006) frequently struggled to come to terms with the fact that their spouses were essentially the primary wage earners in their households, despite the available support they received from spouses. Similarly, participants in a qualitative study of unemployed professional men in mid-life often expressed frustration in watching their spouses leave for work in the morning and discuss work upon returning home (McDaniel, 2003). In fact, some participants in the study, rather than finding home as a space to seek refuge and “save public face” over guilt for not being employed, found themselves—as one participant described—“exiled in the house” in addition to being removed from the workplace (McDaniel, 2003). Hence, the perceived quality
of social supports in the immediate family helps explain the extent to which unemployed men cope adaptively with job loss.

Social supports outside of the family can benefit adults coping with job loss as well. In their study of downsized executives, Feldman and Leana (2000) reported that participants had much more favorable reactions to post-downsizing counseling that they received than they did to outplacement services that their ex-employers provided. Specifically, these reactions indicated that the outplacement services focused exclusively on the job search process and reemployment, although the counseling addressed more sensitive, personal stressors that accompanied job loss—including the disruptions of social networks—as well as the perceived loss of professional status and self-worth. In fact, many participants in Feldman and Leana (2000) indicated that social supports and networks were so important that, as they considered reemployment options, they were willing to sacrifice salary and status in larger, more prestigious firms in order to work in smaller, friendlier environments with supportive colleagues. Thus, social support—especially support that extends beyond job placement and job search itself—promotes higher levels of well-being for adults coping with job loss.

However, finding ample social support outside the family—especially for men coping with job loss—can prove challenging and contribute to lower levels of well-being. In her interview-based study of older (i.e., 45 years and older) professional Canadian men ($N = 45$) who were contending with involuntary job loss, McDaniel (2003) reported that participants sensed a deliberate distancing of colleagues from themselves—even among those they considered friends—because of their unemployed status. In turn, many participants shared that they sought refuge from the public sphere and “hid in the household” out of the shame they felt due to their unemployed status. Similarly, in their phenomenological study of unemployed mid-level and
senior-level executives, Vickers and Parris (2007) reported participants’ stories of former colleagues distancing themselves from participants following job loss, which contributed to participants’ feelings of social alienation and isolation. Participants believed that their colleagues’ distancing was perhaps fueled by feelings of “survivors’ guilt” or simply a result of awkwardness on the change in dynamics. The authors, noting that the social creation and validation of male identity is often linked to workplace success, found that participants’ coping with threats to professional identity experienced something akin to identity loss. Further, several participants in the McDaniel (2003) and Ranzijn et al. (2006) studies admitted that they perceived their age as a barrier to not only gaining reemployment, but also to establishing new networks of support (i.e., support systems beyond their former circle of work colleagues). Thus, social supports beyond the immediate family promote men’s adaptive coping with job loss and contribute to higher levels of well-being; that said, finding those supports can prove challenging.

Even a community (i.e., one’s broader sense of home) itself can provide social supports that promote adaptive coping. In their cross-cultural study of unemployed and reemployed adults in two distinct Italian communities, Martella and Maass (2000) explored the ways in which coping with unemployment is experienced in more individualistic communities (the Northern Italian community) and more collectivistic communities (the Southern Italian community). Although unemployed participants in both communities reported lower life satisfaction than reemployed adults, life satisfaction for the unemployed was lower among those who lived in the Northern, more individualistic community, which prompted the researchers to question the extent to which culture helps reduce unemployment’s negative aspects (Martella & Maass, 2000). Thus, social supports can be conceived of in numerous ways, and community
support offers yet another example of social support that can promote adaptive coping and contribute to unemployed adults’ well-being.

In sum, perceived social supports help explain, in part, why some adults cope more adaptively with job loss than others. Specifically, social supports contribute to higher levels of cognitive well-being (e.g., life satisfaction, optimism) and affective well-being (e.g., self-worth) that positively influence adaptive coping with job loss. Although the immediate family is often a source for social support, men’s potential perceptions of inadequacy with respect to their roles within the immediate family might weaken the influence of social support within the immediate family. Further, potential social support outside the family, especially from former colleagues, can prove limited, contributing to lower levels of affective well-being. Finally, although social networks and support networks outside the family—including one’s broader community—can promote adaptive coping with job loss, making optimal use of those networks can be challenging for men coping with job loss.

**Chapter Summary & Research Questions**

Research on coping, resilience, and unemployment captures what we know about how adults cope adaptively with involuntary job loss. Highly resilient unemployed adults—those, in other words, that demonstrate adaptive coping skills—are more problem-focused, feel confident about their ability to cope with their circumstances, regulate their emotions and emotional responses well, frequently possess a strong sense of self, and rely on social supports and networks as they contend with the uncertainties of involuntary job loss. In particular, the perspective they take with respect to their unemployment matters a great deal: positive appraisals and emotions not only contribute to better coping outcomes, but also promote higher levels of cognitive well-being as well. Further, unemployed adults who structure and manage their time
well—especially considering the gulf of time available to adults that their employment previously occupied—cope more adaptively with job loss. Moreover, the extent to which unemployed adults draw upon prior experiences with job loss often shapes and influences the ways in which they cope with new spells of job loss. Specifically, adults who cope adaptively with job loss negotiate reemployment decisions that help mitigate future job loss amid the growing complexities of early 21st century life.

Because adults appraise their experiences with job loss in different ways (and draw upon a range of available resources and prior experiences to do so), educators who support adults through these unanticipated life transitions must be responsive to such heterogeneity. Unanticipated life transitions offer a threshold for learning, and the “mancession” is but one aspect of an increasingly complex social reality with significant implications for learning from experience (Jarvis, 2007). So these implications may be understood more substantively, the conceptual model for my study served as a framework for not only understanding how older, professional men cope adaptively with job loss, but also for understanding how this group of men learn through the uncertainties underpinning an unanticipated life transition.

My study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What is the meaning that older, professional men make in coping with involuntary job loss?
2. How do older, professional men cope with the life transition of involuntary job loss?
3. What role does learning play in their coping with this unanticipated life transition?
CHAPTER 2

This study was designed to explore not only how older, professional men cope adaptively with involuntary job loss, but also to understand how this group of men learn through the uncertainties associated with this unanticipated life transition. In this chapter I discuss the methodology and methods I used for this study. I also explain the aspects of trustworthiness I attended to in order to ensure a sound research design. Finally, I conclude this chapter by discussing several limitations in this study’s design.

Methodology

In this qualitative study, I followed a phenomenological design of inquiry, in order to describe the essence of participants’ lived experiences with respect to coping with involuntary job loss. As both a philosophical and empirical approach to understanding participants’ felt experience of a specific phenomenon (Husserl, 1970; Giorgi, 1985), phenomenology offers “the strengths of qualitative research [that] derive primarily from its inductive approach, its focus on specific situations or people, and its emphasis on words rather than numbers” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 22). Because phenomenology helps researchers gain a deeper understanding of the meaning of everyday experiences (van Manen, 1990), this methodology was particularly well suited to explore the lived experience of older, professional men coping with involuntary job loss. Moreover, with respect to the phenomenon of job loss in later life, this study intended to fulfill a primary objective of phenomenological research: to “address what it is like to be, to have, or to live” (Sandelowski, 2008, p. 787).

In the Spring of 2014 my home institution’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved all the methods I used for this study, including sampling, data collection, and data analysis.
Sample

The target population for this study was men over the age of 50 years old who had earned a minimum of a bachelor’s degree, and who had experienced involuntary job loss since turning 50. I used the baseline age of 50 years as a designator of “older” for participants in this study, based primarily on the ideological apparatus (Althusser, 1971) in the United States that, in this case, establishes an individual’s particular age as a benchmark for “older.” For example, AARP “believes strongly in the principles of collective purpose, collective voice and the collective power of the 50 and over population (emphasis added) to change the market based on their needs” (AARP website, 2013).

In addition to this baseline age parameter, I used several additional criteria for participation. Participants had to have: (a) completed a least a bachelor’s degree (as a signal for employment that required professional training and preparation), (b) experienced their involuntary job loss in the past 5 years (reflecting the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis), (c) lost jobs that were salaried (i.e., non-hourly wage) positions, and (d) tenure of at least 5 years with the employer who terminated employment to reflect a certain degree of organizational affiliation, for length of tenure with an organization tends to be positively associated with organizational identification (Hall & Schneider, 1972; Mael & Ashforth, 1992).

Finally, participants had to have considered themselves either unemployed or underemployed, so as to reflect potential scarring (Clark et al., 2001; Ranzijn et al., 2006).

With the help of key informants (see Appendix A), I used a purposeful snowball sampling strategy (Morgan, 2008) to identify potential participants for this study. I emailed key informants (see Appendix B for email script) in the summer of 2014 to briefly describe the nature of my study and solicit their help in recruiting potential participants. I selected my key
informants from a range of work, civic, and religious communities in which I participated during this study. The informants were either explicit or informal leaders within their respective groups, and they were willing to speak to others about my study, to let me post fliers about my study in public spaces associated with the communities, and also to describe my study on their respective groups’ email listservs.

Once informants provided me with the names and contact information of potential participants, I emailed these potential participants directly (see Appendix C for email script). I used my initial point of contact with potential participants solely to introduce myself, to explain the general nature of my study, and to ensure that potential participants met the eligibility requirements for this study (see Appendix C). If participants met the eligibility requirements and expressed their interest in participating in the study, then I arranged for a mutually agreed upon time and place for the first semi-structured interview. I also emailed each participant a copy of the Informed Consent Form and the questions for the first interview (see Appendix D). I began collecting data in the summer of 2014, and I completed data collection in the fall of 2014 (see Appendix E for the study timeline).

Following Creswell (2014) and his review of phenomenological research studies, I anticipated that I would need 10 participants for this study to reach data saturation (Charmaz, 2006). That said, as I proceeded with analysis and engaged in constant comparative coding throughout the data collection phase of this study, I determined that I had reached data saturation after concluding the interview cycle with my tenth participant.

**Participants**

In Table 1, I provide profiles of the ten participants. In addition to describing participants’ age, professional background, and details regarding their involuntary job loss, I also provide
general insights about participants’ employment history and circumstances surrounding their respective job losses, as well as additional demographic and personal background information that I obtained from interviewing these men. All participants were Caucasian and born in the United States (unless stated otherwise in the participant profiles), and all participants were married (again, unless stated otherwise in their profiles).

**Table 1: Participant Profiles**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Profession</th>
<th>Age at Job Loss</th>
<th>Time at Last Job</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Scott</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>Wholesale Distributor</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rick</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>Research Scientist</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>17 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethan</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>HR Benefits Manager</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>9 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Todd</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>Senior IT Director</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>7 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steve</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>Sales Engineering CEO</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>22 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ken</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>Engineer/Scientist</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>38 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chris</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>Accountant</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>14 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ian</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>HR Director</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>28 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roger</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>Church Choral Director</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>13 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tim</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Journalist</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>22 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Scott**

Scott closed down his wholesale tea distribution business four years ago at the age of 50. He operated his business in New Orleans, and the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina—combined with the global recession—largely explained his inability to keep his business afloat. A paleontologist and geologist by training, he was a first-generation college graduate and had early work experience working for major oil companies in that capacity. He had also worked as a consultant for the better part of his life before starting up his wholesale tea distribution business.

**Rick**

At age 59, Rick lost his job as a Research Fellow for a major research and development firm in 2010 after 17 years of service for this company. A holder of 49 patents who had also
written numerous professional publications over the years, he earned a PhD in biology. His father was an internationally recognized philosophy professor at a premiere American university, and Rick spoke lovingly and enthusiastically of growing up in a family and neighborhood that “immersed [him] in the world of ideas.” An innovative problem solver, he had a passion for solving multidisciplinary problems that he believed others necessarily could not.

**Ethan**

Ethan was a 61-year-old human resources specialist who lost his position as a benefits manager in 2012 at age 59. A divorcee, he experienced several involuntary job losses in the human resources field prior to his most recent job loss, due primarily to reorganizations and mergers/acquisitions. While Ethan participated in this study, he was currently seeking full-time employment, and he was also doing some part-time consulting work in the interim. A first-generation American (came to US as teenager) and first-generation college graduate, Ethan earned first his associate’s degree and then completed a bachelor’s degree while working part-time.

**Todd**

Todd’s most recent job loss occurred in 2014 at the age of 59 after 7 years of service as a senior information technology director for his organization. A first-generation college graduate, Todd earned his bachelor’s degree from an Ivy League university, and he worked for one company for almost two decades after he graduated from college. Thereafter, he started two different high-tech start-ups, both of which have since been dissolved. He strongly valued flexibility and mobility, which reflected his self-admitted “entrepreneurial mindset,” as he enjoyed finding things to be done better and making them happen.
Steve

Steve was a 72-year-old mechanical engineer by trade, and was forced to shut down his consulting business 5 years ago due to the impact of the global recession. A first-generation college graduate, Steve began his career as a sales engineer, but he eventually established his own engineering consulting business. He identified strongly through his employment, and he took particular pride in introducing himself to others as a business owner. He admitted that shutting his business down was a “big disappointment,” for he enjoyed the work and pretty much viewed work as his entire life.

Ken

Ken held a PhD in nuclear physics and lost his job as a research scientist from a well-known R&D firm; he worked there for the past 38 years, and his job was terminated in 2013 when he was 70. A first-generation American (he immigrated to the US at age 11), his father was an engineer as well. Prior to this most recent job loss, Ken experienced a few job losses at start-ups in the very early stages of his working career, and he attributed these job losses to failures in these start-ups’ business models. Although Ken admitted that the thought of retiring crossed his mind, he still wished to continue working.

Chris

Chris was a 65-year-old accountant who lost his position with a manufacturing company in 2012 at age 63. A first-generation college graduate who grew up poor, he said he never really had any professional goals in mind as he mapped out his life (“things just sort of happened”); rather, he just knew that he wanted to be a professional (vs. a blue-collar worker). Exposed to a wide range of individuals from various part-time jobs early in life, Chris shared that he always
enjoyed learning new things on the job. Chris also took particular pride in having earned two graduate degrees (an MA in financial management and an MBA) in his 50s.

**Ian**

Ian was a 60-year-old human resources manager who lost his job in 2012 at the age of 58. A first-generation college graduate, he felt fortunate to have worked in the ambulance response sector (his “true love”) his whole life. He worked for his company for almost 30 years; however, during that time, the company culture and size changed significantly due to numerous reorganizations, as well as mergers and acquisitions. He had no real ill feelings towards the company since losing his job (he “saw it coming”) and actually felt “total relief” in ways, for he gradually found his role as an influencer and decision maker reduced there.

**Roger**

A 60-year-old church music director, Roger lost his job at age 55; he had worked in this full-time role at this church for 13 years. The son of a PhD-trained engineer, he admitted that it is unusual for church choral musicians to find full-time jobs (“the ‘norm’ is piecing together part-time jobs”), so he felt fortunate for the stability that he had experienced in his career. A single man, Roger had always wanted to succeed professionally, but he never aspired to any “top tier” position, believing that he had always had “a realistic sense of [his] talent and possibilities.” Rather, he viewed employment as an opportunity to enjoy his work and to give back to the greater community with his talents.

**Tim**

Tim was a 52-year-old journalist who lost his job with a medium-sized daily newspaper at the age of 51, after 22 years with that paper. A first-generation college graduate, he had worked in this industry his entire life. Tim considered himself very community-minded (i.e., he
coached children’s sports teams and was active in his town’s Parks and Recreation board), and he had always wanted to work for a newspaper that served a smaller community. He was not bitter about his job loss, inasmuch as he saw that his job loss was a result of disruptive technologies’ impact on newspapers’ business models. He also believed that, as a more senior employee (higher salary), he was a more likely target for job loss.

**Data Collection**

Following Seidman (2005), I conducted three in-depth phenomenological interviews with each participant. For 9 of the 10 participants, each interview lasted approximately 60-90 minutes. Each interview with Rick lasted approximately 120-150 minutes; that said, the longer interviews I conducted with Rick did not yield any additional insights compared to other participants in the study. Each interview with a participant was scheduled approximately 5-7 days apart. Prior to the first interview, I emailed each participant and asked him to select a place and time that was most convenient and comfortable for him to meet with me; at this time, I also emailed the participant a copy of the Informed Consent form to review, following IRB protocol.

The setting for this study was not limited to a particular place or organization; rather, the setting was secondary to participants’ having experienced the phenomenon of involuntary job loss itself. I conducted interviews with participants across a range of settings, including public libraries, university classrooms, and community fire stations. In some instances, participants invited me into their homes to conduct the interviews. All interview locations were conducive to audio recording, and I used mini audio-cassette tapes to record the interviews. During these interviews, participants were encouraged to stop the audio recording at any time if they wished (i.e., to avoid recording sensitive or proprietary information).
The semi-structured interviews themselves consisted of open-ended questions that allowed participants to “use their own words and develop their own thoughts” (Denscombe, 2007, p. 176) with respect to the phenomenon of involuntary job loss in later life. I modeled my interview protocols based on Seidman’s (2005) work (see Appendix F-H for each interview protocol). Specifically, Seidman (2005) recommended a sequence of three interviews for a phenomenological investigation: one that focused on each participant’s life history (Interview 1), one that focused on deeper descriptions of each participant’s present experience of the phenomenon (Interview 2), and one that then focused on each participant’s further exploration that emerged from the previous interviews (Interview 3). Before I conducted interviews for this study, I developed and piloted an initial set of interview protocols in the spring of 2014—via Skype—with an individual who met the criteria for this study (this participant was not, however, a participant in the actual study itself). After conducting the pilot interviews, I rearranged and rephrased some questions slightly for future interviews with participants to generate more seamless transitions across responses to questions.

When each participant and I met for the first semi-structured interview, I reviewed the Informed Consent form with the participant and addressed any questions. At the conclusion of the first and second interviews, I then scheduled the next meeting day and time for the second and third interviews, respectively.

I personally transcribed each interview. After transcribing each interview, I removed identifiers that might otherwise compromise participant anonymity (Thomas, 2006). Once I transcribed all the interviews for a participant, I member checked with him, emailing the transcripts for him to review for accuracy. As part of this member checking process, participants were invited to make any deletions or revisions that they wished, as well as to include any
additional responses that they did not include during the audio-recorded interviews. Also, participants were asked to point out any additional identifiers that they wished to be removed. Overall, participants verified that the contents of the transcripts were valid representations of their interview responses, and offered very few corrections or modifications. I then revised all interview transcripts to reflect the revisions that study participants sent me.

Data Analysis

For this study, I used inductive analysis, which allowed me to identify patterns and broad themes across the data (Creswell, 2014). Unlike deductive analysis and the testing of pre-determined hypotheses and theories, inductive analysis yields research findings that emerge from the data. The process of inductive analysis is necessarily recursive and required me to move “backwards and forwards across the [data], reading, re-reading and comparing aspects” (Grbich, 2013, p. 261) to make sufficient sense of the data. During this process, I made sure to bracket (Moustakas, 1994) my biases, beliefs, and judgments into my data, in order to keep my data interpretations as credible as possible. More specifically, when I bracketed, I handwrote ideas in brackets in interview transcripts when I came across participants’ responses that I believed reflected my own biases, beliefs, and judgments, all of which I describe in a Subjectivity Statement later in this chapter.

After I completed the three-interview cycle with the study’s first participant, I read through the transcripts to develop a general understanding of the data. Doing so also allowed me to remain “open during initial data collection and review before determining which coding method(s) . . . [would] be most appropriate and most likely to yield a substantive analysis” (Saldana, 2013, p. 65). This preliminary reading also helped me generate a more nuanced
understanding of the phenomenon I was exploring, which helped me identify questions I could anticipate or ask in interviews with future participants.

To analyze this first set of interview transcripts, I proceeded with open coding, that process researchers use to generate conceptual labels and categories that help expose theoretical possibilities in the data (Glaser, 1978). Specifically, I identified categories, patterns, and themes across interview transcripts at this stage, using what Saldana (2013) describes as a first cycle coding process, or an initial preliminary engagement with the data. During this process, I analyzed data by bracketing words, phrases, and sentences and writing a word (or words) that represented a unit of meaning (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). Importantly, by analyzing data in smaller textual units this way, I minimized possibilities of my projecting my own biases and subjectivities onto the data (Charmaz, 2006). The coding methods themselves that I used were primarily elemental and affective (Saldana, 2013); I used the former method to code for more descriptive and in vivo elements (i.e., borrowing participant’s direct language from transcripts), and I used the latter method to code for elements such as emotions and values. Finally, after coding a complete set of transcripts for this participant, I recorded my codes in a codebook (Bernard & Ryan, 2010), so I could then use—and continue to build—this coding schema to analyze subsequent participants’ transcripts.

As I proceeded to interview subsequent study participants, I engaged in constant comparative analysis (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Specifically, after coding each newly prepared set of transcripts, I then reviewed previously coded transcripts to confirm that the existing set of codes provided a good fit, and also to revise previous codes as warranted (Harry, Sturges, & Klingner, 2005). Because subsequent data sets will influence researchers’ recoding of earlier data sets in a study that has multiple participants (Saldana, 2013), this constant comparative
process helped me maintain an emergent, evolving understanding of the phenomenon of involuntary job loss for this population. In turn, this process also helped me slightly modify interview protocols for all subsequent interviews, as I developed a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon. To capture this more nuanced understanding, I drafted analytic memos (Miles & Huberman, 1994) during the constant comparative process to assist my own meaning making; I then coded these memos to exhaust my “momentary ideation based on data with perhaps a little conceptual elaboration” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 72). I followed this constant comparison technique throughout the data collection process to its completion in the fall of 2014.

In the spring of 2015, I was part of a four-member qualitative analysis team in a qualitative analysis seminar in my program of study. As team members, we exchanged data samples and requested feedback on our coding, as well as invited critique about particular concerns we had. I used this opportunity to address some concerns I had from my initial open coding. Namely, I questioned the extent to which I used predetermined codes, those drawn deductively from pre-conceived theories (Creswell, 2014), during my initial open coding. In Table 2, I provide a few excerpts from an interview transcript to illustrate the ways in which I revised my coding after conferring with my data analysis team. In this particular excerpt, a participant, Chris, is sharing how there are positive aspects to a life event that may initially be perceived negatively. In particular, Chris discusses how he explored some aspects of his life after job loss to help himself cope adaptively with the circumstances. In this table, I include my first cycle coding from the fall of 2014 (exploratory coding), as well as my revised coding that emerged after collaborating with team members.
As Table 2 illustrates, I used codes such as “PR-FOC COP” and “EMOT-FOC COP” (problem-focused and emotion-focused coping, respectively) to identify behaviors and attitudes that the literature would identify as problem-focused or emotion-focused coping. However, by coding as such, I did not merely “let the data speak” as I could have, and—instead—relied on predetermined codes a bit more than I would have liked. In short, by working with my data analysis team, I sensed that I was coding for categories, thereby delimiting a more exhaustive range of interpretive possibilities. I also discovered with my teammates’ help that I tended to use an inordinate number of structural codes (Saldana, 2013) in my earlier coding, when a more exhaustive and expansive set of codes would have opened up richer interpretive possibilities. Once I discovered these “blind spots” in my initial coding, I then went back and essentially recoded my entire data set; I also developed a new codebook and used constant comparison to analyze my data anew as part of this process.

This revised round of open coding included a much more exhaustive set of descriptive codes, including emotions, values, and in vivo coding (Saldana, 2013). Table 2 illustrates how I took a code from my initial round of open coding, “perspective,” and subsequently coded more descriptively in my revised coding (i.e., “+ attitude to new job,” “gratitude”), depending on the context of the passage. The greater degree of freeplay in my coding contributed to a richer, more exacting interpretation of my data. As I expected, I generated a much higher number of codes in my revised open coding; specifically, I generated 153 codes, which I then organized into 18 categories that collapsed into 4 major themes. These numbers squared with Lichtman (2010), who observed that most qualitative studies in education will generate codes, categories, and themes of comparable number. At the bottom of Table 2, I have also included excerpts from an analytic memo I drafted that captures my own reflexivity as I revised my exploratory coding.
Table 2: Progression of Codes

Chris: “When they originally told us that we had 6 months left on the job, had 6 months to prepare, [exploratory code: job exit prep], it was an opportunity—I thought, at my age [exploratory code: age awareness]—to do something different. I tried different things, like volunteering, [exploratory code: volunteering], and now I’m driving a bus for employment [exploratory code: new job]. It’s less cerebral; I don’t have to think as much, but I also enjoy the kids that I drive around. [exploratory code: perspective; revised code: + attitude to new job]. So it was an opportunity for a change [exploratory code: prob-foc cop; revised code: readiness] . . . I enjoy what I’m doing now more, so it all worked out for the best [exploratory code: perspective; revised code: gratitude].

[excerpt from an analytic memo, March 10th, 2015: “I’ve noticed that some of my initial codes were really categories. Revising some of these codes [after conferring with my data team] has opened up richer interpretive possibilities . . .”]

To bring my data collection and analysis to a close, I needed to determine when I had achieved data saturation, that point at which “no new information seems to emerge during coding” (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p. 136). After I coded transcripts for my eighth participant, I discovered that I was neither adding new codes nor revising existing prior codes in my codebook. Nonetheless, I continued to recruit study participants, and I completed 3-interview cycles with two additional participants. That said, as was the case with my eighth participant, the codes that emerged from the data were both patterned and predictable, for I was neither adding nor revising codes during analysis. As a result, I brought recruitment of participants for this study to a close in December, 2014 after the tenth participant.

Once I reached data saturation, I collapsed codes into categories that, in turn, coalesced into key themes. To identify these themes, I engaged in axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and examined the ways in which substantive categories across my data interrelated. To manage my data more efficiently during this axial coding process, I transported my data to Microsoft Excel®, allowing me to examine the codes and categories across different interrelationships. Table 3 provides one example of how I generated a key theme during this process.
Table 3: Generating a Theme

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SELECT EXAMPLES OF CODES</th>
<th>CATEGORIES</th>
<th>THEME</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“give-and-take expected” sacrifice</td>
<td>Mutuality</td>
<td>Older, professional men who cope adaptively with involuntary job loss</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>expectations &amp; others “got my/your back”</td>
<td></td>
<td>demonstrate “rugged interdependence,” a mindset grounded in mutuality that respects the limits of individual meaning making and values learning from others’ lived experiences; enacted across a range of holding environments, this mindset is conducive to men’s learning through the uncertainties of involuntary job loss.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“felt vulnerable”</td>
<td>Individual Limits</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>inexperienced with search “don’t have the answer” “no script” lack of preparation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>asked others’ questions</td>
<td>Collaborative Learning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“talked it out together” interview practice groups synergy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>networking group supportive home “my people”</td>
<td>Holding Environments</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Trustworthiness**

A sound phenomenological research design makes use of multiple methods to reduce threats to trustworthiness (Trochim, 2005). To reduce such threats, I attended to four aspects of trustworthiness in this study: transferability, credibility, dependability, and confirmability. I have outlined these methods in Table 4.
### Table 4: Methods to Ensure Trustworthiness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trustworthiness Dimension</th>
<th>Threat</th>
<th>Strategy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transferability</td>
<td>Findings cannot be applied to other settings or contexts.</td>
<td>Provide rich, thick descriptions about participants, collection and coding methods, and credible interpretation. Engage in ongoing peer debriefing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Credibility</td>
<td>Study does not accurately identify and describe its intended subject and phenomenon.</td>
<td>Engage in member checking of transcripts. Bracket my own biases, beliefs, and assumptions (Husserl, 1960; Moustakas, 1994) early in study to ensure reflexive stance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dependability</td>
<td>Study does not account for changing conditions that require revision of study design.</td>
<td>Provide extensive audit trail for readers to assess degree, frequency of researcher bias.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confirmability</td>
<td>Study does not control for interpretive bias.</td>
<td>Engage in ongoing peer debriefing and “memoing” (i.e., ongoing reflective and reflexive writing to ensure my own perspective taking).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

With respect to transferability, Lincoln and Guba (1985) propose that readers, rather than researchers, must determine if findings can be applied to other settings or contexts. To ensure transferability in this study, I have provided rich, thick descriptions about participants, my collection methods, my coding methods, and credible interpretation. Also, I engaged in peer debriefing during this study to ensure that this study yielded meaningful findings for readers. Specifically, I conferred weekly over a 3-month span in early 2015 with a four-person team (including myself) of peer debriefers as part of a research methods course in my program of study; these debriefers were instrumental in helping me revisit and revise early stages of open coding. I also conferred weekly throughout the entire duration of the study with an additional peer debriefer who agreed to help me clarify my research methods and interpretations.
I also reduced threats to this study’s credibility in order to assure readers that this study accurately identified and described its intended subject and phenomenon (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Specifically, I engaged in member checking (Creswell, 2014), emailing all interview transcripts back to participants for their review and inviting them to make any necessary revisions; doing so strengthened the accuracy of this data. With respect to data interpretation, I followed a number of qualitative research authorities in deciding to refrain from member checking interpretations. Morse (1999), for example, disputed the idea that participants have more analytic and interpretive authority than the researcher. Further, Giorgi (1989) argued that inviting participants to evaluate a researcher’s interpretations of their own descriptions actually exceeds participants’ roles in a phenomenological study. Finally, Sandelowski (1993) raised concerns that because study results have been synthesized, decontextualized, and abstracted from and across various participants, individual participants may not recognize their own experiences or perspectives during a member check. For these reasons, I member checked only to verify the accuracy of interview transcripts.

I further reduced threats to this study’s credibility by following additional steps. I triangulated my data collection to ensure readers that I used multiple data collection methods. To collect this data, I followed Seidman’s (2005) strategies for in-depth, phenomenological interviewing across a three-interview series. Finally, I clarified my own stance and remained mindful of my own biases as a researcher during this study by engaging in epoche, the process of identifying and setting aside biases, judgments, and assumptions pertaining to the phenomenon being studied (Moustakas, 1994). I “bracketed” (Husserl, 1960; Moustakas, 1994) these biases and judgments to ensure that I maintained a fresh perspective throughout the study. Doing so
required me to consistently consider the ways in which my own subjectivities and positionalities may have shaped my inquiry and analysis during this study.

To account for changing conditions that shaped the study’s design in response to these changes (Marshall & Rossman, 1995), I followed specific steps to ensure dependability. By triangulating my data collection methods, I increased the chances that this study—if repeated with similar participants and in similar contexts—would yield similar results. Also, I provided an extensive audit trail for readers who wished to assess “the degree and incidence of inquirer bias” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 323); this audit trail consisted of methods and procedures I used to collect and analyze data, as well as my rationale for making these decisions.

Finally, to strengthen this study’s confirmability and build in checks to control for interpretive bias (Marshall & Rossman, 1995), I revisited my own subjectivities throughout this study. Specifically, I engaged in peer debriefing and also engaged in reflective writing throughout this study to remain reflexive, taking perspective on my biases and reactions to my participants’ experiences. In turn, I used these insights to help me recognize how my own subjectivities might have impacted my data interpretation.

**Subjectivity Statement**

As a researcher who explored how older, professional men cope adaptively with job loss, I have several life experiences that have shaped my view of this phenomenon. Over the past 8 years, I have taught professionals who fit this profile in the courses I teach for my home institution’s MBA program. I have gathered—both through direct conversations with such men, and my own observations of adults navigating today’s uncertain world of employment—that many professionals are reinventing themselves, preparing to work longer than they anticipated, or simply “future-proofing” their present careers to hedge against future uncertainty. I, in turn,
have become intellectually curious about the phenomenon of later life job loss, especially during this era of “liquid modernity” (Bauman, 2000), in which nothing—including employment—seems to retain its shape, and social forms are constantly changing, radically transforming the human experience. However, I respect that my curiosity about this phenomenon may not be shared by participants who may be facing particular challenges (e.g., emotional, financial) because of involuntary job loss.

Further, while I cannot speak to the phenomenon of involuntary job loss directly, I can speak to the phenomenon of voluntary job loss. I left my current employer in 2010 to matriculate my graduate studies in Adult Education and Gerontology full-time at the University of Georgia. Although I anticipated that making this transition would be challenging on numerous levels, I did not fully appreciate how challenging this transition would be: to have a professional identity cast aside, feel removed from the rhythms of full-time employment, and to do so in an unfamiliar land. Even though my experience was voluntary, I was careful in my data analysis not to interpret participants’ experiences with involuntary job loss through my own lived experiences with voluntary job loss.

Finally, my own relationship to work—what I understand as remunerated labor in the market economy—stands, in many ways, in stark contrast to culturally accepted norms, inasmuch as I self-identify as a New Monastic (Berman, 2000). In ways that mirror traditional monastics’ efforts to intentionally distribute their energies and time across the domains of labor and leisure in sustainable and balanced ways, I—along with others who travel this path—remain “in the world” of employment, but equally define ourselves through our pursuits outside of the market economy. As a New Monastic, I have adopted a vocation—an identity comprised of, but not wholly invested in, my employment in the market economy—rather than a career, per se, and
my path through life is predicated upon a horizontal consciousness that allows for optimal flexibility and reinvention. My orientation to employment in the market economy reflects an alternative tradition, and I was mindful of my values and assumptions regarding employment when I interpreted my data for this study.

Limitations

I acknowledge that my own subjectivities may have posed a potential threat to this study’s trustworthiness. In addition, I recognize that other potential threats—transferability, credibility, reliability, and confirmability—also may have compromised this study’s trustworthiness. However, I have sought to control for these threats to the greatest extent possible and, in so doing, I accept these limitations.

This study also captured only a representative sampling of participants’ lived experiences with involuntary job loss; as such, this study did not purport to speak to the full possible range of experiences with respect to this phenomenon. For example, this study did not control for issues of participant race, ethnicity, social class, specific profession, or other identity-specific markers that would otherwise change the shape and tenor of experiencing this later life phenomenon. However, I did screen participants using a detailed set of parameters that allowed for a certain baseline experience with involuntary job loss to be captured. A further discussion of limitations to the study is included in the final chapter.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I have described the methodology and methods I used to conduct this study of older, professional men coping with involuntary job loss. Specifically, I described my sampling procedures, provided brief participant profiles, and discussed my data collection techniques. I also reviewed my data analysis strategies, as well as described the methods I
employed to ensure trustworthiness for this study; further, I included my own subjectivities to reveal how I attended to my own potential biases as a researcher. Finally, I concluded this chapter by addressing limitations of this study.
CHAPTER 3

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of older, professional men coping with involuntary job loss, in order to understand how such men cope with this phenomenon and learn through this unanticipated life event. In Chapter One, I reviewed the literature on coping and job loss, as well as explained the attendant conceptual framework I developed to answer my research questions. In Chapter Two, I described my participants and shared the semi-structured interview protocol and analysis procedures I used to conduct this phenomenological study. Now, in Chapter Three, I present four findings that emerged from my analysis of interview data. Specifically, my analysis illustrates that older, professional men who coped with involuntary job loss (a) needed time to adjust, but came to see their newly acquired time as an asset that helped them think creatively and create value differently; (b) felt an initial loss of stability in their lives, but came to see that focusing their attention on aspects of their circumstances that they could control helped them remain optimistic about the future; (c) came to understand that their disrupted lives were open to restorying, as they envisioned that “future chapters” in their lives could be written; and (d) surrendered to the limits of “rugged individualism” in their quest to move forward with their lives, instead embracing a “rugged interdependence” as they learned from—and remained accountable to—others coping with the same life transition. These findings all reflect adaptive coping, and all participants in this study demonstrated coping adaptively.

**Finding 1: Older, professional men who coped with involuntary job loss needed time to adjust, but came to see their newly acquired time as an asset that helped them think creatively and create value differently.**
Although participants may have lost a time structure to their lives that their employment previously provided, they perceived their newfound time outside of the market economy as a “gift” of sorts, offering them opportunities to engage with their communities—and, indeed, themselves—in creative ways that not only enhanced their job search, but also broadened their perceptions of a well-lived life. In a sense, job loss begets time loss, inasmuch as a job-focused time structure to one’s life disappears. For some, this may be potentially unwelcome: an abundance of time emerges, necessitating adults to structure their time as they choose. Despite this, men in this study demonstrated the capacity to self-regulate the new “time on their hands” to promote meaning making and well-being during an unanticipated life transition.

**Initial Disruptions**

As they made meaning of this change, the participants acknowledged that this newfound time required an initial adjustment and proved challenging in many ways. Tim shared his initial reaction to job loss as “Okay, you’re severed?; now, guess what? You’ve got this gulf of structured time, and you better be prepared to deal” (lines 15765-15767). Ken, who unexpectedly lost his position in his firm after 38 years, admitted that “having worked all your life and having your daily routine established, and then to have nothing is a bit unsteadying” (lines 10421-10423). Part of this routine that disappears, as Rick explained in discussing his current job search, is a sense of daily closure that helped structured his day prior to job loss:

At the end of the 8 hours, you have a clear conscience, you can call it off. Or you can maybe have a deadline that requires you to work 9 or 10 hours. But, nevertheless, there’s a point of closure at the end of your day. When you’re searching for jobs, there is no closure. (lines 2908-2911)
A few participants shared their experience with the loss of time structure in terms of personal readiness with respect to managing their time independently. For example, Steve, who used his job loss as a segue into an earlier retirement than he had anticipated, said that he “really didn’t give retirement much thought at all . . . just really, really didn’t plan for it; I planned for it with the finances, but that was all” (lines 9794-9796). Similarly, Ethan shared that he was “at a point now in my life where I could retire, but I wouldn’t feel comfortable retiring . . . I wouldn’t know what to do with myself, with my free time, because I like to be busy” (lines 6541-6543).

Introspection

Despite this felt loss of time structure in their lives, men who coped adaptively with their circumstances demonstrated the capacity to take pause and engage in self-exploration and introspection, as they considered what their job loss might mean or require of them. Ken reflected that “well, it’s made me look at myself, you know, and see what to do with my life because it’s been so oriented around work and meeting deadlines. Work sort of schedules your life” (lines 10462-10464). Ian used his job loss as a human resources professional as an opportunity to contemplate a wider set of questions about his future path in life:

I was still in a place where I was trying to figure out what I want to do when I grow up (laughs), you know . . . to go back to what I was doing for the past 30 years that caused all that stress and so forth led me to ask, ‘Do I really want to go back and do that?’ (lines 13067-13072)

For some participants coping with job loss, using their available time to engage with the world of ideas—especially through self-directed reading—was central to appraising their situations. Tim, a journalist for a mid-sized regional newspaper who lost his job due to downsizing, said that “I think you just need the time to remind yourself about the bigger picture”
(lines 16773-16774), and he found respite in exploring this bigger picture by reading “lots of histories and biographies of late. I just find it interesting to read about how others fared through challenging times and how history has played itself out across time” (lines 16537-16540). Todd, who lost his position as an IT administrator, used available time to read, so as to promote his perspective taking:

I just try and read threads of what people are doing, not the ‘how-to’ types, but more how people are doing, what has happened. I’ve always been a biography reader. I’m not reading people’s biographies when it comes to jobs, but rather I am trying to look and say, ‘okay, what threads did they see?’ (lines 7623-7627)

For both Tim and Todd, their self-directed reading helped them take perspective on their respective life situations, as they attempted to better understand their situations by placing them in a broader historical context.

For Scott, a paleontologist by training who lost his wholesale tea distribution business in New Orleans several years after Hurricane Katrina wreaked havoc on the city, his own writing helped him work through the challenging times he experienced following job loss. Scott took the opportunity to write an essay on his experiences, and he then submitted this essay to a publisher interested in recounting the stories of lives upended by the hurricane. Scott described his writing as “a way for me . . . to really just get it off my chest. I can express myself without being whiny, and I can reread it to make sure it’s not whiny” (lines 1457-1459). Further, as Scott revisited and revised his writing, he came to understand his own thought processes more clearly. As Scott put it, “I understood myself more with each revision, thinking, ‘Oh, that’s what I was thinking and that’s why it was wrong’” (lines 1467-1468).
In general, participants recognized that the time now available to them in their lives following job loss required them to self-manage their time carefully and constructively. Roger, a church music director who lost his full-time position after 13 years, appreciated that managing his time well not only came naturally to him, but sent an important message to potential future employers: “I like keeping current; it’s important to show others that I’m not just sitting home, watching episodes of ‘Law and Order’” (laughs) (14595-14597). More broadly, however, Roger believed that independently structuring his time played to his strengths: he shared, “I actually work better with pressure from being busy than not. So if I don’t have a lot going on, then I tend to not get a lot done” (lines 14098-14100).

**Creative Approaches to Job Search**

Searching for new employment can be, to a certain degree, a very self-directed venture in itself; that said, men who coped adaptively with job loss used their time particularly well to regulate their progress during job search, using a range of metrics to manage and assess their efforts to secure new employment. Rick, an accomplished research fellow scientist who lost his job at age 59, developed a data-intensive method to help him chart accurately the extent to which his time use most efficiently helped him secure promising job leads and interviews:

> Having some way to show myself progress is something that works very well for me.

> Probably the most practical thing that I did was I created a spreadsheet in which I would log every job application, every interview, every rejection, every networking contact, week by week. And so I’m basically looking to see the trajectory of this graph. (lines 2954-2959)

For Rick, his creative use of time to promote his job search goals provided him with extra clarity, but also intrinsic satisfaction:
So I keep track of these things, and I get psychological reward from achieving the milestone. And I also gain a sense of how bad things are. How far behind am I? And what’s my plan? I mean, if I’m really in a rut here, how am I going to get out of it? It seems to me you’ve got to be able to actually see what’s happening to do that. (lines 3942-3946)

The type of self-direction that Rick demonstrated didn’t necessarily come “easy” to participants in this study; however, participants recognized the ways in which self-managing their time helped them cope adaptively as they created structure for their lives in the absence of employment. As Tim admitted:

I just really became aware that there is this rhythm to life, this structure, and that you’ve got to create that rhythm or structure if a job doesn’t do it. It’s a job to create the structure then, actually (laughs), just no paycheck. But, sure, it does stretch you, challenge you, to make it work, take the responsibility to make it work. (lines 15774-15779)

Tim continued: “It was important for me to look back at the end of the day and check things off, you know, what did I accomplish today? What did I do to push the job search forward? How was I useful? No one’s going to do that for me; you learn to do that” (lines 15785-15788).

**Creative Engagement with Others**

Participants who coped adaptively with involuntary job loss not only used time to engage themselves and their self-directed inquiry, but also to engage with others in ways that they might not have otherwise prior to job loss. For example, Ethan expressed “Now I also do volunteer work; I volunteer for 2 organizations, and I enjoy doing that. That’s my contribution to the community, to help as much as I can” (lines 6582-6584). Ian shared that, as a volunteer training director with his local fire company, he appreciated the ways his volunteer work allowed him to
take certification courses and continue learning. As Ian conveyed, “it’s an opportunity to 
continue, my brain is still occupied, and it’s something I enjoy” (lines 13127-13129). Ian also 
explained that he would encourage men coping with job loss to follow suit and use their time to 
serve others and, in the process, themselves:

I just think it’s important to keep yourself busy, find your new passion, don’t worry about 
getting paid for it, volunteer somewhere. These volunteer opportunities may open up new 
job opportunities. But you have to step out there and do it . . . just to watch life go by is 
not going to solve anything. (lines 13523-13528)

For other participants, staying engaged with their communities took on a slightly 
different form, one that reflected their enhanced commitment to professional and residential 
communities. Ken, who lost his job as a research scientist after 38 years with the same company, 
was actively involved in professional associations connected with nuclear technology; serving as 
a committee chair at the national level for one organization, he enjoyed “just being able to 
contribute to the public understanding” (lines 10039-11040) of a topic in which he was deeply 
invested. Steve, who was forced to close down his engineering consulting firm after the recent 
financial downturn, shared that his awareness of—and engagement with—his residential 
community and neighbors became more pronounced following his job loss: “I think I was able to 
connect more with my local community, you know, people in the community and organizations 
and that. Before I was traveling quite a bit, but now people see me and know me and say hello” 
(lines 9587-9589). Also, Roger, who has contributed countless hours of community service to 
the greater Hartford music scene during his career, shared:

I also think it’s important to demonstrate what you can give back, whether it’s job related 
or not . . . your career’s fine, but when you get to the end of that, and you’re sitting in
your retirement house, that’s what matters: what have you done for other people? What have you brought to help other people off? Because there’s always somebody that’s struggling behind you, and they could use some help. (lines 15030-15038)

Chris used his time after losing his accounting job in manufacturing to also engage with his greater community; in Chris’s case, he pursued a number of different community volunteer opportunities, ranging from hospice work to fraud protection presentations for older adults. In the process, Chris admitted, he learned that “the busier you are, the better off you’ll be. Sometimes you’re going to have to do things that you’re not going to get paid for” (lines 12393-12394).

Community engagement, then, in its myriad forms and expressions, helped participants coping with job loss—and, more broadly, coping with the loss of an assumed time structure in their lives—use their skills and energies to create value in ways that remunerated employment did not afford them.

Self-regulation of Time Use

Whether using their time for individual introspection or for contributing to the greater collective good, participants recognized that regulating their time use frequently proved challenging, if not frustrating. Several participants, for example, spoke of the perceived burnout and sense of wasted time that accompanied the seemingly endless job search process. In describing his felt sense of wasted time, Rick lamented: “the notion of being put in ‘time out’ effectively for a year, 2 years, whatever, is just mindboggling. I mean, every minute I’m trying to make good use of. And the notion that I’m just going to go idle for half a year or a year drives me crazy” (lines 2403-2406). Rick continued:
I mean I’ve a met of lot of people, I’ve learned a lot. But in terms of what I’ve accomplished, you know I kind of feel like it’s a motor that’s spinning with the gears not engaged in anything . . . burning up a lot of energy, doing a lot of work, personal work, but not actually achieving. (lines 2411-2416)

Tim questioned the wisdom of living a life solely committed to job search:

If you want to spend your time job searching 18 hours a day because you feel like a moral failure and all that, then that’s a strategy. But there’s limits. I totally agree with this idea that getting a job is a job in itself . . . but does anybody want to make any job—including a job search—into an all-consuming affair every day? (lines 16227-16232).

Nonetheless, Rick and Tim still managed to view their circumstances as thresholds for learning. Rick devised an entire job search “tool kit” with a range of innovative job search materials, including a “mind map” (i.e., graphical organizer) of his patents to distribute to interested parties at networking events. Tim admitted to thinking about time differently, saying that he’s learned “if you’ve got time, you can think, and that’s key, really, to anything. Time’s a gift in that way” (lines 15711-15713).

Other participants also acknowledged that staying alert was key to self-regulating their use of time. Chris commented that, “perspective is very, very important. It’s a bottomless pit if you start acting with self-pity. I think that if you don’t keep your mind active, it’s very easy to do that” (lines 12228-12230). Staying active to manage time well was valued by Steve as well: “it was just very important for me to stay very active” (lines 9543-9544). Staying active and alert for Steve (and his spouse) included regulating his TV use carefully as he transitioned into an unanticipated and early retirement. Steve shared “we’ll watch one show a night on TV . . . Period. Just so we don’t turn into couch potatoes. We’ve seen ourselves slip before” (9416-9419). Upon
reflection, Steve saw a link between his time regulation in retirement and his work experience: “having worked on straight commission for my entire life, I’ve had to self-regulate like this . . . a lot of that behavior comes from the workplace” (lines 9423-9425).

**Thinking Differently About Time**

Finally, many participants discussed learning something about themselves as they considered their own relationship to time following involuntary job loss. Although Chris’s primary goal after losing his job as an accountant at age 63 was to secure full-time employment, he has now settled—quite happily—into part-time work as a school bus driver: “I was forced into part-time work, but now I kind of enjoy it” (lines 12035-12036); Chris discovered that the part-time work schedule afforded him more time to spend with his wife and to help an older relative. Also, Todd spoke at length of admiring a friend of his who experienced job loss in later life. From his friend’s example, Todd learned that:

> It’s important to have a normal life; don’t think you’ve got to be all consumed with the job search. Okay, so your job is to look for a job . . . [but] the search isn’t something that should consume your life; it’s just something that you have to deal with.” (lines 8422-8427)

In sum, older, professional men who coped adaptively with involuntary job loss had to adjust to the new, unregulated sense of time, but came to see their newly acquired time as an asset that helped them think creatively and create value differently. Specifically, men demonstrated that they could use time outside of the market economy to make valuable contributions to the larger communities in which they live and participate. Men also came to understand time as a gift that afforded them space to learn through the uncertainties of later-life job loss, and allow for learning opportunities that included creating new job search materials and
strategies, as well as engaging in introspective activities to broaden their perspectives. Although self-directed and self-regulated time use often proved challenging or frustrating for them, the second theme illustrates that participants sustained a problem-focused orientation towards their circumstances.

**Finding 2: Older, professional men who coped with involuntary job loss felt an initial loss of stability in their lives, but came to see that focusing their attention on aspects of their circumstances that they could control helped them remain optimistic about the future.**

Participants who coped with involuntary job loss also coped with the loss of a perceived order and stability to their lives. Nonetheless, as participants appraised their circumstances, they coped adaptively by focusing their attention upon actions that they perceived were solely under their control, and they came to understand that managing their attention this way helped them think more positively about their circumstances. Specifically, this selective attention allowed participants to cultivate a sense of optimism for the future and a positive outlook that pointed to new meaning making possibilities for them. Although participants shared that negative emotions often arose and challenged their ability to stay problem-focused, they shared a capacity to take perspective on these negative emotions in ways that helped them maintain a rational, problem-focused mindset conducive to moving forward with their lives.

**Initial Disruptions**

In describing the loss of stability in their lives following job loss, participants spoke to a range of disruptions. Todd shared that “my wife was very nervous. We were trying to sell this house. So all of a sudden, we had 20 things in the soup at once” (lines 7387-7388). Rick conceded, “the stress level obviously goes up with a lack of income. Although, with a severance, I was on full pay for a year. So it’s more of a ticking time bomb” (lines 2892-2894). Chris stated
“the most difficult thing about getting laid off is that you never really understand your financial situation . . . it’s always a moving target” (lines 11439-11442). Compounding these financial uncertainties was a felt sense among participants that they simply did not feel ready for this life transition. Steve confessed “I must admit, I did not see this coming” (line 9082), and Ken reflected that, although some colleagues were hoping to be laid off in order to receive severance packages, he himself was not ready to exit the workforce: “It was pretty much of a shocker when it actually happened. It was a surprise . . . I was escorted out; I couldn’t touch my keyboard or anything. And after 38 years, you think, ‘that’s not the way you treat somebody’” (lines 10132-10136). Ethan also spoke about “this uncertainty now of what the future’s going to hold, because of my age. You immediately know there’s going to be some challenges” (lines 6088-6090). With respect to such uncertainty, Tim described being “just kind of numb, you know. It’s like, ‘okay, boom, boom,’ your life as you know it, now that’s all different” (lines 15623-15625).

Selective Attention

Despite these feelings of shock and uncertainty, participants recognized their lack of control over the job loss itself helped lessen negative responses to the disruption. Ian said that “none of this was particularly personal” (line 13376), and Todd recognized that terminating this job “was a decision that was made; there was no input that I was going to make” (line 7296-7297). Likewise, Chris understood his job loss from a business perspective, adding that “I understood why they had to do it . . . but I could only do so much” (lines 11421-11423).

The ability to distinguish between aspects of job loss that participants could control and not control contributed to their problem-focused orientation. Ethan said that “I can control the job search process, preparing myself for the search, but I cannot control the outcomes” (lines 6128-6129), and Tim added:
It was important not to take the disruptions personally and just assess what the changes meant, what that meant for me personally and professionally. I couldn’t control the changes or the forces, but it’s more a case of, okay, I could control my reaction to all of that. (lines 15494-15498)

For Scott, assuming a similar perspective enabled him to think strategically and creatively about his plans moving forward:

Once you put things in perspective, then no matter how bad it looks, it’s probably not as bad as you initially felt. And then you just take stock of who you are, where you are, and what’s around you. Because there are always these competitive forces around you. So once you position yourself that way, then you can do something that’s uniquely human: you can reposition yourself. (lines 1048-1053)

Scott recognized that his ability to reposition himself was distinctly a choice of his own, despite the forces in the external environment that he could not control, and assuming responsibility for the choices he made contributed to his optimistic outlook.

**Realistic Expectations**

Participants also maintained a set of realistic expectations as they prepared to seek future employment. Tim confessed that “no one’s knocking on the door for a seasoned reporter in his 50s; nada, not happening” (lines 15920-15922), and Roger conveyed that “Yes, I think my expectations are lower, in terms of salary and responsibilities and challenges” (lines 14832-14833), adding that simply securing any type of employment would be preferable to none. Chris discussed his future expectations with respect to new employment in later life:

At this age, it’s tough because I think, ‘okay, prepared for what?’ I mean, prepared to be a CEO? No, I don’t think so, because that’s not realistic. With my background, I should
have, I would think, a fairly decent position, but it’s unrealistic to expect that at my age.

(lines 12262-12266)

By maintaining realistic expectations, Chris and other participants buffered themselves from disappointment that might otherwise elicit negative emotions and weaken their problem-focused orientation towards their respective situations.

**Negative Visualization**

To avoid dwelling on negative aspects of their situations, participants coped adaptively by demonstrating negative visualization, taking pause to express gratitude and recognize that their lives could be in much worse shape. Ian believed that he hadn’t been handed anything he couldn’t handle, disclosing that “part of it is patience. We’re not about to lose a house; we’re not about to sell anything off at this point” (lines 13541-13542). Chris’s sense of gratitude emerged when he placed his own challenges in a broader, global context: “I started thinking about all the things in the world that I see on TV . . . people are dying all over the world, and I don’t think I could have the nerve to be depressed for a long period of time” (lines 12213-12219). Chris added that as long as his basic needs were met, then he believed he would be okay: “I know that not everybody thinks that way, and that’s the problem . . . if you just have one way of seeing your life, that your work is your life, then it’s going to be more difficult” (lines 12545-12547). During one of our interviews, Tim pointed to a poster of Carl Sagan’s “Big Blue Dot” in his home; this poster depicts Earth as a tiny blue dot in relation to other galaxies in the solar system. When Tim slips into occasional negative thoughts about his job loss, he “think[s], ‘hey, blue dot.’ Big picture, or bigger picture? My little situation here will work itself out . . . I realize how fortunate I am” (lines 16731-16732).
**Broader Perspective Taking**

Other participants spoke of misfortune’s bright side, recognizing the positive aspect of what might otherwise have seemed like a life transition with no positive outcome or trajectory. For example, Scott recognized the opportunity to grow through his unanticipated job loss:

> You know, my ancestors had to deal with sabertooth tigers. Life’s not fair. You just have to recognize that there’s always going to be roadblocks. Sometimes people are really lucky that they don’t have any roadblocks, but—for the most part—there’s going to be lots of roadblocks. That’s really good, though. Those roadblocks are learning opportunities. They work for you, and make you a better person in the long run.

(lines 1551-1556)

In Rick’s case, his job loss reminded him that, in many ways, his former workplace was no longer a space of vitality, and that the job loss—disruptive as it was—perhaps came at a fortuitous moment. Rick said that “there was a feeling that the company had sort of died already. It was a sinking boat, and we were getting out of the boat” (lines 2854-2856). These participants’ statements illustrate that perspective taking and understanding circumstances within a broader, meaning making context was central to participants’ adaptively coping with involuntary job loss.

**Prior Experience**

Participants shared that their prior life experiences largely influenced their capacity to construct positive meaning out of involuntary job loss. Not only did Todd have prior experience with job loss, but he also had to bring two separate entrepreneurial ventures to a close in his life. With respect to his most recent job loss, Todd said, “Yes, there’s an element of ‘of my God, I’ve got to find another job’ . . . but this time around, it seems like another task to do, rather than an emotional belt” (lines 8042-8044). In his human resources career, Ethan lost jobs on several
occasions because of a series of mergers and acquisitions; in hindsight, Ethan considered himself seasoned and ready to weather the proverbial storm that followed this most recent involuntary job loss:

The emotional part was more of a recognition as opposed to an ‘oh my God! What am I going to do next?’ kind of reaction. There was a recognition that there was a challenge coming, and so I went through that phase, which was very short, but then I went into a problem-solving mode. (lines 6095-6099)

Ethan continued:

Job loss is definitely something that I can look back on and say I’ve learned, you know, how to deal with it more effectively. The emotional aspect of it is like an obstacle that you have to go through before you can deal with it effectively. So I think I’ve learned not to get emotional about it. (lines 6504-6508)

Just as Ethan and Rick used prior experience with job loss to help them appraise their most recent spells with job loss, other participants believed that other employment patterns and behaviors across their lives helped explain their adaptive coping. For instance, Rick shared that his career consisted of numerous term-limited positions prior to his 17-year stint with his most recent employer. He believed that this work history not only served him well throughout his career, but also helped him take perspective on his recent job loss, stating “if I had stayed in the same position I started in for the rest of my life, I’d be nowhere near as happy with my life as I am now” (lines 4364-4365). Chris defined himself throughout his career more by how he approached his work itself, not so much by job title or institutional rank. In particular, Chris discussed how in his work life he “could take pleasure in almost any job. I could find something
I like about it” (lines 12140-12141), and he believed that this attitude helped him remain open to any future employment possibilities that might emerge.

For still other participants, their prior life experiences—those that helped them cope adaptively and remain optimistic despite their respective job losses—were rooted in early influences in their lives, or even grounded in their professional ways of knowing. As a paleontologist, Scott described how his proclivity for thinking historically explained his optimism: “I think studying the past puts the present into perspective, no matter how far back you go” (lines 495-496). Ethan believed the perseverance that he developed as a school-age immigrant to the US—struggling to adapt to a new culture—helped explain his tenacity with life’s misfortunes. Chris suspected that his age and lived experience helped him appraise his job loss, for “as you get older, you develop a sense of what’s really important and what isn’t” (lines 12482-12483). Hence, life experience—including, but not limited to, prior job loss—helped explain participants’ ability to cope adaptively with involuntary job loss.

**Emotional Self-regulation**

Participants readily admitted that regulating their response to negative emotions as they coped with job loss proved challenging. Roger expressed that “there are reminders of the loss. You know, you run into somebody that you used to work for, and ‘oh, yeah, that reminds me of that work situation.’ So the loss never goes away” (lines 14776-14778), and Ian shared that television commercials of his former company would remind him of his job loss. Scott lamented that exhaustion bound up with job search could get taxing, as “there are some times when you just get tired. You have these weeks, one week, two weeks, three weeks in a row, where everything seems to be going wrong” (lines 1240-1242). Sometimes, according to Chris, the exhaustion stemmed from negotiating a barrage of advice on conducting a job search:
You’re constantly drafting cover letters and changing things, and people are telling you from all directions how to do it. I mean, I was told so many times, one person will say ‘change your resume to this,’ and the next person will say, ‘change it back.’ After a while, I just got so tired of it. (11487-11491)

Todd expressed the frustration that accompanies false hope early in the job search process—“you think, ‘oh, I’m going to beat the odds here. I’m going to get a job in a month.’ And when that doesn’t happen, then you go through this ‘aw, shit’ phase” (lines 7833-7835)—and Rick confessed that, as much as he takes pride in his extensive and innovative skill sets, his diversity of experience can “make it hard to know where to go” (line 3514) and make job search more challenging as a result. No matter how the negative emotions surfaced, then, they appeared to easily disrupt participants’ problem-focused orientation to job search.

That said, participants spoke about their capacity to take perspective on those negative emotions in ways that helped them return to a problem-solving orientation. Tim, like many participants, said that constant rejection during job search was a reality and generated negativity at times: “you just never know when negative thinking can creep in. But I think the key is just recognizing that that’s all it is . . . that thought is just a thought, and I can change it” (lines 16519-16522). Hence, Tim redirected his attention to what he could control when negative thoughts surfaced: his perspective. Other participants shared different strategies for transforming negative thoughts. For example, Roger discussed his helping others and getting out of the house to work through negative patches. Todd and Steve both spoke about downsizing in order to limit expenses, reduce potential financial stressors, and integrate more flexibility into their lives; this downsizing appeared to reduce negative thoughts associated with future financial uncertainties. For Steve, this downsizing enabled a smoother transition into retirement, for he and his spouse
then felt that “our retirement decisions were pretty much taken care of . . . So I thought, ‘whew,’ I’m happy” (lines 9319-9324).

**Problem-focused Strategies**

Other participants spoke about specific strategies they used to sustain their positive outlook during job search. Todd discussed intentionally scheduling easy “to do” tasks for the early morning hours to ensure he would “have a reason to get up” (line 8243). Ian spoke of changing his diet to regulate his moods, a process that “turned out to be quite a revelation, because those negative feelings are much less diminished now” (lines 13556-13558). Scott made extensive lists to categorize his thoughts and stay goal-oriented whenever he felt “stuck” in his thinking or progress.

Participants shared a particular savvy for coping adaptively with perceived ageism during job search, for as Ethan said, “there’s this stigma or stereotype that comes with people of advanced age in the marketplace, you know, this idea that they have nothing new to offer” (lines 6646-6648). Recognizing their inability to definitively control others’ perceptions of themselves, participants represented themselves during job search in ways that intentionally deflected attention from their age. Roger highlighted only current activity in his job search materials, “so it looks like you’re able to step into something and take on new things without being so set in your ways” (lines 14689-14691). Ken shared that he “[doesn’t] put the years down for my education in LinkedIn, things like that. I just write about the experience I have” (lines 10326-10327). Todd spoke of perceived ageism in the “hip and now” (line 7740) IT industry, and subsequently pitched himself in interviews as the “long-term solution” to IT infrastructure issues, so he could underscore his proven experience. In sum, participants learned through the uncertainties of age-
specific job search issues by exerting control over aspects of their lives they could control. As Scott put it, “I had to think of how to make age an asset” (lines 933-934).

Interestingly, some participants even adopted a detached, non-judging perspective that illustrated their heightened capacity for engaging with uncertainty. On his current employment status, Roger said “the situation is what it is at the moment . . . it’s not about you or an employer; it just is what it is” (lines 14953-14955), and Todd mused that “losing a job isn’t a negative. It isn’t good or bad. For whatever reason, this is not a fit” (lines 7843-7845). Perhaps Rick best summed up his genuine curiosity about his current situation when he shared “you know, with some people, uncertainty leads to depression. In my world, uncertainty leads to action” (lines 5341-5342).

In sum, older, professional men who coped with involuntary job loss felt an initial loss of stability in their lives, but came to see that focusing their attention on aspects of their circumstances that they could control helped them remain optimistic about the future. Participants often used prior life experiences with uncertainty—including, but not limited to, prior spells of unemployment—to help them identify these actions. Moreover, these participants regulated negative emotions when they did surface in ways that not only served their problem-solving orientation, but also in ways that helped them maintain a positive future outlook.

**Finding 3: Older, professional men who coped with involuntary job loss came to understand their disrupted lives were open to restorying, as they envisioned “future chapters” in their lives could be written.**

Participants not only experienced a loss of employment, but also an unanticipated disruption in their stories about themselves, which occurred as the broader culture itself was changing rapidly, especially with respect to employment issues. Nonetheless, participants coped
adaptively by demonstrating an openness to restorying their lives in later life and, in so doing, accepting that the changing society in which they lived invited them to explore new ways of meaning making that responded to the complexities of early 21st century life. Even though participants experienced negative emotions that accompanied risk taking during this restorying process, they coped adaptively by regulating their responses to these emotions in ways that promoted generativity, possibility, and learning.

A “Chapter” Closes

Participants spoke about a sense of the unknown that accompanied their job loss, especially inasmuch as their envisioned futures seemed derailed to some extent. Rick shared that his job loss changed his perceptions of the future a lot: “I expected that I would be there until I was about 70, which would have been another 11 years or so. I expected I’d be working on a variety of things, I’d be learning more things, I might decide to move to an emeritus position” (lines 4987-4990). Ken confessed that his job loss reminded him “you always think that it’s not going to happen to you” (line 10415), and Ethan described losing his job as akin to a mourning process:

It’s similar to losing a loved one because your job is something that you identify with as a social individual and what identifies you as a human being, as a professional . . . so it becomes part of who you are. So when you lose it, there are these uncertainties that come along with it. (lines 6524-6528)

Ian described how his job loss was actually part of a bigger story about the loss of his company’s identity over the years due to numerous mergers. For Steve, closing his business down also brought unexpected, premature closure to a significant part of his life:
That was a big disappointment when the end came. And I think I identified with my work more strongly as I got older. I was able to introduce myself to others as a successful business owner . . . just being recognized as a successful businessman—and a business owner—I enjoyed that. (lines 8914-8919)

Steve added that he “never considered myself old until I was facing this, and did not see where I was going to go anymore. And I had to face that. It wasn’t an easy process” (lines 9372-9374). Participants, then, were challenged to revisit their stories about themselves as part of the meaning making process that accompanied involuntary job loss.

**Perceived “Script” Change in World**

Participants also recognized that their stories about themselves were changing against the backdrop of a swiftly changing culture of work that made full-time employment seemingly less available, a realization accompanied by a range of reactions. Scott lamented a world of work that he knew was disappearing: “I’d like to think you could get a job right after college and work there until retirement, and you have sufficient savings going into retirement . . . but those days are gone” (lines 625-628). Rick shared that he “just cannot get over the fact that the job of getting a job is so unbelievable . . . it’s now gotten to the point that jobs are fragile like life” (lines 5270-5272). In fact, some participants revealed that the very process of obtaining new work required them to discard former ways of knowing. Ian, for example, said that, in this highly competitive job market, resumes and online applications amounted to “just an exercise in futility” (line 13432), and Tim admitted that he’s “been smart enough to toss out all the old rules about job search” (lines 16045-16046). Ken, searching for work for the first time in 38 years, said that “the entire process to go through . . . it’s huge” (10290-10291), and Chris expressed frustration that he was actually told to “dumb down” his resume and remove degrees he had earned to
appeal to employers: “I worked pretty hard to earn those degrees” (line 11583). Collectively, participants recognized that rebounding from job loss in a culture in which the nature of work was changing required them to think differently about the usual story or “script” on how to proceed following job loss.

Openness to Possibility

To move forward with their lives, participants demonstrated an openness to new ways of thinking and knowing that responded to the perceived “new work narrative” that was unfolding around them. Some participants questioned whether a “job,” per se, was actually what they sought in transitioning after job loss. Todd said “I’m starting to think more and more that looking at jobs is the wrong approach . . . I’m really looking for a situation, not looking for a job” (lines 8178-8180); Todd believed that his ideal work situation could not necessarily be captured by a traditional job post. Rick said “That’s what I’m looking for; it’s not a posted job” (lines 5079-5080). Scott, too, spoke about employment possibilities that aligned with his perceived mindset, as opposed to a particular skill set, per se: “I refer to myself as an ‘integrator’ a lot . . . That’s what a paleontologist does; that’s who I am. And I think that’s what my future is; it doesn’t matter what industry” (lines 643-648). Hence, participants who entertained future possibilities for their lives beyond job loss coped adaptively by extending their inquiry beyond routes they perceived as unduly rigid and limiting.

Participants’ openness to future life directions following job loss included exploring ways to configure employment into their lives in ways that challenged traditional notions of “full-time employment” and, in some cases, even “retirement.” Scott revealed “I knew I always had to have multiple irons in the fire” (line 433) and enjoyed the prospects of pursuing a combination of consulting ventures during his job search. Similarly, Todd voiced “I’d love it if I could get a
situation where I’m done with putting all my eggs in one basket” (lines 7647-7648), as he expressed an interest in pursuing a range of entrepreneurial and consulting opportunities that might include a traditional job as well. Like many participants, Ken expressed bemusement at traditional retirement’s allure for many:

I know a lot of people that are, “okay, I’m just retired.” It’s interesting; I always thought those kind of people must be special because they know that their particular line of work is something that they don’t want to continue. They want to do something else (laughs).
(lines 10662-10667)

Ken, although still pursuing full-time work, was actively engaged in his professional societies—“it’s been a stabilizing thing” (line 10606)—and also found work teaching part-time at an area university, a new venture for him: ‘it’s actually quite a lot of fun, but it’s a lot of work” (laughs) (lines 10170-10171). Ethan, too, although interested in full-time employment, expressed an openness to rethinking retirement, as he shared “the fluidity of retirement has taught me that it’s no longer the way it used to be” (line 6743-6744); because he understood that the transition from a lifetime’s worth of full-time work to full-time retirement was a rocky one for many adults in the past—“most people died shortly after they retired because that was their life; their life was their job” (lines 6746-6747)—he wanted to remain fully engaged in later life.

A key to participants’ coping adaptively with job loss appeared to be a capacity for challenging predominant or master cultural narratives with respect to later life generativity. Specifically, an openness to new employment possibilities—and, more broadly, later life engagement—appeared central to participants’ adaptive coping; this openness spoke to participants’ capacity to challenge preconceived ideas derived largely from the broader culture.

Scott was clear with his intentions moving forward: “My goal is to find something I enjoy doing
until I die, because I’m going to want to do it until I die. I don’t think anyone’s going to retire in the future (laughs). It’s just not going to be feasible” (lines 1366-1369). Also, since transitioning into retirement that now includes part-time work, Chris’s thoughts on retirement have changed:

> Originally, I thought of retirement as essentially not working and, honestly, I didn’t look forward to it. But what’s happened now is they consider me retired, but I think ‘retired’ to me means doing what you want to do to make a little extra money, and to enjoy yourself with what you’re doing. (lines 12321-12325)

Tim expressed gratitude that his relatively stable financial situation supported his thinking:

> I’d be a basket case if I thought that my inability to find full-time work right now was, let’s say, preventing me from reaching a magic number like a certain age with a certain dollar amount in the bank. I just never thought that way, and I think it’s kind of saved me in a way, just knowing that there’s no fixed point. (lines 16649-16653)

Hence, participants who coped adaptively with job loss exhibited a sense of openness and possibility not only about themselves, but also about ways of living out their later years in ways that might depart from master cultural narratives.

**Risk-taking and Uncertainty**

Despite this openness to possibility, participants spoke of the perceived risk they felt in thinking and acting in ways that departed from more familiar ways of knowing. Deciding to pursue a part-time, online master’s degree to improve his employment possibilities, Scott admitted that he was “terrified, absolutely terrified” (line 816), not having completed college coursework for several decades. Like several participants, Ian respected that further, formal learning could help him secure new employment, but he believed pursuing additional degrees was a calculated risk of sorts, inasmuch as obtaining another degree “isn’t necessarily going to
guarantee any type of employment” (lines 13639-13640). Also, Rick spoke of constantly weighing the risk he took in bypassing less attractive employment, because he wanted to invest more time and energy to obtain work that resonated with him:

I believe I am doing this longer range search because I’m looking for work that excites me . . . I think I’m going to get a job that I’m going to have fun in, that I’m going to enjoy driving to every morning. So that’s the trade-off I’m making. I’m taking some risk. I’m tolerating some ambiguity. (lines 5462-5467)

Hence, for some participants, this perceived risk spoke to challenges that accompany departing from more comfortable—yet unresponsive—ways of meaning making as part of their “restorying” process.

Other participants spoke of indecision that prevented them from writing the next proverbial chapters of their lives. Ian, receptive to the idea of start-ups and entrepreneurial pursuits, admitted “this isn’t coming naturally to me” (line 13289), especially when:

You’re used to the paycheck coming week after week, whether you’re sick or not, whether you go to work or not, whether you do a good job or not, week after week, and then to step out and invest energy and money in something, but you think “what if this fails?” (lines 13290-13293)

Tim, a journalist by trade, drew an interesting analogy between writing and the storying process, as he knew that well-intentioned creative projects can easily go nowhere:

A big challenge right now is simply finding a way to contribute in a different way. So it’s like the cliché of a chapter closing; now a new one begins. I just have to make sure I don’t get writer’s block (laughs), you know, in sorting this out. (lines 15566-15569)
For Steve, any future chapters of his life that he decided to pursue came with a caveat: “I ask myself, ‘how secure am I knowing that I am secure for the next several years and that my wife is part of that?’” (lines 9615-9616). Hence, although changing the “script” of one’s life in later life seemed ripe with possibility for participants, doing so seemingly came with a felt cost for these participants.

**Identities Reconceived**

Nonetheless, participants who coped adaptively with job loss accepted the challenge to move forward with their lives, despite discomforts that accompanied letting go of prior ways of knowing, both of themselves and the broader world. Interestingly, several participants perceived that they did not—indeed, were not compelled to—let go of their professional identities, despite their respective job losses. Roger even conceded that “my idea of career has been changing; I don’t know exactly what to think of what a career is” (lines 14160-14161). Scott said that, even though he was challenged to find work in his particular field of expertise, “I’m still me; I still have all those skills . . . that was just a part of me; it didn’t go away” (lines 1115-1117). Steve, now in retirement, continued to define himself as a mechanical engineer: “I think it’s my identity. And still is . . . it’s helped me identify myself at this stage of life and say, ‘I’m a mechanical engineer’” (lines 9008-9013). Tim shared:

> I lost a paycheck, I lost a title, granted, but I didn’t lose a life. So, for me, that’s where perspective comes in. I didn’t commit a crime, I didn’t do anything unethical; I was a casualty of a dying industry. I can accept that. But I’m still a writer, still a journalist, still a professional, you know, you can go on and on. I still identify in all those ways, though.

(lines 16313-16318)
Hence, participants who coped adaptively with job loss believed that they were able to retain their identities in ways that did not preclude them from restorying themselves and creating new opportunities to explore.

**Prior Experience with Uncertainty**

Finally, participants believed that their prior life experiences helped explain their curiosity about new life directions following job loss in later life. Rick said that “I think I’m now in career 10 (laughs)” (line 1621), for his fluid professional identity reflects his insatiable zest for cross-disciplinary problem-solving; in fact, Rick took pride in his ability to introduce himself using different titles, depending on the context of a particular meeting. For Todd, having started two different businesses earlier in his career encouraged him to think entrepreneurially early in his life, and “to be a planner, but a short-term planner. Be a planner for General Electric, not the Soviet Union. Because plans get in the way of being nimble a lot of times” (lines 8543-8545). Roger spoke of always trying to market his transferable skills to other lines of work to carve out a career, a capacity he learned early as a musician accustomed to piecing together a living with multiple income streams. Thus, prior experience with work-related uncertainty helped explain how participants coped adaptively with job loss. For Todd, this prior experience with uncertainty has taught him well:

> Having gone through some adversity is helpful. I’m not suggesting that people go get in a car accident so they know what it feels like when it happens to them (laughs). But, on the other hand, the longer you never get exposed to this, you don’t know where your weaknesses are, and how you’ll handle things. (lines 7942-7947)

In sum, older, professional men who coped with involuntary job loss came to understand their disrupted lives were open to restorying, as they envisioned “future
chapters” in their lives could be written. Participants demonstrated this openness by envisioning themselves as stories with chapters to be written, against the backdrop of a cultural story about early 21st century life that they questioned with respect to its goodness of fit. Although perceived risk and indecision accompanied this restorying process, participants understood that losing a job was distinct from losing an identity, and they used their prior experiences with uncertainty to help them navigate future possibilities.

Finding 4: Older, professional men who coped with involuntary job loss surrendered to the limits of “rugged individualism” in their quest to move forward with their lives, instead embracing a “rugged interdependence” as they learned from—and remained accountable to—others coping with the same life transition.

Participants discussed their reluctance to rely upon others for assistance as they sought to move forward with their lives following involuntary job loss. Participants wished to respect others’ time and not appear bothersome to others; also, many participants spoke about their general aversion to networking. Ian, for example, shared “I tend to be introverted” (line 12918), and Roger said, “I’m more introverted . . . I still don’t feel comfortable calling somebody on the phone” (lines 13910-13916). However, participants did share that exchanging resources and experiences with others who also lost jobs proved educational. This mutuality helped them learn through their circumstances and also enhanced their motivation as they appraised their respective situations. Although participants expressed frustration that these group exchanges lost their appeal at times, participants shared that they were able to regulate the ways and degrees in which they learned from and with others to ensure that their time was well invested.
Perceived Limits of “Rugged Individualism”

Several participants shared their concerns that the absence of available resources to help them make successful transitions after job loss limited the extent to what they could accomplish independently. Although Steve spoke lovingly of the support his spouse provided, he confessed that after job loss, he wondered, “am I just going to now fall off the end of the earth?” (line 9164). Scott, as much as he appreciated the support he received from his family, knew that he would need to create new networks to generate assistance, for “there’s a price to pay to play the game. You have to pay the ‘entry fee’” (line 960). Chris said that he regretted there was not someone to whom he could speak about his situation, especially “someone who has been through this ordeal” (line 11650-11651) in later life, and Ken found his company’s attempts to help him secure new employment unhelpful: “all they did was give me a website to look at, and that’s about it. Which, I mean, nobody’s going to find a job where you’ve got to find it yourself” (lines 10221-10223).

For other participants, networking to secure new employment prospects seemed distasteful. Tim said that he “never really thought about networking . . . I pretty much just never saw a need to actively put time aside to say, ‘Well, how’s my pipeline?’” (lines 15803-15809). Other participants seemed reluctant to network because of their reserved nature or because they wanted to respect others’ time and not seem bothersome. Roger said that he is “not necessarily comfortable about asking or opening up to people” (line 13903), and Ian shared that networking is difficult for him, as he’s “on the introvert side of the scale” (line 13171). Ethan shared that “even if it’s somebody I know, I just don’t like imposing on people” (lines 6339-6340), and the perceived inauthentic nature of particular types of networking left Todd feeling frustrated:
I’m finding that there’s this whole strategy of meeting with people and asking them for help, rather than a job. And my theory is, because I have plenty of people do that to me, that it’s so darn phony. You know, you might as well just send a form letter at this point, except it’s in-person, which is even more of a nuisance. (lines 7671-7675)

Rick said that as much as he enjoyed meeting and speaking with interesting people during his post-job loss transition, “the prospect of calling one more person and twisting their arm is not what I look forward to” (lines 4245-4246). Thus, participants articulated a general distaste for networking and, given their preferences, they would have preferred to manage their transitions independently.

**Mutuality in Networking Groups**

Groups designed exclusively to help unemployed professionals obtain new work helped participants cope adaptively as well. However, participants who wished to benefit fully from such groups were expected to make these groups function well. Ethan attended a few such groups in his region, and said “in each of these networking groups, it’s important and expected to help each other. That’s really the focus of the entire group: to help each other as much as possible” (lines 6212-6214). Particular job search groups were grounded in mutuality and required that attendees make efforts to provide others with promising leads on employment prospects. Rick, also a member of several similar groups in his region, put in this way: “if I see a lead, if I see a job with your name on it, then I send it to you. And, you know, it’s kind of the ‘pay forward’ thing” (lines 4074-75). In a sense, group members were encouraged to look beyond their own immediate needs in hopes that others in their group would do likewise.

Although groups across the region differed slightly in scope and size, a fairly consistent set of activities comprised each group: time for self-introductions, space for members to share
challenges and strategies, and opportunities to hear group members deliver longer, prepared presentations. For these longer presentations, Roger explained, the same sense of mutuality was expected, inasmuch as speakers were expected to consider others’ needs as speakers: “You’d have to bring in a topic or issue and broaden it out so it’s useful to everybody in the group, so it’s not simply a focus on what I need” (lines 14396-14398). In sum, these job networking groups helped promote participants’ job search, but also created a spirit of mutuality that underpinned a shared, collective experience to which participants could attest.

Participants who took part in such networking groups also expressed that there was a sense of accountability—to both themselves and others—that made such groups a vital component to their adaptive coping. With respect to individual accountability, some groups expected members to share with others their weekly time use. Roger explained:

You have to report on your activities for the week: how many hours you spent, how you spent those hours. So there’s a pattern to it. You have to report, for example, how many hours you spent networking, the hours you spent on resumes, and the hours you spent on job boards . . . you’d have to specify how many new people you met or added to your network, or if you had interviews, how they went. (lines 14383-14391)

This sense of accountability, Roger added, created a sense of responsibility and commitment to the group; group members, in turn, were expected to help other members remain accountable for aspects of job search under their control. Rick explained the dynamic this way:

If you and I are working together in a networking group, and you’re asking for my advice and I’m asking for yours, and you give me your advice and you give me action items and you commit to do certain things on my behalf, then I’m duty-bound to follow up. (lines 3065-3068)
This sense of obligation resonated deeply with participants when they believed they had an opportunity to know other networking group members intimately, as opposed to simply making casual acquaintances and exchanging business cards every week for the sake of building a repository of contacts. For Ethan, this “quality vs. quantity” aspect of building a network in networking groups was central to his motivation for attending such groups:

The quality aspect is when you know somebody and you meet this person over and over, and you talk to this person, and they get to hear about your experience, they get to know your qualifications, they know your story, they know how you conduct yourself. They have a better sense of who you are as an individual, as a professional. (lines 6177-6181)

Ken shared that online networking groups, such as the community he’s developed using LinkedIn, operate similarly, and his ability to make substantive comments on message boards that convey his professional expertise has allowed others to become very familiar with his story. Hence, as participants became more familiar with group members’ stories, the easier it was for participants to act on behalf of those members and be accountable to a networking group’s cumulative success.

**Mutuality Beyond Job Search**

To help them explore new directions in their lives, participants also spoke positively about the social supports that were available to them as they appraised their circumstances, especially when those social supports helped them learn through their circumstances. Participants appreciated that social supports helped them think differently about their circumstances, rather than solely offer—albeit also helpful—emotional support and words of encouragement. Ian said that he learned to think about his role as the primary earner in his family differently:
What have I learned? Probably just support from my spouse isn’t based purely on economics . . . but that took a little getting used to, not being the stereotypical primary breadwinner type person, since I’m someone who worked constantly since he was 18.

This is the first time I’ve had to deal with this role. (lines 13746-13753)

Ian’s spouse helped him see that his displacement as the primary wage earner was simply a different dynamic, neither superior nor inferior. Steve credited his spouse for teaching him new financial management software applications that assuaged his concerns about future income streams, as he admitted “my wife’s much more conservative than I am, and I’m very impulsive. I’m Mr. ‘ready-aim-fire’ (laughs)” (lines 9646-9647). Shortly after his job loss, Tim almost decided to not attend a college reunion he anticipated, out of concerns of others’ judgments about his unemployment. However, his spouse reminded him that his extensive community work and volunteerism constituted “work” of a different nature as he searched for employment. Tim, who did attend the reunion with his spouse, reflected that his spouse “make[s] me see things differently or just see things in ways that I forgot to see them” (lines 16555-16556). Participants, then, appeared to benefit from perceived family support that helped them learn to take different perspectives on their respective circumstances.

Participants also benefitted from social groups for which job search was not the primary objective for convening. Shortly after retirement, Steve joined a community social group in which retired men gathered monthly to hear educational lectures, reminisce, and volunteer on behalf of their community, and he said “we probably have a written purpose, but in my version, it’s about getting retired people out of the house and mixing them up with others” (lines 9243-9245). Ken continued to contribute to listservs, write editorials, and give community talks on energy alternatives as he searched for new employment, and he believed “I’ve established a
network with people who know me” (line 10230). Ian found solidarity and a place of belonging in his volunteer fire company. He explained his motivation for participating in this group:

Is it because I like to help people? Yeah. I mean, one of our trucks used to say that, on the side: “neighbors helping neighbors.” But it’s hard to describe; it’s a little more than that.

There’s a camaraderie here, and a brotherhood and sisterhood, and we look out for each other and everything. (lines 12888-12892)

In sum, participants benefitted from social supports that provided them with a sense of purpose and engagement as they simultaneously pursued future employment prospects.

**Exploring Future Directions with Others**

Formal learning opportunities also helped some participants consider future directions for their lives. Ian and Roger both had an opportunity to explore work in the non-profit sector by participating in an area university’s *Encore!* program, designed for seasoned professionals who are contemplating non-profit careers. In this program, participants studied non-profit business strategies and models, engaged with non-profit leaders in the greater community, and learned from their peers’ experiences. Roger found the program helpful:

I think it was good for me to have another focus for my job search . . . I was grateful to be accepted; there was an interesting group of people in it, from people in the finance field to other fields . . . it was a good experience. (lines 14519-14528)

Ian believed he was “the perfect kind of person to go into the program, just to see what it might be like to transition into something else . . . where more of the emphasis is on the mission” (lines 12997-12999). Continuing education programs, then, appeared to help participants explore the possibilities of future selves as they moved forward with their lives following job loss.
No matter the context or mission of the groups in which participants took part, these groups helped them to learn through life after job loss by exploring new ideas and learning from others’ experiences. Steve shared that joining a men’s social group upon retirement was “so helpful because here I am with guys that are active and doing things and joking” (lines 9165-9166), thereby lowering Steve’s concerns about time use and engagement in lieu of employment. Chris enjoyed the opportunity to learn about possible new avenues of employment when he participated in an Encore! program: “I learned a lot about the non-profit sector . . . all of my peers were well-accomplished; they all came with their own experiences, and we shared our experiences” (lines 11694-11696). Speaking about their experiences in some of their respective job networking groups, participants believed that learning was central to their group experience. For example, Roger valued “learning different techniques for the job search, learning different ways of doing things. That was helpful, because I never really had to think about or do those things before” (lines 15008-15010). Tim believed he was making a sound investment of his time in his job networking groups: “it’s important for me to attend from an ROI perspective, because I walk away from these meetings knowing that I learned something, rather than just standing around and handing out lots of business cards or what have you” (lines 15894-15897). More broadly, some participants shared that learning through others’ experiences strengthened their own outlook—and even creativity. For example, Ethan shared “another benefit to these groups is that you learn what other people are going through in terms of what their challenges are. Once somebody voices the challenges that they’re experiencing, the group usually chimes in and helps out” (lines 6227-6230). Ethan said that these challenges included issues from managing perceived age bias in job search to dealing with sensitive interview questions about issues like “resume gaps.” Rick appreciated that his group experiences promoted his creativity:
The networking meetings have not been so much a source for job leads as much as insights, how to process work, ideas, giving me a stimulus to innovate . . . if I can explain to you as a peer in a networking group of my vision of where I fit, then when I meet with a potential employer, I’ve got something that will knock their socks off. And I’ve refined my thinking. (lines 5083-5090)

Participants who coped adaptively with involuntary job loss believed that networking groups were not merely instrumental means to an end, but rather spaces for learning to think creatively about their circumstances.

**Self-regulated Engagement with Others**

Because participants recognized they were actively responsible for making these groups dynamic learning spaces, several participants reported that they would become occasionally frustrated when they believed the dynamics became stale or the meetings lost focus. Roger shared that members of his networking group actually asked an attendee to leave the group, as they perceived the attendee really required emotional support that was beyond the group’s mission. Also, Ethan and Rick expressed frustration with some networking groups in that they either did not allow sufficient space to get to know members really well or attendees sometimes did not step up and pull their share, which is required for accountability to flourish.

That said, participants kept their frustrations at bay, choosing to make sure that they were as accountable as possible in the way they brought themselves to these groups. Scott said that letting go of his guard and expressing vulnerability made him more valuable to his peers: “I learned that it’s okay to show your flaws . . . it’s actually valuable not to have this ‘know-it-all’ persona” (lines 861-863). Ethan took pride in the way he regulated his relationships in these groups: “in my experience, it’s quality vs. quantity that matters” (line 6168), and Rick shared
that when he perceived creative lulls in his groups, then he needed to step up, for “I like to raise
the bar. When I feel the audience is getting dull, it’s time to push it again” (lines 4059-4060).
Several participants shared that being accountable to their peers reinforced a collective
impression of empathy among peers following the global financial crisis. Todd said “I think
everybody says, ‘Shit. I could be in that position someday, and I wonder if, or hope that,
somebody will be there for me’” (lines 7703-7705).

In sum, older, professional men who coped with involuntary job loss surrendered to the
limits of “rugged individualism” in their quest to move forward with their lives, instead
embracing a “rugged interdependence” as they learned from—and remained accountable to—
others coping with the same life transition. Participants who coped adaptively with job loss
learned that others’ support enhanced their learning through the uncertainties of this
unanticipated life transition.

Chapter Summary
To explore the lived experiences of older, professional men as they coped with
involuntary job loss and understand the role that learning plays in this process, I used this chapter
to describe the meaning that participants made of involuntary job loss, as well as describe the
 capacities that participants demonstrated as they coped with an unexpected life transition.
Specifically, participants (a) perceived newfound time as an asset that helped them think
creatively and create value differently; (b) focused their attention on aspects of their
circumstances that they could control to help them remain optimistic about the future; (c)
displayed an openness to restorying their disrupted lives, and (d) learned from the experiences of
others who were also coping with involuntary job loss. By making the meaning they did and
demonstrating these capacities to promote this meaning making, participants attended to not only
the job loss itself, but also the numerous other perceived losses that accompany involuntary job loss. In attending to these losses, participants demonstrated an adaptive mindset for learning through the uncertainties of involuntary job loss in later life; this mindset—characterized by curiosity, connectedness, and creativity—points to more complex ways of meaning making conducive to coping adaptively with uncertainty.
CHAPTER 4

Discussion

Since the global financial crisis (2007-08), the relative novelty of professional men losing jobs routinely has received notable attention (Marin & Dokoupil, 2011). To understand how older, professional men cope with involuntary job loss and the role that learning plays as they make meaning of this life event, I conducted a phenomenological study of 10 men who experienced involuntary job loss in later life. In support of the literature, this study’s findings confirm that adults who cope adaptively with job loss make structured use of time (McKee-Ryan et al., 2005), assume a problem-focused orientation to job loss (Sadeh & Karniol, 2012), and demonstrate a strong sense of coherence (Surtees et al., 2006), all behaviors that promote higher levels of well-being. This study’s findings also confirm that adults who cope adaptively benefit from social supports that promote higher levels of well-being (Slebarska et al., 2009), and use prior job loss experience to diminish the perceived “hurt” of a new job loss (Clark et al., 2001).

In Chapter 3, I presented the following findings from my study. Specifically, older, professional men who coped with involuntary job loss:

1. Perceived their newly acquired time as an asset that helped them think creatively and create value differently;

2. Focused their attention on aspects of their circumstances that they could control to promote an optimistic outlook for the future;

3. Came to understand that their disrupted lives were open to restorying, as they envisioned “future chapters” in their lives that could be written;

4. Embraced a sense of “rugged interdependence” as they learned from—and remained accountable to—others coping with the same life transition.

These findings—all examples of adaptive coping—offer new insights to the role that learning plays for men facing the uncertainties of later-life job loss. Men can self-regulate their time use
to promote higher levels of cognitive well-being, which supports their meaning making during this unanticipated life transition. Men can also self-regulate their emotions in ways that promote higher levels of cognitive well-being, which leads to rational and creative responses to involuntary job loss. Additionally, men can use prior experience with uncertainty to help them think reflexively as they explore new possible “chapters” in their lives after job loss. Finally, men can make use of relationships grounded in mutuality and interdependence to support their meaning making as they cope with an unanticipated life transition. In this chapter, I first describe limitations inherent in my study, followed by my conclusions. I discuss how each conclusion contributes to the current literature on coping and job loss, and I also discuss the implications of each conclusion for practice and research.

**Limitations**

In Chapter 2, I provided an overview of concerns for limitations to the internal validity of my study. Here, I describe a few important limitations that had an influence on my findings and subsequent conclusions. First, I perceived that a self-selection bias helps explain my findings, which suggest that participants were predominately engaged in adaptive coping to involuntary job loss at the time of the interviews. In recruiting participants for this study, I emailed several men whom my key informants identified as potential participants, but I never received replies from many men. Men who cope maladaptively with job loss demonstrate avoidance (Ranzijn et al., 2006), and these unreturned emails may—to some extent—have reflected maladaptive coping. The men who self-selected into my study were characteristically open and demonstrated adaptive coping strategies. The extent that their openness with me reflects an adaptive, problem-focused orientation to job loss may have resulted in selection bias. As such, this study’s findings may not reflect the experiences of men who cope maladaptively with involuntary job loss.
Also, participants in this study came from a narrowly defined geographic area. Because the global financial crisis has impacted various regions of the country disproportionately, my findings can only speak to a limited set of experiences with involuntary job loss. In addition, participants in my study may have experienced a certain degree of financial security in their lives that influenced their adaptive coping; to that end, this study’s findings are limited.

**Conclusion 1:** Older, professional men who cope adaptively with involuntary job loss self-regulate their time use to promote higher levels of cognitive well-being that support their meaning making during this unanticipated life transition.

Men who lose employment also lose a time structure that gives their lives a sense of continuity and certainty. Men in my study coped adaptively with this loss of time structure by self-regulating their time use in ways that supported their job search. Self-regulation—a process in which adults monitor, regulate, and control their cognitive, metacognitive, and behavioral processes to achieve goals (Zimmerman, 2002)—helped unemployed men stay engaged with life and maintain a sense of well-being. As described in Chapter 1, well-being comprises thoughts and emotions, and can be conceived as two distinct yet interrelated domains: cognitive well-being and affective well-being. Cognitive well-being refers to an individual’s thoughts about a particular life event or situation. This particular type of well-being assumes that individuals cognitively process life events through active evaluation and interpretation rather than experiencing such events passively.

A positive link between self-regulation and cognitive well-being in job-loss contexts is demonstrated in a meta-analysis of the impact of unemployment on worker well-being by McKee-Ryan et al. (2005). The authors found adults (both men and women) who had positive expectations for the future also had higher levels of well-being ($k = 11, N = 4778, r_{c} = .29$), and
participants who self-regulated time use in ways that supported their job search demonstrated adaptive coping ($k = 3, N = 585, r_c = .17$). One participant in my study, Tim even described structuring his time use as a “job” that takes “responsibility to make it work” (line 15779), and he successfully met this challenge by “look[ing] back at the end of the day and check[ing] things off” (lines 15785-15786). Like many study participants, Tim demonstrated successfully the ability to create a structured life outside of employment that contributed to his higher life satisfaction during job search. In support of the literature, these findings indicate that structured time use promotes higher well-being following job loss.

Participants not only made structured use of their time following job loss, but also avoided maladaptive uses of time that threatened to diminish well-being. Chris shared that life following job loss can become a “bottomless pit if you start acting with self-pity” (lines 12228-12229), and Roger made sure not to simply sit at home and “escape” his situation, a form of avoidance that promotes maladaptive coping following job loss. Hence, participants in my study recognized that a wasted use of time diminished their well-being. These findings are consistent with findings in survey-based studies of unemployed men and women professionals by Kulik (2001) and Sadeh and Karniol (2012) in which respondents who coped adaptively during job search avoided emotion-focused coping strategies and engaged in problem-focused coping behaviors. Other studies of unemployed and underemployed older adults (e.g., Ranzijn et al., 2006) show that negative self-assessments—illustrative of emotion-focused coping—in response to involuntary job loss and lower levels of well-being prevented adults from using time productively.

In my study, participants expressed wariness of “shutting down,” a particular type of avoidance that promotes maladaptive coping. For example, Ian said that “just watch[ing] life go
by is not going to solve anything” (lines 13527-13528), and Steve discussed the concern that he and his spouse—if they were not mindful with their time use—could easily become “couch potatoes.” Thus, participants self-regulated their time use in adaptive, rather than maladaptive, ways that promoted higher well-being.

The higher levels of well-being experienced by participants in my study supported their meaning making during their transition, which allowed these men in transition to engage in novel ways of seeking re-employment. The findings add a new dimension to the literature on coping and involuntary job loss by highlighting how cognitive well-being promotes creative, self-regulated job search strategies required to gain employment. Numerous participants shared that traditional approaches to job search seemed unresponsive to the complexities of the job market since the global financial crisis. Like other men in this study, Rick spent time using traditional job search strategies, including job boards and networking groups; however, he developed a highly refined set of spreadsheets and metrics to help him regulate more closely the extent to which his time use helped him meet his re-employment goals. Also, to display his 49 patents in a visually compelling way to recruiters, Rick developed a “mind map” (i.e., graphical organizer) to complement his more traditional resume. Rick’s “mind map” of his intellectual property illustrates a creative response to his circumstances, as he avoided rigid and fixed ways—what Langer (2005) calls “culturally reinforced roadblocks”—to conduct his job search. This type of creativity reflects high levels of cognitive well-being (Diener, Oishi, & Lucas, 2003). Coping adaptively with job loss, then, requires the capacity to use time well to promote cognitive well-being so that adults may then develop creative responses to the complexities of job search in the early 21st century.
The findings of this study also extend the literature by showing that men used their time to engage with their greater communities as they concurrently engaged in job search. This work in the social economy contributed to higher cognitive well-being and helped men avoid maladaptive coping strategies like avoidance. Ethan enjoyed “help[ing] as much as I can” (lines 6583-6584) and contributed to his community by volunteering for two organizations, and Ian appreciated that his “brain [was] still occupied” (line 13128) as he served his community in numerous ways. “Work” is sometimes not recognized by traditional economic metrics—“we are operating with a strange definition of work. If it earns money, it is work. If it doesn’t earn money, it isn’t work” (Cahn, 2004, p. 113)—and Ethan’s and Ian’s work in the social economy elides these traditional metrics. Chris, for one, realized that “sometimes you’re going to have to do things that you’re not going to get paid for” (lines 12393-12394), and he valued that his new part-time employment afforded him time to assist with elderly relatives. Across these cases, unemployed men used their time to add value to their greater communities in ways not recognized by traditional market economics. This time use promoted their well-being, but also that of the communities they served, supporting Cahn’s argument that “we need an economy that rewards decency, caring, civic participation, and learning as automatically as the market now rewards unbridled self-interest,” (2004, p. 74). More broadly, this time use to promote individual and community well-being captured “what economics attempts to measure, underneath money: the totality of all that human beings make and do for each other” (Eisenstein, 2011, p. 76). Perhaps this time use was best reflected in Roger’s observation that “there’s always somebody that’s struggling behind you, and they could use some help” (15037-15038).

Men who coped adaptively with job loss also used time to engage themselves, turning inward to help them make meaning of an unexpected life transition and assess what this
transition required of them. This finding enhances understanding of coping and job loss by underscoring the importance of leisure to meaning making with respect to this unanticipated life transition. Leisure, classically understood, is time devoted to contemplation and music, the latter more broadly conceived as the act of creation and play (de Grazia, 1962). Ian shared that leisure was important to his meaning making following job loss, for he “was trying to figure out what I want[ed] to do” (line 13068), and he appreciated the time to ponder multiple possibilities. To enhance their perspective taking, Tim and Todd used time to read; however, their reading served a “playful” purpose: to help them take a broader perspective on their circumstances, as they explored how others throughout history handled adversity. Scott used expressive writing to help him make sense of his recent job loss and the circumstances that contributed to that loss. He shared that he understood his thinking more clearly as he revised his writing. Leisure, then, reflects a particular type of time use that was central to men’s coping adaptively with involuntary job loss. In defending what he calls “useful unemployment,” Illych (1978) argued that “most of the time we find ourselves out of touch with our world, out of sight of those for whom we work, out of tune with what we feel” (p. 11). Men who coped adaptively used time to think—and, hence, to learn—by engaging in introspection, which promoted higher levels of cognitive well-being.

In sum, self-regulated time use promoted cognitive well-being, which helped men maintain a positive outlook, despite the challenges of job search. Self-regulation, which requires the motivation and capability to plan, reflect upon, and assess learning (Luftenegger, Schober, van de Schoot, Wagner, Finsterwald, & Spiel, 2012; Zimmerman & Schunk, 2008), promoted men’s coping adaptively with involuntary job loss, as they decided what to do with their available time and how to manage that time use.
Conclusion 2: Older, professional men who cope adaptively with involuntary job loss self-regulate their emotions in ways that reflect a problem-focused orientation to the uncertainties that accompany this unanticipated life transition; this orientation promotes higher levels of cognitive and affective well-being.

Men who coped adaptively with job loss self-regulated their response to negative emotions in ways that promoted higher assessments of self-worth. By doing so, men maintained higher levels of affective well-being that underpinned composed, detached responses to this unexpected life event; in turn, these responses promoted higher levels of cognitive well-being.

In a mixed methods analysis of older adults across two linked studies (Study 1: \( N = 27, 52\% \) men; Study 2: \( N = 40, 50\% \) men) designed to measure psychological resilience with respect to completing stressful tasks, Ong et al. (2006) found that men who coped more adaptively with stressful events self-regulated their emotions in ways that promoted higher levels of affective well-being. Men in my study self-regulated their emotional responses to job loss similarly. Describing his job loss, Ian shared that “none of this was particularly personal” (line 13376), and Todd and Chris explained that their job losses were business decisions.

Other empirical studies focused on individuals’ response to involuntary job loss have found that men can struggle to maintain a problem-focused orientation and experience low levels of affective well-being. In their qualitative study of 517 downsized senior executives (74\% men), Feldman and Leana (2000) found that participants who struggled to make sense of their job loss reported lower levels of affective well-being, and Ranzijn et al. (2006) found in their qualitative study of 27 middle-aged unemployed adults (63\% men) that participants frequently expressed negative emotions—ranging from humiliation to low self-respect—in coping with job loss. In contrast, men in my study assessed their job loss in ways that promoted higher levels of affective
well-being, and these higher levels of affective well-being— in addition, and importantly— positively influenced cognitive well-being.

Men who coped adaptively also self-regulated their emotions in ways that diminished unrealistic expectations about their lives following job loss. By doing so, they maintained higher levels of affective well-being that minimized “magical thinking” (Johnson-Laird & Yang, 2008), or reductive causal interpretations of phenomena that privilege quick-fix propositions and ultimately fail to respond to complexity. Tim, for instance, understood that “no one’s knocking on the door” (lines 15920-15921) for a professional with his age and experience in the current market. As older professionals, Roger and Chris shared they did not anticipate new job offers that promised long-term opportunities for salary and organizational advancement. This realistic life assessment following job loss reflected a relative level of contentment that promoted higher levels of cognitive well-being (Gilboa & Schmeidler, 2001). This finding is consistent with outcomes by Slebarska et al. (2009) in a survey-based study of 104 unemployed German adults (48% men) showing that unemployed adults who assumed a realistic outlook about their situation demonstrated job search behaviors that were correlated with optimism. Men in my study also assumed a realistic outlook as they appraised their situations, and their higher levels of cognitive well-being and positive meaning making following job loss in later life—a scenario that might cause less resilient adults to resort to emotion-focused coping—offers a unique contribution to the literature on coping and job loss.

Men who coped adaptively with job loss transformed negative emotions into positive emotions by practicing negative visualization, the process of imagining a “worst case” scenario that offers broader perspective (Irvine, 2008) and promotes positive meaning making. In so doing, men expressed gratitude for the positive aspects of their lives, and this positive emotion
promoted higher levels of cognitive well-being. Todd and Rick admitted that their job losses, although disruptive, came as a relief of sorts, for they perceived their respective workplaces were already bereft of vitality. As Rick shared, “the company had short of died already” (lines 2854-2855). Scott viewed his job loss as a growth opportunity: “those roadblocks are learning opportunities. They work for you, and make you a better person” (lines 1555-1556).

Men who appraised their life disruptions positively demonstrated higher levels of affective well-being and self-regulation that reflects emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995). In a mixed methods investigation comprised of three linked studies designed to assess how adults appraise their capacity to complete perceived challenging tasks, Tugade and Frederickson (2004) found that positive appraisals helped adults recover quickly from negative emotions, and this finding is consistent with men in my study who appraised their involuntary job loss positively. Appraising life disruptions positively leads to broadened repertoires of thoughts and actions, which then help adults build resources that contribute to future well-being (Cohn & Frederickson, 2009). Findings from my study make a unique contribution to the literature on coping with involuntary job loss by showing that men who appraise unexpected life disruptions positively—and, hence, cope adaptively with the uncertainties that accompany later-life job loss—broaden their understanding of an unanticipated life course transition, and this broader perspective promotes higher levels of cognitive well-being.

Another area in which men self-regulated their emotions in positive ways was with respect to their age. Facing a perceived age barrier in their job search, men who coped adaptively with job loss conceived of their age as an asset, using positive emotions to promote higher cognitive well-being that resulted in rational and creative responses to a perceived re-employment barrier. On their resumes, Ken and Roger removed dates that might reveal their
ages to recruiters. Todd knew that IT professionals might associate his age with an inflexible mindset; hence, Todd cast himself as the “long-term solution” (line 7748) in job interviews to underscore how his experience differentiated him from younger job applicants. These examples demonstrate men’s ability to creatively self-regulate their response to the perceived barrier of age to re-employment in later life.

To cope adaptively with job loss, men also used positive emotions to promote curiosity and a positive future outlook. This problem-focused orientation helped men to perceive their job loss as an interesting challenge. Adults who understand a phenomenon as an adaptive challenge demonstrate a learning orientation (Heifetz, 1994), and men in my study framed their understanding of their situation as a “growth opportunity” (Dweck, 2006). Scott believed that history teaches us to recognize life as perpetual change, and his passion for history encouraged him to “do something that’s uniquely human” (lines 1052-1053) and reposition himself as a professional seeking a job in a competitive market. Ethan and Tim described how they maintain a positive future outlook by choosing to focus their thinking solely on aspects of job search that they control. These findings are consistent with the outcomes of a quantitative study of unemployed high-tech professionals ($N = 40$; men 69%) in which participants who coped adaptively with job loss avoided negative emotions in appraising their situation (Sadeh & Karniol, 2012). Rather than dwell on negative aspects of job loss, men who coped adaptively in my study perceived job loss as a challenging life transition that required a curious and positive outlook.

Men used prior experience with job loss to help them cope adaptively and make meaning of this unexpected life transition. Men who had unexpectedly lost jobs in the past self-regulated their responses to negative emotions in ways that promoted learning from their experiences. As
Lehrer (2009) writes, “a brain that’s intolerant of uncertainty—that can’t stand the argument—often tricks itself into thinking the wrong thing” (p. 203). Todd said that his prior experience with job loss helped prepare him for what lie ahead. Similarly, Ethan found helpful his prior experience with job loss as he made meaning of his most recent job loss, describing the initial shock as “more of a recognition as opposed to an ‘oh my God! What am I going to do next?’ kind of reaction” (lines 6095-6096). Prior experience with job loss provided men in this study with a realistic preview of what they could anticipate as they made meaning of this life transition, and this prior experience helped men avoid negative appraisals of their situation. This finding is consistent with another phenomenological study of professional adults ($N = 10$; men 90%), in which Vickers and Parriss (2007) found that adults were more likely to appraise job loss negatively if the suddenness and/or perceived randomness of job loss challenged them to make coherent sense of their job loss. Prior experiences with job loss therefore helped mollify a perceived lack of control over their circumstances.

Prior experience with job loss helped men not only self-regulate their emotional responses to job loss, but also develop specific strategies to promote a problem-focused orientation to their situation. Todd spoke of intentionally scheduling more-or-less “easy” tasks in the morning to motivate him to adhere to a daily routine that a job did not offer. Ian altered his diet to increase his physical health, and Scott made use of extensive lists to help him think through his situation strategically. Empirical research supports that prior experience with life challenges can increase the likelihood that adults will use positive emotion and positive meaning making when they encounter future challenging life events (Ong et al., 2006; Tugade & Frederickson, 2004). Similarly, men in my study used prior experience to maintain a problem-solving orientation during this unanticipated life transition, but this orientation then translated
into self-regulated behaviors that promoted higher levels of cognitive well-being. This finding offers a new contribution to the literature on coping and job loss.

In sum, older, professional men who coped adaptively with job loss self-regulated their emotions in ways that promoted a problem-focused orientation to the uncertainties that accompany this unanticipated life transition. To promote this learning orientation, men assumed a composed perspective toward their situation and set realistic expectations about their lives following job loss. Men also coped adaptively by practicing negative visualization, a meaning making strategy that promotes the positive emotion of gratitude. By cultivating positive emotions, men developed strategies to manage perceived age bias as they sought re-employment. Men also used prior job loss experience to promote higher levels of cognitive well-being. By maintaining this problem-focused orientation, men demonstrated higher levels of cognitive well-being that helped them cope adaptively.

**Conclusion 3: Older, professional men who cope with involuntary job loss demonstrate developmental complexity as they explore new “chapters” in their lives and consider possible, future selves.**

Men who cope adaptively with involuntary job loss demonstrate an openness to restorying their lives, even if they are uncertain what that transition might entail. Human identity can be conceived as a life story, “an internalized and evolving personal myth that functions to provide life with unity and purpose” (McAdams, 1996, p. 132). Older men who lose jobs experience a disruption in their life stories; however, those who cope adaptively remain open to restorying their lives with new “chapters,” thereby contesting a “narrative of decline” (Gullette, 1997) that envelops aging in America. Todd and Tim considered how they might configure future employment into their lives, and neither man committed to a fixed idea of what that might
look like or require of them. Roger even shared that his “idea of career has been changing” (line 14160), as he did not know exactly how to conceive of a career anymore. Men who coped adaptively with job loss resisted a “narrative disclosure” (Bohlmeijer, Westehof, Randall, Tromp, & Kenyon, 2011) to their lives, and remained open to possible future selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Higher levels of cognitive well-being promoted this openness to generativity that is central to adults’ developmental growth in later life (Levinson, 1986; Valliant, 2002). In sum, older men who remained open to new directions in their lives following involuntary job loss learned through the uncertainties of this life transition by remaining open and curious about new directions in their lives.

Men who cope adaptively with involuntary job loss think reflexively about their storied lives. By recognizing habits of mind—what Bourdieu (1990) calls habitus—and thought patterns that comprise their “unconscious programming,” men who coped adaptively with job loss reflected on their own meaning making to ensure that they themselves were, as Tim said, “not the barrier” (line 16487) to making positive meaning of their situation. Ian learned that he did not need to serve as the primary wage earner in his family. Tim’s spouse helped him think of himself as a “social worker” to acknowledge his contributions to the social economy following job loss, and this new framing helped Tim “see things differently or in ways that [he] forgot to see them” (lines 16555-16556). Men who were able to recognize the limits of their own meaning making helped create conditions for their further growth, and this problem-focused orientation to job loss promoted higher levels of cognitive well-being that led to broader meaning making.

Several participants shared that they may have lost their employment, but they did not lose a sense of themselves as professionals or human beings. Although he lost a salary and
organizational title, Tim shared, “I didn’t lose a life” (lines 16313-16314), and Scott said, “I’m still me” (line 1115) in response to his job loss. Their responses not only reflected a strong sense of self-identity distinct from their previous employment, but also represented self-authored ways of knowing that reflected higher stages of developmental complexity (Kegan, 1998). Rick and Todd also thought in more complex ways about their respective job losses, describing job search as more of a search for a meaningful situation than a job, per se. Developmentally mature adults interpret themselves and their worlds with more complexity (Hy & Loevinger, 1996), and these men’s ontological awareness (Jarvis, 2007) helps explain their strong sense of coherence: a strong sense of themselves, as well as their life stories about themselves (Surtees et al., 2006).

My finding is consistent with empirical research that finds adults who cope with job loss and possess a strong sense of coherence about themselves and their situation report higher levels of affective well-being. In a mixed methods study of adults (51% men; mean age: 49.6 years) coping with daily stress (Diehl & Hay, 2010), participants with a lower sense of coherence experienced higher levels of negative affect. In a large-scale survey study of adults (N = 20,579; age range: 41-80 years) who completed a Health and Life Experiences Questionnaire (HLEQ) designed to measure the influence that a sense of coherence has on responses to adverse events in adulthood, participants reported that a strong sense of coherence helped diminish negative responses to adverse life events (Surtees et al., 2006). For men in my study, a strong sense of coherence positively influenced their cognitive well-being and meaning making, which resulted in developmentally mature responses to involuntary job loss.

Men who cope adaptively with later-life job loss question the dominant culture’s narrative with respect to their roles as older adults in society. This capacity to take critical perspective on assumptions governing one’s lifeworld—the “unquestioned assumptions that
structure [our] actions and forms of reasoning” (Brookfield, 2004, p. 57)—reflects higher levels of cognitive well-being that are particularly well-suited for making sense of job loss in later life in the rapidly changing culture of work in the early 21st century. In making meaning of their lives as unemployed, older men in early 21st century America, men in my study challenged their broader culture’s assumptions, but did so without dwelling on negative emotions that would promote lower affective well-being. Rather, their higher levels of cognitive well-being promoted creative thinking that helped them broaden their meaning making. Scott and Chris said that traditional retirement was not something they believed in or that will be feasible for most adults, and Ethan believed that retirement is “no longer the way it used to be” (lines 6743-6744). Tim, too, thought of retirement differently, more of a state of mind than a “magic number [associated with] a certain age” (line 16651). Men who coped adaptively refrained from one-dimensional thought—thinking that trains individuals to feel a deep need to stay within their existing frameworks of analysis (Marcuse, 1964)—that would curtail broader meaning making. Instead, men with a strong sense of coherence—a strong sense of who they are—demonstrated creativity and openness in contesting received cultural narratives, and their positive meaning making promoted higher well-being. To this end, this study provides a more nuanced understanding of how older adults cope adaptively with job loss within this period of rapid change.

Older, professional men who cope adaptively with involuntary job loss use prior experience with job loss to promote openness that broadens their making meaning as they cope adaptively with an unexpected life transition. This finding aligns with empirical research that shows prior experience with job loss positively influences adaptive coping with new spells of job loss. In an analysis of unemployed men ($N = 5,348$) drawn from 18 waves of a British Household Panel Study, Mandemakers and Monden (2013) examined the impact of involuntary
job loss on well-being, and they found that the more experience adults have with job loss, and the greater the passage of time with respect to the job loss itself, the more adaptively adults tend to cope with new spells of job loss. Prior experience with job loss helped men in my study cope adaptively, as they used their experience to help them transition through—and, hence, learn through—their current spell of involuntary job loss. Grounded in lifespan and life stage development theories (Bee & Bjorkland, 2004; Levinson, 1978), transitional learning seeks to explain how adults respond to change (Rossiter, 2007a), paying attention to the psychosocial and emotional adjustments that adults make as they assume new roles in their lives. Men in my study who remained open to possible future selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986) used prior experience with job loss to help them learn through the uncertainty of later-life job loss, and their openness reflected higher levels of cognitive well-being. Rick laughed when he shared “I think I’m now in career 10” (line 1621), a result of his younger adulthood, when he accepted a series of shorter-term jobs upon earning his PhD. Before Roger lost his 13-year position as a church music director, he was accustomed to piecing together a living with a series of part-time professional positions. Todd experienced two failed businesses in his career prior to his job loss, and he believed these experiences helped him learn more about his perceived professional weaknesses.

A central premise of transitional learning is that transitions offer meaning making possibilities, as adults learn to live critically with new conditions in their lives (Glastra, Hake, & Schedler, 2004). In my study, prior experience with job loss helped men learn through the uncertainties of an unanticipated life transition, for these experiences promoted curiosity and an openness to new experience.

Findings of this study offer a unique contribution to the literature on coping and job loss by highlighting how adults who cope adaptively with job loss in later life “grieve well” (Baker,
Specifically, men who cope adaptively with involuntary job loss allow themselves to accept not only the loss of their jobs themselves, but also the loss of ways of knowing that formerly helped them make sense of their professional lives. Men in my study learned through uncertainty by remaining open to new ways of understanding, including how to conduct job search in a complex world of work ushered in by global neoliberal capitalism (Martin & Schumann, 1997), as well as how to adapt to a nimble, flexible workforce that offers few secure employment opportunities, especially for older adults. Men coped adaptively with these seismic changes by grieving these losses; in other words, they accepted these changes and self-regulated emotional responses to these changes in ways that allowed them to maintain a problem-focused orientation. Ethan compared his job loss to the grieving of a loved one, and Rick described jobs in the new economy as “fragile like life” (line 5272). Tim let go of “all the old rules about job search” (lines 16045-16046) as he made sense of how job search had changed so since he last sought work decades ago. Men who coped adaptively grieved well, accepting the loss of a job, as well as the loss of a culture of work they once knew. Accepting these losses, men in my study were then able to shift their attention to future possibilities in their lives, and this problem-focused orientation promoted higher levels of cognitive well-being that supported more complex ways of meaning making to emerge.

In sum, older, professional men who coped adaptively with involuntary job loss explored new “chapters” in their lives and considered possible, future selves in response to an unanticipated life transition. Men who coped adaptively demonstrated a strong sense of coherence that promoted higher affective well-being, which positively influenced cognitive well-being and meaning making. Men also used prior experience with job loss to support their making meaning as they transitioned in their lives after an unanticipated life event. Men who
coped adaptively with involuntary job loss also grieved the loss of a lifeworld they once knew; as part of this grief work, men self-regulated their emotions, so they could maintain a problem-focused orientation to their situation. This problem-focused orientation comprises openness and reflexive thinking, both of which promote higher levels of cognitive well-being that support learning through the uncertainties of involuntary job loss in later life.

**Conclusion 4: Older, professional men make use of social supports to help them learn through the uncertainties that accompany involuntary job loss; these learning relationships—grounded in mutuality and interdependence—promote higher cognitive and affective well-being.**

Men coping with involuntary job loss make use of social supports to promote higher levels of well-being. Social supports promote psychosocial adjustments that enable adults to take on new roles and accommodate life transitions (Aslanian, 2001; Rossiter, 2007a). In assisting adults as they make these transitions, the literature highlights the positive role of social supports on individuals’ affective states. A survey-based study of adults coping with job loss ($N = 104$; 48% men) found that men with positive social supports in their lives had a more optimistic future outlook (Slebarska et al., 2009), and a meta-analysis of the impact of unemployment on worker well-being found that adults who benefited from social supports also demonstrated higher life satisfaction (McKee-Ryan et al., 2005). Consistent with these findings, in my study Ian’s community of firefighters offered him camaraderie and a place to “look out for each other” (line 12891), as he coped with his involuntary job loss. Steve and Todd shared the importance in their lives of having positive male role models who made meaningful life transitions after spells of later-life job loss. The role models exemplified what is possible after job loss and provided men with an optimistic future outlook.
Findings of my study extend the literature on coping and job loss by highlighting the ways in which social supports help older, professional men learn through the uncertainties of this life transition. Previous studies, such as the 2010 survey-based study by Forret et al. (2010) that examined gender role differences of adults (42% men; average age of 42 years) coping with job loss, have found that men were more likely than women to perceive of job loss as a defeat. My study, however, shows that men who coped adaptively with this life transition did not perceive job loss as a defeat. Rather, they demonstrated a sense of duty-bound accountability to the communities of social support in which they participated, which promoted a learning orientation to their job loss. In their communities, men who could offer one another mutual support as learners and help diminish the perceived “hurt” of job loss, offering men a sense of accountability to their peers. Moreover, men who took active roles to co-create these systems of support benefited from a sense of community and social capital that has largely waned in the United States over the past several decades (Olds & Schwartz, 2010). Putnam (2000) argued that communities with high levels of social capital—by which he means social networks that engender trust and reciprocity—are cohesive and happier, but that levels of social capital have declined gradually in the United States since World War II because adults have been pressured to meet greater work, family, and community demands than previous generations. In my study, the value of social capital was clearly evident for men coping with job loss. Roger, as just one example, said his networking group was “not simply a focus on what I need” (line 14398), but rather that he and his peers were responsible for the group’s quality of learning. The mutual aid that Roger described promoted higher cognitive well-being for men coping with the uncertainties of later-life job loss.
Men who coped adaptively with involuntary job loss also perceived that the quality and intimacy of the relationships in their communities of support promoted their cognitive well-being. These relationships helped men overcome a potential barrier to adaptive coping—lack of social supports—that can accompany unemployment for older men, as the literature on coping and job loss shows. Two qualitative studies of middle-aged adults coping with job loss—one comprised of all male participants ($N = 45$) (McDaniel, 2003), and the other with a majority of men ($N = 27; 63\%$ male) (Ranzijn et al., 2006)—found that an absence of social supports was associated with maladaptive coping. My finding indicates that not only do social supports promote adaptive coping, but the quality of these relationships influences adaptive coping as well. Ken and Ethan found it easier to exchange ideas and advocate for one another in their respective communities because they were so familiar with their peers’ stories. Rick knew his networking group so intimately that, when he sensed the group’s creativity subsiding, he would introduce new ideas to energize the group, allowing him to “refine [his] thinking” (line 5090) in the process. Hence, men coped adaptively by engaging in mutuality, described by Scott (2012) as “the capacity of ordinary citizens to learn through participation” (p. 122). These voluntary exchanges of reciprocity challenged the ideas of competition and individualism that underpin the American psyche and heroic ideal of rugged individualism (Slater, 1970), particularly for men. This mutuality promoted cognitive well-being, and cognitive well-being positively influenced men’s making meaning of an unexpected life course transition.

Men who coped with job loss expressed a general disdain for traditional networking strategies—what Ian described as “imposing on people” (lines 6339-6340)—to obtain new employment, but nevertheless found opportunities to network in ways that helped diminish their general dissatisfaction. Empirical research reveals that resistance to networking opportunities
can lead to social isolation and feelings of alienation. Unemployed executives in a phenomenological study by Vickers and Parriss (2007) on coping with job loss shared that coping with job loss was challenging inasmuch as social networks from their previous workplaces were unavailable, which contributed to unemployed executives’ feelings of social isolation. That said, in another study men who participated in social support networks they perceived were rooted in mutuality spoke positively about the networking process (Martella & Maass, 2000). In this study of unemployed adults, those who resided in Southern Italy, a more collectivist culture, coped more adaptively with job loss than adults from Northern Italy, a more individualistic culture. My finding nuances understanding of coping and job loss further by showing how older men in a more individualistic culture cope adaptively with job loss by engaging collectively with others. Although Rick summed up networking as “not what I look forward to” (line 4246), he valued the ways his networking group helped him sustain a creative approach to job search. Also, Ethan observed that his networking group’s core mission was for members “to help each other as much as possible” (line 6214). The mutuality that men in this study experienced promoted a sense of solidarity among network members, and this solidarity enhanced life satisfaction. In turn, life satisfaction promoted higher cognitive well-being that helped men make meaning of an unexpected life transition as they learned from others’ experiences with later-life job loss.

Men who coped adaptively with involuntary job loss used social supports to learn new job search strategies or entertain new directions in later life. Because many men expressed that a clear, forward trajectory to their lives following later-life job loss was fret with uncertainty, they benefited from opportunities to learn from and with others in ways that promoted higher levels of well-being. As a result, men in my study expressed optimism about the future and remained
open to new possibilities in their lives. Roger, Ian, and Chris all spoke highly of their experiences in a program that introduced seasoned professionals to employment opportunities in the non-profit sector. Roger also spoke of “learning different techniques for the job search, learning different ways of doing things” (lines 15008-15009) in this program. In his job networking group, Ethan valued “learn[ing] what other people are going through” (lines 6227-6228) as they contend with issues particular to older professionals in transition, such as managing perceived age bias in interviews. Hence, participants demonstrated a problem-focused, learning orientation to later-life job loss. Social supports positively influenced this learning orientation, and encouraged men to think more creatively about their circumstances. Creativity is central to positive meaning making (Langer, 2005), and this creative mindset reflects higher cognitive well-being.

Finally, men who coped adaptively with involuntary job loss self-regulated their roles in communities of support to optimize the perceived learning quality. Like many participants, Tim closely monitored how he co-created conditions for learning in his networking group, as he wanted to “walk away from these meetings knowing that I learned something, rather than standing around and handing out lots of business cards” (lines 15895-15897). Roger expressed frustration when he perceived that the “return” on his time in groups was weaker, especially from a learning perspective. Roger used a set of accountability metrics to assess how he managed his time to pursue job search-related goals, and he introduced his networking group members to this strategy, so that members of his group could help one another remain accountable to their respective job search goals. Rick self-regulated his engagement in his networking group by “rais[ing] the bar” (line 4059) and introducing his peers to innovative job search strategies when he perceived that the creative energy in this group waned. These examples illustrate that men
who cope adaptively with job loss self-regulate their contributions to communities of social support in ways that enhance the perceived learning quality in these groups.

As highlighted previously, my findings are in contrast to those obtained in other studies where individuals coped maladaptively with unexpected job loss. A qualitative study of unemployed executives (74% men) who lost jobs unexpectedly found that disruptions of social workplace contributed to men’s lower sense of self-worth and self-esteem (Feldman & Leana, 2000). In states of lower self-worth and self-esteem as found in this study, coupled with perceptions of social isolation found by Vickers and Parriss (2007), individuals are challenged to self-regulate their engagement with others and their learning in social contexts (Hoban & Hoban, 2004). My finding that men who coped adaptively with job loss self-regulated their participation in new social networks—to ensure that they learned something and that their participation was perceived as a worthwhile investment of their time—extends understanding of coping and job loss in that men who perceive social networks as beneficial become active participants in creating the learning conditions in these networks. Men who self-regulated their contributions to these groups demonstrated higher levels of cognitive well-being, which promoted adaptive coping and meaning making during their transition.

In sum, older, professional men who cope adaptively with involuntary job loss made use of social supports to help them learn through the uncertainties that accompany involuntary job loss. These learning relationships—grounded in mutuality and interdependence—promoted higher cognitive and affective well-being that supports adaptive coping. Men who coped adaptively engage in communities of mutuality, and strong, intimate relationships among members supported the perceived quality of learning in these groups. Men used social supports to learn new job search strategies and to explore new directions in their lives following job loss,
and this optimistic future outlook and positive response to a unexpected life challenge led to greater positive meaning making. By co-creating the learning conditions and perceived learning quality in these groups, men who coped adaptively self-regulated their contributions to these groups. Relationships of mutuality helped men cope adaptively with job loss in later life. These relationships promoted higher cognitive well-being, which led to creative meaning making and an openness to new opportunities after an unexpected life transition.

**Summary**

To cope adaptively with involuntary job loss, older, professional men demonstrate higher levels of cognitive well-being that promote a learning orientation to the uncertainties that accompany an unexpected life transition. This adaptive mindset—one characterized by creativity, curiosity, and connectivity—promotes “positive thinking,” a complex, nuanced way of meaning making. Men who cope adaptively—and, hence, make meaning by “thinking positively”—attend not only to job loss itself, but numerous related losses in their lives: time structure, perceived control, a “chapter” of their lives, and a set of social relationships. To attend to these losses and make meaning of this unexpected life transition, older, professional men use time to engage with their broader communities, and also to engage in personal introspection. Men also focus their attention on aspects of their lives they perceive they can control, thereby diminishing the impact of negative emotions on their well-being. They demonstrate an openness to new possibilities and directions in their lives, even if they may not necessarily understand what those new possibilities may require of them. Finally, men participate in social networks of mutuality that promote higher levels of well-being and diminish feelings of alienation that may accompany job loss in a competitive global economy. The adaptive mindset can be summed up as “thinking positively,” a type of meaning making that reflects higher levels of cognitive well-
being, and that also requires higher levels of self-regulation: of one’s time, of one’s emotions, and of one’s thoughts. This positive thinking promotes an openness to future possibilities, as well as an openness to others and to one’s self.

**Implications for Practice**

The conclusions of this study have implications for facilitators of adult learning who assist adults as they cope with involuntary job loss in later life. Because adults may be challenged to make optimal use of time outside the structure of employment, facilitators of adult learning can help adults learn to self-regulate their time use. Helping adults self-regulate time use following job loss may include broadening their sense of how time can be used to promote cognitive well-being. In addition to helping adults search for new employment, facilitators can encourage adults to explore other types of civic and social engagement in their communities, for this type of engagement not only creates value for the communities in which adults live, but also enhances the overall health and well-being of older adults (Morrow-Howell, Hinterlong, Rozario, & Tang, 2003; Thoits & Hewitt, 2001). Facilitators can also promote creative meaning making and responses among older adults coping with job loss by encouraging adults to “take play seriously” and engage in activities, such as art and music, that enhance imagination and support creative problem-solving (Goleman, Kaufman, & Ray, 1992).

Facilitators who assist adults as they learn their way through the uncertainties of job loss can provide learning supports and challenges that promote “positive thinking,” a rational, detached, and optimistic problem-solving perspective that requires emotional intelligence and self-regulation. Later-life, involuntary job loss is just one example of an unanticipated life transition that comprises the “hidden curriculum of life” (Kegan, 1998) in the early 21st century.
Adults who are coping with this transition make psychosocial adjustments to accommodate life changes (Rossiter, 2007a). Facilitators can help adults self-regulate their emotional responses to unanticipated life transitions by introducing adults to what Goleman (1995) calls “emotional intelligence,” or a sense of how emotions are created, how they can both hinder and enhance our learning, and how they can be regulated to facilitate creative problem-solving.

Because a strong sense of coherence and a “good, strong story” (Randall, 1996) promotes adaptive coping with job loss, facilitators can support adults who are coping with an unanticipated life transition by encouraging them to acknowledge and honor their storied lives as they explore new possible directions in their lives. Methods to do this include expressive and autobiographical writing, meaning making activities that help adults understand their lives as narratives constructed of numerous identities (Clark & Rossiter, 2008). Adults who recognize that their professional identity is one of many identities that comprise their beings are likely to explore other ways to make meaning in their lives. Rossiter (2007) highlights the value of enabling adults to consider “possible selves,” particularly in terms of career development. In a helping relationship with adults, facilitators can encourage adults to test out new possible selves in safe environments conducive to risk taking and exploration.

Because adults frequently display “grief-like” responses to unemployment (Archer & Rhodes, 1993, 1995) and job loss has been identified as the life event with the most detrimental effect on men’s psychological well-being (Iwasaki & Smale, 1998), facilitators can encourage older, professional men who experience job loss to engage in “grief work” as part of the coping process. This grief work can include space to acknowledge and discuss the loss of a lifeworld, as rapid changes in the global economy have challenged men to rethink how to obtain new jobs and even how to conceive of employment in an early 21st century economy. Attending to this grief
work in safe spaces will promote higher levels of affective well-being, which promotes cognitive well-being. Cognitive well-being, in turn, promotes openness and creativity required to entertain new directions and possible selves after job loss in later life.

Finally, facilitators can enable men to cope adaptively with job loss by designing learning contexts grounded in mutual social supports. Two qualitative studies of men coping with unemployment found that older age is a perceived barrier to building support systems following job loss (McDaniel, 2003; Ranzijn et al., 2006). That said, learning contexts grounded in mutuality can provide older men with opportunities to establish intimate relationships that promote a creative, problem-focused orientation to the uncertainties that accompany later-life job loss. Learning contexts can include structured gatherings for older men to discuss not only job search itself, but the broader experience of learning through the uncertainties that accompany the transition itself. Learning contexts can also include gathering spaces that allow men to engage in informal learning and leisure-based activities, as they simultaneously provide support for one another in later life (Carragher & Golding, 2015). The precarious nature of employment in the early 21st century may cause older men who lose their jobs to face a “conceptual emergency” (O’Hara, 2007) and feel unprepared about how to meet the demands of an unexpected life course transition. Thus, learning contexts grounded in mutuality will promote learning that eschews rugged individualism in favor of a rugged interdependence conducive to learning through uncertainty.

**Future Research**

This study offers a limited understanding of how older, professional men cope with involuntary job loss. The extent to which an individual copes adaptively will necessarily depend upon a wide range of life experiences particular to each man and the contexts in which his life
has unfolded. Although participants in this study were limited to men over age 50, most men in
this study were closer to traditional retirement age. A sample of younger (i.e., mid-career) men
who have experienced involuntary job loss may make meaning differently than men closer to
traditional retirement age, and future research can identify the relationship between age and
meaning making when men are faced with an unexpected life transition following involuntary
job loss.

Men in this study also fit a limited profile with respect to other identities that would help
nuance understanding of coping and job loss. All study participants were Caucasian and of
European descent, although a few participants were not first-generation American citizens. Also,
identity markers that cover a wide spectrum—including (but not limited to) class, ethnicity,
sexual orientation, and gender identity—were not taken into account during this study’s
recruitment or data analyses processes. Future studies that assess a wider range of participants
who speak to these various identities will enable facilitators of adult learning to better understand
how these identities influence coping with involuntary job loss.

This study included participants across a range of professions; it did not explore the
coping and meaning making of men who share a particular professional mindset or way of
knowing. The global financial crisis of 2007-08 had far-reaching implications for professionals
from a wide range of fields; however, certain industries—the financial services sector, to name
just one—suffered especially significant job losses. Future studies that explore how older men in
particular professions cope with involuntary job loss would help facilitators of adult learning
better appreciate the challenges that men from particular professional backgrounds face as they
cope with involuntary job loss.
Future studies can also take into consideration participants’ levels of developmental complexity. As indicated by their flexible and creative responses to their circumstances, men in my study demonstrated relatively high levels of cognitive well-being. According to Kegan (1982), adults with more complex ways of meaning making exhibit higher stages of developmental growth. Because developmentally mature adults interpret themselves and their worlds with more complexity (Hy & Loevinger, 1996), future studies that explore how adults of varying levels of developmental complexity cope with job loss would help adult learning facilitators design learning environments for adults at different developmental stages.

Finally, since coping with job loss can best be understood as a process (Kinicki et al., 2000; Vickers & Parriss, 2007), future studies should explore how older, professional men take action as they proceed with an unexpected life transition. The phenomenological methodology I used for this study is limited in its capacity to understand the coping process in its entirety, and a longitudinal case study methodology would help adult learning facilitators understand the ways that meaning making serves as the basis for subsequent action, such as men who undertake a more substantive, later-life career reinvention, or men who integrate part-time remunerated work into their later years. Coping with job loss can only be understood as a phenomenon that places in a particular sociohistorical context, and a more flexible orientation to work appears to be emerging for adults of all ages. Thus, future studies of older men coping with job loss can address this phenomenon further with longitudinal studies that examine how men cope with the uncertainties of an emerging, flexible culture of work in the early 21st century.

**Final Thoughts**

Motivated by the 2007-08 “mancession,” this study explored how older, professional men coped with involuntary job loss, and the role that learning played as part of this coping process.
Men in this study largely failed to describe their experience with job loss as any more challenging or disorienting because of their sex. Instead, men spoke much more about the flexibility and nimbleness that later-life job loss required of them as adults—regardless of sex or other identity markers—trying to make meaning of an unexpected life transition in a rapidly changing world. In a sense, this study highlights the type of flexible thinking required to meet the demands of a “gig economy,” as more adults of all backgrounds are challenged to think of themselves as “free agents” in an economy that offers fewer long-term “gigs.” Men in this study coped adaptively with later-life job loss largely because they chose to frame this life transition as an adaptive challenge that offered a learning opportunity, rather than as a problem that needed to be “fixed.” This learning orientation supported an adaptive mindset that promoted “positive thinking” (i.e., curious, creative, and connected), and men who coped adaptively with later-life job loss demonstrated this quality of thinking to make meaning in developmentally complex ways.

As an unprecedented aging boom unfolds globally over the next several decades, older adults who assume a learning orientation to job loss will be more likely to perceive their respective challenges as learning opportunities. A more age-integrated life course is emerging (Carstensen, 2009; Riley & Riley, 2000), such that work, education, and leisure are more integrated across the life course in ways that promote more sustainable responses to uneven population distributions. In “resetting the markers of aging” (Dychtwald, 2012), these responses will help us avoid “stuff(ing) a 21st century life span into a life course designed for the 20th century” (Freedman, 2011, p. 5). From an age-integrated life course perspective, older adults can be expected to work longer than they may have anticipated. Men in this study coped adaptively by remaining open to later life employment, even if they did not necessarily know
what type of work (or how much) that entailed. As we transition to an age-integrated life course, older adults who cope adaptively with job loss—and also with the loss of more traditional conceptions of “retirement”—will be more likely to “write new chapters” in their storied lives.

More broadly, the very culture of work itself is changing rapidly, and adults who cope adaptively with this change will be more likely to flourish in the future. In *The Human Condition* (1958), Hannah Arendt lamented that human beings in modern industrial societies have been conditioned to think of themselves primarily as laborers. Perhaps the global financial crisis has even offered adults a space to “collectively rethink the true meaning of the word ‘wealth’” (Berardi, 2009, p. 169). Men in this study coped adaptively with job loss by the very way they stood in relationship to work: their jobs offered them meaning in addition to a livelihood, but their jobs were not necessarily their exclusive domain for meaning making in their lives. As Chris shared in our final interview, “if you just have one way of seeing your life, that your work is your life, then [job loss is] going to be more difficult” (lines 12546-12547). As labor’s availability and reliability in the gig economy shifts, the extent to which labor serves as a meaning making domain in adults’ lives may shift as well. This study serves as a marker of the ways that adults can integrate meaning across multiple life domains to optimize “wealth” in meaning making.

This study of older, professional men coping with job loss can be summed up as a study of the human condition and its central role: meaning making (Frankl, 1959). In a culture in which one’s being is largely equated with one’s “doing” in the market economy, job loss can take on existential proportions: not simply the loss of a paycheck, but the loss of identity and meaning. Human beings, Fromm (1947) argued, are the only creatures for whom existence is a “problem,” and job loss in a culture that regards employment as the answer to this existential
problem takes on potentially grave dimensions. And yet herein lies a message central to this study. In *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Wittgenstein argued that, “the solution to the problem of life is to be seen in the disappearance of the problem” (Monk, 1990, p. 142). Men in this study coped adaptively because of how they came to understand job loss: not as a problem per se, but a situation that challenged them to make meaning differently. In short, these men offered a philosophic response to job loss that serves as a reminder of what adult learning pioneer Eduard Lindeman (1926) insisted was the ultimate goal of adult learning: to grow and to become.
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Press.


Washington, D. C.


Appendix A

Chart of Informants for Participant Recruitment

**Primary Tier of Key Informants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Role and Organization</th>
<th>Location</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>John Barry</td>
<td>Chief Organizer, Northern Fairfield Professionals (NFP)Networking Group; Newtown, CT</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter Kenny</td>
<td>Director &amp; Founder, The Good Works Project (Workplace Transition Group); East Windsor, CT</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ken Innocenzi</td>
<td>Chief Organizer, Shoreline Executive Networking Group; Madison, CT</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David Garvey</td>
<td>Director, Encore! Hartford; UConn School of Continuing Studies; Storrs, CT</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah Byrnes</td>
<td>Facilitator, New England Transition Towns Coalition; Boston, MA</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ken Innocenzi</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah Byrnes</td>
<td>Facilitator, New England Transition Towns Coalition; Boston, MA</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Secondary Tier of Key Informants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Role and Organization</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tom Bell</td>
<td>Chief Organizer, Darien Professionals Networking Group; Darien, CT</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharon Viveiros</td>
<td>Organizer, Friends of the Hartford Business Journal (HBJ)Network; Hartford, CT</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wayne Boulton</td>
<td>Facilitator, The Mankind Project ® (Hartford chapter); West Hartford, CT</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heather Guerette</td>
<td>Co-Coordinator, Axis 901 (co-working space); Manchester, CT</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tom Bell</td>
<td>Chief Organizer, Darien Professionals Networking Group; Darien, CT</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharon Viveiros</td>
<td>Organizer, Friends of the Hartford Business Journal (HBJ)Network; Hartford, CT</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wayne Boulton</td>
<td>Facilitator, The Mankind Project ® (Hartford chapter); West Hartford, CT</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heather Guerette</td>
<td>Co-Coordinator, Axis 901 (co-working space); Manchester, CT</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steve Yanicke</td>
<td>Co-Founder, MakeHartford (co-working space); Hartford, CT</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brian Jud</td>
<td>Lead Organizer, Farmington Valley Reemployment Group (FVRP); Avon, CT</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

My **primary tier of key informants** consists of individuals whom I have previously met. I have intentionally constructed a primary tier of key informants that reflects an equal distribution of individuals who work directly with adults in career transition, and those individuals who may know adults in career transition because of the nature of their work. My goal is to use a purposeful snowball sampling procedure that stems from this primary tier of key informants.

My **secondary tier of key informants** consists of individuals whom I have not met, but whose names have been recommended to me. As with my primary tier of key informants, this secondary tier reflects an equal distribution of individuals who work directly with adults in career transition, and those individuals who may know adults in career transition because of the nature of their work. I will make use of this secondary tier if I am unable to recruit a sufficient number of participants by relying solely on my primary tier of key informants.

I have email addresses and telephone numbers for all individuals listed in these charts.
Appendix B

Script to Informants

Dear <<Key Informant’s Name>>,  

By way of introduction, please let me take a moment to introduce myself and share my reason for writing you. I am a full-time faculty member with UConn’s School of Business, as well as a part-time doctoral student in UConn’s Adult Learning program in the Neag School of Education. For my dissertation, I plan to explore how older, professional men (i.e., 50 years of age and older with employment that requires a college degree) cope with involuntary job loss and learn from this experience.

My study will be a qualitative, interview-based study, and I anticipate that I will need about 10 participants for this study. To recruit these participants, I plan on using a “word of mouth” approach; in other words, once I identify one participant who fits the intended profile for my study, I’ll then ask him if he knows of other men who might also be interested in participating in this study.

Do you believe you might be able to help me get started in identifying potential participants? I would be able to meet at times and locations that are convenient for interested men who meet the profile for my study. For men who agree to participate, they can expect to be interviewed on 3 separate occasions, and each interview would take approximately 60-90 minutes. The interviews themselves would be spaced out across a 3-week period.

I would be more than happy to answer any questions you may have regarding my study and my present request. I can be reached at 860.406.1447. If you prefer to speak directly with my dissertation director, Dr. Sandy Bell, she can be reached at sandy.bell@uconn.edu.

Many thanks—
Brian Hentz, MBA, MA
Professional Writing and Managerial Communications, UConn School of Business
Ph.D. Program, Adult Learning, Neag School of Education (UConn)
860.406.1447
Appendix C

Initial Script to Potential Participants

Dear <<potential participant’s name>>,

By way of introduction, please let me take a moment to introduce myself and share my reason for writing. My name is Brian Hentz, and I am a full-time faculty member with UConn’s School of Business, as well as a Ph.D. candidate in Adult Learning with the Neag School of Education (UConn). For my dissertation, I am exploring how older, professional men cope with involuntary job loss, and <<key informant’s name>> has recently shared with me that you might qualify for this study.

Please consider participating in this study if you can answer “yes” to these 6 criteria:

1. You are 50 years of age or older;
2. You have earned a minimum of a bachelor’s degree;
3. Your recent job loss occurred in the past 5 years;
4. The job you lost was a salaried position;
5. You worked for this employer for a minimum of 5 years;
6. You are presently either (a) unemployed or (b) consider yourself underemployed (i.e., in your opinion, your present salary/wages and/or work tasks don’t match your qualifications and prior experience).

If you agree to participate in this study, I would ask you to meet with me on three separate occasions, so I may interview you about your experiences regarding your recent job loss. Each interview will last about 60-90 minutes, and with your permission, I will audiotape each interview. The interviews themselves will be scheduled about a week apart, so your involvement in this study will take about 3 weeks. Finally, I will gladly meet with you at times and places that are most convenient for you.

I assure you that both the information I collect and your identity will be treated confidentially. There are no known risks to your involvement in this study.

If you are interested in participating in this study or if you have further questions about this study, please email me at brian.hentz@business.uconn.edu or call me at 860.406.1447. After you contact me, I will send you an Informed Consent Form that outlines this study in full detail. Please note that your participation in the study will begin only after you have had a chance to review and sign the Informed Consent Form. Additionally, at this same time, I will ask if you know of other men who meet the study’s criteria and might be interested in participating in this study.

Many thanks—
Brian Hentz, MBA, MA
Professional Writing and Managerial Communications, UConn School of Business
Ph.D. Program, Adult Learning, Neag School of Education (UConn)
860.406.1447
Appendix D

Informed Consent Form for Participants

Consent Form for Participation in a Research Study

University of Connecticut

Principal Investigator: Dr. Sandy Bell
Student Researcher: Brian Hentz
Study Title: Learning Through Uncertainty: A Phenomenological Study of Older, Professional Men Coping with Involuntary Job Loss

Introduction

You are invited to participate in a research study designed to explore how older, professional men (i.e., 50 years of age and older whose employment required the completion of a bachelor’s degree) cope with involuntary job loss. The student researcher is conducting this study as part of the requirements for his Ph.D. degree in Adult Learning. He intends to use the findings to assist helping professionals as they work with adults coping with job loss in later life.

Why is this study being done?

This study investigates the ways in which older, professional men cope with involuntary job loss. Outcomes of this study will provide insight into the role that learning plays as men cope with this phenomenon.

What are the study procedures? What will I be asked to do?

As a participant in this study, you will be asked to complete three separate interviews with the researcher. Each interview will last approximately 60-90 minutes, and all interviews will be conducted within a 3-week period. The interviews will take place at a mutually agreed upon location and time. The researcher will request your permission to audio record these interviews, so that the recordings can be transcribed and capture the information that you share with him as accurately as possible. If at any point you feel uncomfortable during the interview process, feel free to say so, and the interviewer will immediately stop the recording, and/or the interview itself.

What are the risks or inconveniences of the study?

We believe there are no known risks associated with this research study; however, a possible inconvenience may be the time it takes to complete the interviews. Some of the questions ask you to reflect on experiences and challenges related to job loss, and you may feel emotionally uncomfortable when talking about these experiences and challenges. You can always choose not to respond to any questions that make you feel uncomfortable.

What are the benefits of the study?
You may not directly benefit from participating in this project; however, your participation will provide insight into experiences useful for professionals who help adults cope with job loss in later life.

**Will I receive payment for participation? Are there costs to participate?**

You will incur no cost as a result of your participation in this study.

**How will my personal information be protected?**

The following procedures will be used to protect the confidentiality of your data:

- I, the student researcher, will be the only one who listens to the recording of your interviews, and only I will transcribe the recordings to help me review the information you provide.
- I will keep confidential your identity in all reporting of information from the interviews. I will use a pseudonym instead of your real name.
- Your identity will be known only to me and to my advisor, Dr. Sandy Bell, while my advisor is responsible for the safe storage of the signed consent forms.
- I will keep the recording of the interviews in a safe location, and recordings will be accessible only to me. After I have completed analyzing the data from the interviews, I will destroy the recordings and any transcriptions.

You should also know that the UConn Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the Office of Research Compliance may inspect study records as part of its auditing program, but these reviews will only focus on the researchers and not on your responses or involvement. The IRB is a group of people who review research studies to protect the rights and welfare of research participants.

**Can I stop being in the study and what are my rights?**

You do not have to participate in this study if you do not want to. If you agree to participate, but later change your mind, you may drop out at any time; I will not use any information from the interviews, and I will destroy the recordings and any transcriptions. There are no penalties or consequences of any kind if you decide that you do not want to participate. In addition, during the interviews, you do not have to answer any questions that make you feel uncomfortable.

**Whom do I contact if I have questions about the study?**

Take as long as you like before you make a decision. We will be happy to answer any questions you have about this study. If you have further questions about this project, you may contact me, the student researcher, at brian.hentz@business.uconn.edu or 860.406.1447, or you may contact my advisor, Dr. Sandy Bell, at sandy.bell@uconn.edu or 860.486.0251. If you have any questions concerning your rights as a research subject, you may contact the University of Connecticut Institutional Review Board (IRB) at 860-486-8802.
**Documentation of Consent:**
I have read this form and decided that I will participate in the project described above. Its general purposes, the particulars of involvement and possible hazards and inconveniences have been explained to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw at any time. My signature also indicates that I have received a copy of this consent form.

____________________  __________________________  ___________________
Participant Signature:  Print Name:  Date:

____________________  __________________________  ___________________
Signature of Person Obtaining Consent  Print Name:  Date:
## Appendix E

### Study Timeline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Time Frame</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pilot of 3-Phase Interview Protocols</td>
<td>February-March, 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initial Email Communication with Primary Tier of Key Informants</td>
<td>June-July, 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initial Email Communication with Potential Participants</td>
<td>August, 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confirmation of Participants Recruited Through Primary Tier of Key Informants; Obtain Signed Informed Consent Forms</td>
<td>September, 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complete 3-Phase Interview with Initial Set of Participants (includes transcriptions, member checking)</td>
<td>September-October, 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitor Snowball Recruitment; Email Secondary Tier of Key Informants If Needed</td>
<td>October, 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complete 3-Phase Interview with Next Set of Participants (includes transcriptions, member checking)</td>
<td>October-November, 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complete 3-Phase Interview with Final Set of Participants (includes transcriptions, member checking)</td>
<td>November-December, 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mail Handwritten “Thank You” Notes to Participants, Key Informants</td>
<td>December, 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Analysis (in conjunction with EDLR 6052)</td>
<td>January-April, 2015</td>
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Appendix F

Interview 1 Protocol

Protocol for Interview 1: Establishing the Context for Participants’ Experience of Phenomenon

1. With respect to employment, at what point in your life did you gain a sense of what you wanted to initially pursue as a career?

2. What influences throughout your life helped you come to a decision upon an intended career path? What were the most important influences, and why? Any negative influences?

3. How would you describe your family background and upbringing? In what ways (if any) did they influence your career path?

4. How would you describe the neighborhoods and communities you grew up in? In what ways (if any) did they influence your career path?

5. To what extent (if any) have you changed career paths during your work life, and why? Please describe the required steps you needed to take to make that career transition.

6. Who or what have been rewarding and/or positive influences for you in your career (e.g., mentors, role models)? To what extent have these influences shaped your career and/or decisions you’ve made regarding your career? Have any individuals been particularly influential for you?

7. What have been some of the highlights of your career? Some of your key accomplishments?

8. What types of professional challenges have you experienced in your career? What made these situations challenges for you? What have you learned or gained from these challenges?

9. How would you describe the history of your work life? For example, has there been a more-or-less consistent “rise and rank” to your career? Or has there been perhaps another pattern to your work life that you could describe?

10. In general, how central would you say that your work has been to your identity, your sense of who you are? Would you say that this relationship of work to identity has been consistent throughout your life? Describe.

11. Have you had any prior experiences with unanticipated or involuntary job loss earlier in your career? Please describe your experiences with these losses. What did you learn from those experiences?
12. In what ways (if at all) would you say that your attitude towards work and career have changed as you’ve progressed throughout your life?

13. To close, I’m going to share 3 phrases with you and ask which phrase you identify with the most and why: “work, then live,” “live-to-work,” and “work-to-live.”

14. What has your career meant to you in the larger picture of life?

15. Is there anything else you wish to add? Any thoughts or life stories triggered by any of these questions?
Interview 2 Protocol

Inviting participants to reconstruct the details of their experiences within the context that these experiences occurred

1. At what point did you develop a sense that you might lose your job? How did you find out?

2. Please share with me how you were officially informed that you were losing your position. How did this process unfold?

3. What was your initial reaction to this event?

4. Did you find that your reaction to this event changed after a period of time? If so, how?

5. Were others in your organization affected as well? To what extent were you able to discuss your situation with them, especially to help you make sense of this event?

6. In what ways were things at home initially impacted as a result of this event?

7. In what ways were things at home impacted over time as a result of this event?

8. Have you found any types of family or social or professional supports (e.g., community networking groups, professional or career counselors) helpful since this event occurred? If so, how? What supports have been the most helpful, and why? The least helpful, and why?

9. What other types of supports have you found useful in coping with this event?

10. Did you search for another position after losing your job? Please share with me any types of job search strategies you’ve used to try and seek re-employment. What search strategies have been most helpful? Least helpful?

11. In what ways did this event influence your thinking about the way that you “get yourself out there,” so to speak, and present yourself on the job market?

12. In what ways have you sensed that your age as perceived by others—or your own sense of your age—has impacted any experiences you’ve had so far in coping with this event?

13. In what ways have you sensed that your age as perceived by others—or your own sense of your age—has impacted any experiences you’ve had so far in seeking reemployment?

14. As you look back, in what ways (if at all) do you think that your age may have contributed to this job loss?
15. Do you know of other men like yourself (i.e., professionals 50+ years with accrued expertise) who have lost their jobs since the global financial crisis? Have you learned anything from their experiences that influenced how you coped with your own job loss?

16. <<if applicable>> You mentioned in the first interview that this had been the only time you lost your job; in other words, you hadn’t had any prior experience in coping with job loss. In what ways (if at all) do you think not having these prior experiences has impacted your coping with this recent job loss?

17. <<if applicable>> You mentioned in the first interview that you had had prior spells with job loss. In what ways (if at all) did you find that you drew upon that prior experience in coping with this most recent job loss?

18. Research shows that, in previous economic downturns, adults with college degrees fared better than those without degrees in rebounding from job loss. In what ways do you find that that observation holds true for you, based on your experiences?

19. If someone with your age and experience suddenly found out that his position was being terminated, what advice would you give him?
Appendix H

Interview 3 Protocol

**Interview 3 Protocol:** *Encouraging participants to reflect upon the meaning their experience with this phenomenon holds for them*

1. When we met last time, I asked you if you had had any prior spells with job loss that were helpful for you as you dealt with this most recent event. More broadly, do you find that any prior experiences with loss—not just job loss, but any type of loss in life—were helpful for you in dealing with this recent job loss? If so, how?

2. I’m sure you’ve heard that phrase that “there’s a silver lining behind any cloud;” in other words, the idea that there is a positive side to negative situations. To what extent (if at all) can you relate to this idea, based on your recent experience with job loss?

3. Some researchers argue that the way we cope with job loss is similar to the ways we cope with the loss of loved ones. Based on your own experiences, to what extent (if at all) do you agree with this statement? Please explain.

4. *<<if applicable>>* To what extent has the type of work you’ve found—both with respect to the work itself and/or the salary you’re earning—been influenced by your experience with job loss?

5. *<<if applicable>>* To what extent is the type of work you’d be willing to accept—both with respect to the work itself and/or the salary you’d be willing to accept—been influenced by your experience with job loss?

6. To what extent do you have any concerns about future job loss? In what ways (if at all) are you doing things in your life to prepare for those possibilities?

7. Do you find that your future goals and expectations about work have been influenced by your recent job loss? Please share these goals and/or expectations.

8. What types of barriers (if any) have you experienced that you think might prevent you from reaching the goals you’ve set for yourself as you rebound from this job loss?

9. To what extent (if at all) are their times when you may slip into some negative thoughts as you move on from this event? Have you discovered ways to remain positive despite any setbacks you might experience? Please describe.

10. While anyone at any time may experience unanticipated job loss, please share what it has been like to cope with unanticipated job loss as an older, professional man.
11. As you look back on your life, in what ways (if at all) do you feel that you were prepared for this unanticipated life transition that some writers have called “too young to retire, too old to be rehired?”

12. Broadly stated, has your recent experience with job loss changed the way you think about work, or about the role of paid employment in your life? Please explain.

13. In what ways (if at all) has your recent experience with job loss changed the way you think about retirement?

14. Have you found yourself exploring or entertaining other ideas about your life—potential future directions—because of this event? If so, describe.

15. What have you learned from this experience?

16. What has been most helpful for you as you make meaning of this experience?

17. If you were to meet a younger version of yourself—say, a typical 20-something college senior about to graduate with an undergraduate degree—what professional and personal advice would you give that young man, based upon your own experiences with job loss in later life?

18. You may have heard the phrase “mancession” in the news over the past few years; this phrase has been used to capture the idea that the global financial crisis has impacted men—including older, professional men—as equally as any other demographic group. To what extent do you agree that being an older man—especially one with your level of formal education—is not necessarily a protection from future economic downturns?