A qualitative study of coping with unemployment

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A qualitative study of coping with unemployment

Abstract
Unemployment is among the largest stressors of adult life. There are many factors that help determine how people cope with unemployment, and several models have been developed to provide schema for understanding the coping strategies people use. In this qualitative study, in-depth individual interviews yield rich detail of how men who have been highly successful in their careers cope with unemployment. The participants offer unique perspectives on their common experience. The concept of self-determinism provides a useful framework for understanding the coping behavior of the participants and for the absence of reported distress.

Keywords
Education, Guidance and Counseling, Psychology, Clinical

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A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF COPING WITH UNEMPLOYMENT

BY

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THESIS

Submitted to the University of New Hampshire
in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts
in
Counseling

May, 2009
UMI Number: 1466920

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my wife, Fran, whose steadfast support and encouragement gave me the freedom to give up the career I had outgrown and the opportunity to find a different path.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to the participants in the study, whose candor provided rich, human detail to this work. I am also grateful to Dr. David Parker of Washington University in St. Louis for introducing me to the concept of self-determination. Thank you to Randy Schroeder and Dr. Loan Phan, members of my thesis committee, for their insights and their support in my coursework as well as in this project. Finally, I am indebted to Dr. David Hebert, the chair of my thesis committee and a wise and wonderful teacher, who helped me to see this work from a fresh perspective and taught me about the power that lies in helping people tell their stories.
ABSTRACT

A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF COPING WITH UNEMPLOYMENT

By

Mark Baddeley

University of New Hampshire, May, 2009

Unemployment is among the largest stressors of adult life. There are many factors that help determine how people cope with unemployment, and several models have been developed to provide schema for understanding the coping strategies people use. In this qualitative study, in-depth individual interviews yield rich detail of how men who have been highly successful in their careers cope with unemployment. The participants offer unique perspectives on their common experience. The concept of self-determinism provides a useful framework for understanding the coping behavior of the participants and for the absence of reported distress.
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INTRODUCTION

I know that there is nothing better for them than to rejoice and to do good in one's lifetime; moreover, that every man who eats and drinks sees good in all his labor--it is the gift of God.

Ecclesiastes 3:12-13

But there is ample evidence that work can be enjoyable, and that indeed, it is often the most enjoyable part of life.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

Never work just for money or for power. They won't save your soul or help you sleep at night.

Marian Wright Edelman

The jobs we do are much more than a way to provide for ourselves and our families. In the current U.S. culture, the work we do is an important factor in how we see ourselves. In most social situations, what we do for work is among the first things we exchange with new acquaintances: teacher, engineer, plumber, builder, driver, therapist. Work dominates our time, and is the source and site of many of our relationships with other people. The challenges work places before us and our ability to meet those challenges can be a primary source of our feelings of competence and self-worth when we are successful, and of the opposite effect when we are not successful. Work and our place in it provide us with an opportunity to learn new skills, to be rewarded for growing
capabilities and to measure ourselves against other people and against our self-perceptions.

In addition to giving us the means to buy food, clothing and shelter, work can define much of our sense of who we are and where we belong in the social order. Involuntary loss of a job may be among the largest stressors adults can face. The ability to cope with the loss of employment, the ability to adjust and move toward future employment, is important for the affected individuals, for those who depend upon them, and for the communities in which they live.

Being at midlife, between the ages of 45 and 65, exacerbates the effects of job loss. At midlife, individuals are more likely than younger workers to have responsibilities for others - aging parents, spouses, college-age children, grandchildren - that make the economic consequences of job loss more threatening. Midlife workers who have been in their field for a long time are also likely to earn more than their younger counterparts in similar positions, and are thus likely to find comparable re-employment in that field more difficult. Midlife is also a time when workers begin to seriously contemplate retirement. Job loss at this stage can be particularly disheartening, as the financial changes can cause retirement planning to abruptly become re-employment planning.

Coping is “a response aimed at diminishing the physical, emotional and psychological burden that is linked to stressful life events and daily hassles” (Snyder & Dinoff, p. 5). Coping behavior comprises our appraisal of the threat posed by an external event and the thoughts and actions we take to protect our well-being. Broadly, coping skills have been divided between active and avoidant, and between task-focused and emotional. According to Holahan and Moos (1987), active coping strategies, whether
problem-focused or emotional, are thought to be better ways to deal with stressful events, and avoidant coping strategies appear to increase the risk of adverse responses to stressful life events. The COPE inventory developed by Carver, Scheier, and Weintraub (1989) provides a more granular look at the strategies people employ in response to stressful events. The authors divide the strategies into problem-focused responses (active coping, planning, restraint coping, suppression of competing activities, seeking instrumental social support), emotion-focused responses (seeking emotional social support, positive reinterpretation, acceptance, denial, religion) and avoidant responses (focus on and venting of emotions, behavioral disengagement, emotional disengagement).

According to the United States Department of Labor (USDL), during the period from January, 2002 through December, 2005, more than 8.1 million workers were displaced from their jobs. The USDL defines displaced workers as “persons 20 years of age and older who lost or left jobs because their plant or company closed or moved, there was insufficient work for them to do, or their position or shift was abolished.” In that three year period, more than 3.8 million people were displaced from jobs they had held for more than three years; an additional 4.3 million people were displaced from jobs they had held for less than three years. In other words, 8.1 million people lost their jobs involuntarily. Recent data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (http://www.bls.gov/news.release/) paints a bleaker picture. In the year between March, 2008 and February, 2009, non-farm unemployment rose from 4.8 percent to 8.1 percent of the workforce. The number of unemployed people rose from 7.5 million to 12.5 million. Forbes Magazine has a “layoff tracker” on its website (www.forbes.com) that details layoffs at the 500 largest publicly traded U.S. companies; from November, 2008
through March 27, 2009, there were 524,801 people laid off by the most visible American firms. The details showed layoffs in virtually every sector: banking, finance, technology, manufacturing, retailing, durable goods, chemicals and pharmaceuticals.

Stressful situations and events are an unavoidable fact of life. Our public schools, sometimes unintentionally, present children with an age-appropriate array of stress-inducing situations. Children who will be successful in school learn which coping skills serve them and which ones are maladaptive. Children who don’t learn useful coping strategies are more likely to have difficulty in school, and also in overcoming obstacles later in life.

Public policy to alleviate the stress of job loss includes an amalgam of job placement, job training and unemployment assistance. However, the extent of assistance varies widely from state to state and with the type of job or industry. Providing a more uniform “safety net” of services to displaced workers across industries could provide a way to engage in more active, productive coping behavior for people whose own coping skills are inadequate to the stress.

Avoidant coping strategies have been shown to be predictive of less desirable health outcomes. Through the lens of coping, spousal and child abuse can be seen as evidence of emotion-venting behavior. Depression is another way to see behavioral and emotional disengagement. Therapy and education to enhance coping skills in adults could lead to an increased sense of control over the stresses life brings, and to a reduction in maladaptive coping and non-desirable behavior. Public money would be better spent on developing and enhancing the coping skills of individuals and families than on dealing with the behaviors that accrue from a lack of ability to cope with the stresses of life.
CHAPTER 1

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Work occupies a central place in our lives, or at least consumes a great deal of our time. The advent of cellular phones and personal digital assistants has extended the reach of work. “Out of the office” no longer means out of touch. Social and economic changes have made “the two-parent, single-wage-earner family...a statistical rarity” (Halpern, 2005, p. 398). Outsourcing and downsizing decisions have made the perception of job security obsolete for many occupations. Dooley, Rook and Catalano (1987) proposed an array of job stressors, including workload increases, trouble with a boss or associate and business failure, of which “unemployment is just one undesirable economic event among a cluster of ... stressors” (p. 115). Indeed, as Koeber (2002) reports in a case study of downsizing at IBM and Link in Endicott, New York, sometimes being in the workplace can be more stressful than the prospect of unemployment: it may be that the only condition more stressful than having and maintaining a job is losing one.

Involuntary Job Loss

Many studies have reported the negative effects of job loss on psychological and physical well-being. Linn et al (1985) assessed the effects of involuntary unemployment on the mental and physical health of 30 middle-aged men who became unemployed during a larger study on the effects of stress on physical health. The unemployed men reported more sick days and more physician visits, and had “more symptoms of somatization, depression, and anxiety after the experience than those who continued to
work” (Linn et al., p. 503). In a study of semi-skilled and unskilled unemployed men, Warr and Jackson (1984) found strong correlations between the length of unemployment, financial strain and general health changes.

There are many negative impacts of involuntary job loss. Studies have shown lowered self-esteem (Guindon & Smith, 2002; Ranzijn et al., 2006), depression and anxiety (Guindon & Smith, 2002; Gallo et al., 2005). Ranzijn et al. (2006) and McDaniel (2003) found reports of reduced quality of life, narrowed scope of opportunity, negative effects on family relationships and increased concerns about the future. McDaniel (2003) related an anecdote in which a person related that he will remember 2001 for the attacks on the World Trade Center and the loss of his job, and that the loss of his job made him feel worse. Hayhoe (2006) used the language and stages of grief (denial, guilt, loss and loneliness, immobilization) in recommending how to guide families of the unemployed through their transition.

New terminology has been coined to describe the changed relationship between workers and their employers. Down-sizing, restructuring, displacements, reduction in force, even “right-sizing”, have found their way into our discourse. No matter how we try to soften the blow of involuntary unemployment by using these terms, it remains an emotionally powerful and frequently painful experience for the affected individuals. Reactions and responses to job loss cover a wide range of emotions, and the more central to life one’s work is, the more painful the loss can be (Hayhoe, 2002).

According to Koeber (2002), long-established, paternalistic attitudes of employers toward their employees have given way to “market-mediated relations” (p. 231). When workers’ fortunes were tied to the company’s, layoffs were understood to be a function of
business conditions. In the current economy, job loss may just as likely come when the company is doing well as not. In that event, all of the usual concomitants of unemployment exist, along with feelings of betrayal and anger and the fear of being obsolete. "Workers' experiences of downsizing, displacement and employment change were not simply, nor even primarily, associated with job loss, but were characterized by significant departure from objective conditions and subjective meanings of work and being workers" (Koeber, 2002, p. 217).

Job Loss and Well-Being

If meaningful work can be a source of psychological and physical well-being, it follows intuitively that the loss of employment can be detrimental to psychological and physical well-being. In a meta-analysis of research on well-being during unemployment, McKee-Ryan et al. (2005) found more than 100 variables that were correlated with well-being during unemployment, which they grouped under five main categories: work-role centrality, coping resources, cognitive appraisal, coping strategies, and human capital and demographics. The five categories form a constellation of variables that contribute to psychological and physical well-being during unemployment.

Work-role centrality is an indication of "the general importance of the work role to an individual's sense of self" (p. 56). People with high work-role centrality rely on their work for meaning and fulfillment in their lives.

Coping resources refers to the personal, social and financial aids a person can utilize to offset the negative effects of unemployment. Personal resources refer to internal constructs from self-esteem and emotional stability to self-efficacy and locus of control. McKee-Ryan et al. grouped these similar constructs under "core self-
evaluations” (p. 57). The more control an unemployed individual feels over his/her environment and emotions, the lower the impact of unemployment on psychological and physical well-being. In a longitudinal study of unemployed auto workers, Hamilton et al. (1993) found depressive symptoms both resulting from unemployment and contributing to continuing unemployment. *Social* resources are positive social interactions with family and friends. Being part of a social group can soften the blow of unemployment by providing a sense of support and continuity and serve as a mediator for the stress of unemployment. *Financial* resources include income from a spouse or other family member, savings or other liquid assets, unemployment compensation and severance pay. The link between financial resources and perceived well-being is strong because “possessing financial resources improves access to other important resources” (Hamilton et al., p. 57).

*Cognitive appraisal* describes the variability in individual perception of job loss. According to McKee-Ryan and Kinicki, (2004) “...the personal meaning of job loss to the individual displaced worker plays a critical role in coping behavior” (p. A2). Bennett et al. (1995) found that problem-focused coping behaviors were correlated with the perceived intensity of emotions after a layoff and negatively correlated with the degree of self-blame reported by laid-off individuals.

*Coping strategies* are the efforts an individual uses to manage the impact of stressful events or situations, particularly those that are beyond the capability of standard thoughts or behaviors to manage. Coping strategies are usually divided between problem-focused and emotion-focused thoughts and behaviors. In the case of job loss, they also include job search efforts.
"Human capital is the productive potential of an individual’s knowledge and actions" (Bartlett & Ghosal, MIT Sloan Management Review, 2002, cited in McKee-Ryan et al., 2005, p. 58). Education level and occupation are aspects of human capital, which works to influence cognitive appraisal of job loss and subsequent job-searching behavior.

The results of the McKee-Ryan et al. (2005) meta-analysis showed a negative correlation between work-role centrality and mental health, supporting the hypothesis that individuals whose work is closely related to their sense of self will be more negatively impacted by unemployment than those for whom work-role centrality is lower. Positive correlations were found between coping resources and mental health during unemployment, both for coping resources as a group and as separate variables (personal, social and financial). Cognitive appraisal of the stress of unemployment was negatively correlated with mental health, and positive reemployment expectations indicated better mental health. Among coping strategies, job-searching behavior was negatively associated with mental health, reflecting the discouragement that necessarily follows a search for work. Interestingly, both problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies were positively associated with mental health.

**Coping With Job Loss**

The wealth of literature on coping makes it necessary and possible to restrict this discussion to studies of coping with job loss. Several studies have attempted to assess the impact of interventions on coping behavior. Vuori and Silvonen (2005) found that participants in a group job search program, an example of problem-focused coping, were more likely to be re-employed and less likely to exhibit depressive symptoms at a two-year follow-up than their counterparts who did not participate in the program. Caplan et
al. (1989) reported higher motivation to continue a job search and higher quality re-employment among those who participated in job-seeking training coupled with behavior modeling and positive reinforcement compared to a control group. Vinokur and Schul (2002) found that the intensity of job search behavior was correlated with re-employment, and that depressive symptoms decreased the extent and quality of re-employment by impeding job-seeking behavior.

A host of internal and external factors before and after involuntary job loss influence coping behavior in response to the loss. In one study, Crowley, Hayslip and Hobdy (2003) found that psychological hardiness (marked by higher levels of belief in one’s ability to control the environment, greater commitment to the task at hand and a predisposition to see change as opportunity) correlated with greater use of coping strategies such as problem-solving and positive reappraisal. There are also a number of perspectives from which models have been formulated to explain the range of coping behaviors. Following is a detailed summary of a representative sample of those models.

Leana and Feldman (1988) posited a cognitive model of job loss as a basis for further research. In their model, the affected individual appraises the loss, considering causality (Was the termination my fault or not?), reversibility (Is the layoff temporary?), and intensity (How stressful is the loss of the job?). The cognitive appraisal combines with the level of emotional arousal caused by the displacement to form a response peculiar to the job loss. Personality attributes, particularly level of self-esteem and locus of control, and external forces, including general economic conditions and the level of social support, are proposed as moderators of the cognitive appraisal and emotional arousal. All together, these factors influence coping strategies. Coping strategies in this
model are categorized as active, palliative or stress prevention. The outcomes of the coping strategies are limited to satisfactory re-employment, continued unemployment or under-employment, and these outcomes are hypothesized to affect the individual’s job attitudes, general health, and the quality of family and social relations.

Kinicki and Latack (1990) proposed a 20-item scale, the Coping with Job Loss Scale (CWJLS). The CWJLS separates the 20 items (e.g., remind myself that a job isn’t everything) into 5 situation-specific coping scales: Proactive Search, Nonwork Organization, Positive Self-Assessment, Distancing from Job Loss and Job Devaluation. Proactive Search (PS) includes activities that are directly related to finding employment. Nonwork Organization (NO) comprises maintenance activities, such as working on ways to save money, which keep one busy but are not directly related to finding a job. Positive Self-Assessment (PSA) includes thinking about one’s skills and qualifications, and looking for ways to apply them. Distancing from Job Loss (DFL) includes avoiding thinking about unemployment and reminding oneself that losing a job is not the end of the world. Job Devaluation (JD) downplays the importance of having a job relative to other things in life. These categories were grouped into control or problem-focused coping strategies (PS, NO, and PSA) and escape coping strategies (DFL, JD). The researchers found support for their idea that people utilize multiple coping mechanisms concurrently, and that coping changes over time.

Latack, Kinicki and Prussia (1995) proposed a process model of coping with job loss. Their model posits that the displaced individual perceives a loss of equilibrium in one or more of four life facets: financial, social, psychological and physiological. Individuals use coping strategies to regain and maintain equilibrium in the aspects of
their lives that are disrupted by the job loss. After termination, an individual appraises the impact of the job loss on those four life aspects and identifies a “coping goal” (e.g., a new job which will provide a living wage, a social outlet and meaningful work). Moderated and informed by the person’s sense of coping efficacy and the coping resources available, the appraisal leads to a group of coping behaviors. The results of the behaviors are in turn appraised, and help to determine further coping behaviors. The process is re-iterative, continuing until equilibrium (previous levels or revised levels) is restored. In addition, some of the parts of the process are reciprocal, with the outcome of one process re-invoking the preceding process (e.g., coping strategy outcome can reinvoke cognitive appraisal). This model has the advantage of considering outcomes other than re-employment (staying home, working part-time, etc.); a loss in financial equilibrium can be offset by a gain in the social or psychological facets.

Thomson (1997) posited an attributional model of coping with job loss, in which coping strategies should be predictable based on the individual’s perception of the cause of the job loss. The three dimensions of causality Thomson hypothesizes are locus of causality (internal vs. external), stability of causality (the degree to which the cause remains constant over time) and globality (whether the cause is specific to the current situation or is generalized over a wide range of situations). Thomson’s model may well be useful in a limited way as a predictor of coping strategies. However, though the model is grounded in theory, he fails to cite research that supports his model. Despite the more narrow focus of Thomson’s model compared with the others cited here, there is little additional light shed on how people cope with involuntary unemployment.
McKee-Ryan, Wu and Kinicki (2004) proposed a life-facet model of coping with job loss, which they hope will be useful in specifying relationships between the antecedents and outcomes of coping. In this model, coping strategies are separated according to seven life facets. Psychological coping addresses how one thinks and feels about oneself. Physical health coping deals with general health or symptoms. Sense of purpose coping relates to the displaced worker’s purpose in life. Spiritual coping centers on one’s relationship with or connection to a greater power. Daily routine coping addresses the structure and order to daily life. Financial coping deals with the level of income or ability to pay bills. Social coping focuses on relationships with others or social networks. Although the results of the authors’ study involving laid-off government workers supported the constructs proposed, there would need to be additional research done to confirm the utility of the model in explaining coping strategies in response to job loss.

Gowan and Gatewood (1997) propose a cognitive model that extends the Leana and Feldman (1988) model by incorporating both positive and negative outcomes, and by dividing the outcomes into short- and long-term ones. In their model, cognitive appraisal includes perceived fairness of termination (Bennett et al., 1995) in addition to the concepts of reversibility, causality and intensity from the Leana and Feldman model. Gowan and Gatewood’s coping strategies include symptom-focused coping, which refers to “attempts by the individual to decrease the negative consequences of job loss by engaging in social, avocational, and community service activities” (p. 287). Symptom-focused coping can be either positive or negative, and differs from problem- and emotion-focused coping in that it is neither directed at solving nor re-defining the
problem. The short-term effects in the Gowan and Gatewood model are re-employment and a decrease in the negative psychological effects of unemployment. The long-term effects are similar to the life facets in the Latack, Kinicki and Prussia (1995) model, although Gowan and Gatewood use well-being in place of equilibrium, and leave out the financial facet.

Gowan, Riordan and Gatewood (1999) used the foregoing model as a framework to study the effects of involuntary unemployment. Summarized, their model hypothesizes that availability of coping resources influences and informs cognitive appraisal and coping strategies; that cognitive appraisal and coping strategies are reciprocal influences; that the immediate outcomes of the coping behaviors are related to re-employment and an increase or decrease in distress; and that long-term outcomes are to maximize physical, social and psychological well-being. In the 1999 study of 202 displaced airline employees, the researchers assessed three coping resources (education, social support, financial resources) and their impact on cognitive appraisal, specifically the level of perceived reversibility. They also gathered data on the relationship between the coping resources and the coping strategies of job search, distancing, and engagement in non-work activities, and on the relationship between cognitive appraisal and the same three coping strategies. Finally, the authors examined the relationship between job search activities, distancing and non-work activities and the model's short-term outcomes: levels of distress (negative reaction to the job loss) and re-employment.

The results of the study supported the continued use of the authors' cognitive model of coping with job loss. Gowan, Riordan and Gatewood (1999) surveyed employees displaced by the closing of Eastern Airlines. Questionnaires were completed
approximately 4 months after the closing, and again 6 months later. The authors found significant relationships between coping resources and cognitive appraisal (education and reversibility); between cognitive appraisal and coping strategies (reversibility and distancing); between coping resources and coping strategies (education, social support, and financial resources with job search and non-work activities; social support with distancing); between the coping strategies of distancing and non-work activities and level of distress; and between distancing and satisfactory re-employment.

Nearly as important as what correlations Gowan et al. found were the elements of their study that were not significantly correlated. There was no correlation between the coping resources of social support and financial resources, and the cognitive appraisal of reversibility. Neither was there a correlation between education or financial resources and the emotion-focused coping strategy of distancing. Reversibility was not correlated with job search or non-work activities. Perhaps most surprising was the lack of correlation between job-seeking coping and satisfactory re-employment. The lack of correlation among these diverse variables leaves much work to be done to further understanding of Gowan, Riordan and Gatewood's model.

**Self-Determination**

In the last quarter of the twentieth century, educators grappled with what happened to students with disabilities when their formal schooling ended. The interventions and supports that were helping these students to have successful academic careers were not translating into successful transitions to independent adulthood. A consensus emerged that the educational interventions were not fostering self-determination, the "ability to define and achieve goals based on a foundation of knowing
and valuing oneself” (Field & Hoffman, 1994, p. 164) Legislation followed (The Individuals With Disabilities Act of 1990, the Rehabilitation Act Amendments of 1992) that affirmed the right of persons with disabilities to live independently and enjoy self-determination, and required transition services to be defined in the Individualized Education Program for all students with disabilities once they reach the age of 16. The model of self-determination proposed by Field and Hoffman (1994) was aimed at furthering the discussion about self-determination and students with disabilities, but it also provides a useful framework for thinking about coping successfully with unemployment.

In the Field and Hoffman (1994) model, self-determination is defined as “the ability to define and achieve goals based on a foundation of knowing and valuing oneself” (p. 164). The model proposes five components of self-determination: Know Yourself, Value Yourself, Plan, Act and Experience Outcomes. Self-determination is “promoted, or discouraged, by factors within the individual’s control (e.g., values, knowledge and skills) and variables that are environmental in nature (e.g., opportunities for choice-making, attitudes of others).” (Field & Hoffman, 1994, p. 164)

The quantitative literature on coping with unemployment attempts to show what coping behaviors are likely to occur, what factors influence coping behavior, and assesses the effectiveness of various coping strategies. Quantitative approaches, however, are not sufficient to understand the individuals who are affected by the loss of a job. This qualitative study was undertaken to improve that understanding by detailing how some individuals cope with unemployment.
CHAPTER II

PROCEDURES OF THE STUDY

Individuals were recruited for this study through a private outplacement company in Burlington, Massachusetts, and through personal contacts of the researcher. The individuals who were contacted by an employee of the outplacement firm were given an informed consent document (Appendix 2) and contacted by the researcher after indicating their willingness to participate. The other individuals were contacted directly by the researcher. Because each participant was to be interviewed for approximately 90 minutes, they were offered their choice of a $25 Home Depot gift card or a contribution to the charity of their choice in the same amount.

A list of prompting questions (Appendix 4) were prepared to provide some structure to the interviews, but also as prompts to help the participants tell their stories as completely as possible. In-depth individual interviews were conducted with each participant. The interviews were audio-recorded, and those recordings were transcribed verbatim. After the transcriptions were completed, the audio recordings were erased. The transcriptions were reviewed to extract common themes as well as the unique experiences of each participant. Since the use of names is necessary for clarity, pseudonyms have been used to protect the anonymity of the participants.
The participants had much in common. All were college-educated, White men. All were married, suburban, fathers of children and active to varying degrees in their communities. All had reached managerial, executive or senior technical positions in the companies for which they worked, and had earned salaries in excess of $90,000 per year. All had been employed for the majority of their adult lives, with little interruption. And all had been terminated by their employers within the last year at the time of the interview.

The statistics about unemployment through the first quarter of 2009 give some idea about the magnitude of the current economic downturn. The personal reality of being unemployed cannot be expressed in numbers. There is a story for each of the people whose lives have been impacted by becoming one of those numbers. Without hearing their stories, it is possible to draw one’s own conclusions about all those individuals, but it is not possible to understand them. This project was undertaken to record the narratives of real people trying to cope with the consequences of unemployment. It was expected that there would be value and meaning in the stories these men told.

The news media in the second half of 2008 and the first quarter of 2009 have provided us with a flood of articles and features about people becoming unemployed. Each medium has limitations: television can provide snippets of coverage on news programs, but little in-depth analysis; print and web news need to be compelling and pithy, or readers won’t
engage. The result is that most of the coverage has been pathos, arousing our emotions, but leaving us without much of a clue about how individuals cope with unemployment. What follows is a glimpse of how the participants lost their jobs and how they felt and acted in the aftermath, largely in their own words.

The Layoff

All of the participants were laid off by their employers between August and December of 2008. Employers are constrained by legal requirements, ethical responsibilities to their employees, and responsibilities to their shareholders to conduct terminations within certain boundaries. The degree of compassion with which the layoff is communicated can make a difference not only to the affected individual, but also to those who remain employed with the company. Because it can be a life-changing event for the person being laid off, communicating with an employee who is being laid off can be an anxiety-provoking task for a manager. Several of the participants talked about how awkward their managers were when delivering the news. Human resource departments, wary of the potential for lawsuits to be brought by dismissed employees, carefully craft the message to be delivered, and urge their managers to deliver it verbatim. Participants reflected on the way in which the layoff was communicated Was it consistent for the participants, and was there any resentment or bitterness about the manner in which their termination was handled?

Larry, a vice president at a large regional bank, saw the layoff coming, and reported that he was more anxious in the six weeks prior to the layoff than he was immediately following the event. “So in January, I found out I was one of the lucky 15%. They had consolidated offices ... and had decided that my two assistants and I ... were
going to be terminated. Wasn’t really a rhyme or reason that they would explain … except that they figured they would handle the business with fewer people.”

Paul, a vice president of engineering at a high tech manufacturing company, related that his most recent layoff was handled awkwardly. He had to leave the premises immediately, and the company required that he leave everything, including his cell phone. “… that, to me, is a pretty inhuman way to operate with somebody who’s worked with you all those years.” The president and a Human Resources representative delivered the news, and they worked directly from a script. “I was reporting to a guy who lived in Sweden [who] was helpful after the event, making it a little easier to leave with some grace … management disappointed me … They just followed the instructions, and that’s the way things work these days.” In hindsight, he thought the company had been trying to ease him out for several months, hoping that he would leave of his own accord. Paul was irritated that they hadn’t approached him about it, and believed they could have worked out a mutually agreeable ending that wouldn’t have cost the company any more than the layoff did.

Harold came back to his director’s position at a financial services company from a long weekend with his family in Florida, knowing that the layoffs were happening the day he returned. He talked with a co-worker, trying to learn if anything had happened while he was away, and then, “… at five minutes of nine, I saw my boss’ number flash on my phone, and I knew that was it. The interesting part was, I handled it better than she did…she was just babbling. She had this script, I knew what was going on …” The reasons provided were the same as those Larry had heard, that it was a result of the economic downturn, and not a result of performance. Harold was given the chance to stay
in the office for three days, to tie up any loose ends and say goodbye to colleagues. He appreciated the opportunity, because it showed him that the company saw him as a person as well as an employee.

George worked as a vice president in a different office of the same company as Harold. On the day of the layoff George had been in group meetings all day. George returned to his office and found his desk festooned with Post-It notes from his boss’ administrator, letting him know that his boss wanted to see him at 4:30. "I wandered back to my office at a quarter to five, found the notes, and walked down to his office... I could tell right away he was nervous and uncomfortable. What I found funny was that I had been there 22 years, and the gentleman was giving me this script. 'I kept looking at him and the script, and thinking, 'You're not helping me.' He tried to tell me he understood my feelings, what I was going through. And at the end of the conversation, he said, ‘I just want to point out to you that the firm and I really appreciate everything you’ve done for us.'"

Ted was working for a mortgage company when he was laid off. He had been working in the mortgage industry for about five years, after a lengthy and successful career in the computer manufacturing industry. Prior to being laid off, he had been exploring the possibility of working in the alternative energy field, and the layoff pushed him to make the change. "I had known for a while that the mortgage business wasn’t really my forte... I really wanted to be doing something different... toward the end of the day, the manager called me in and said they were letting me go.”

For Ted and Paul, this layoff was not the first they had experienced. Ted had worked for a large manufacturing company and a financial services company, each of
which had handled layoffs in a very different way. His manager at the manufacturing company had warned him that layoffs were coming, giving Ted time to find another job within the company. The financial services company laid Ted off without warning, and escorted him from the building. That day happened to be his wedding anniversary, which made the company’s brusque, dispassionate style all the more jarring. The prior layoff Paul had experienced was the most heartless of any that were described. Paul had been laid off while he was recuperating from an auto accident, and was forced to bring a lawsuit to gain the compensation he was due.

**Warning Signs**

As long as there are options available, knowledge that a change is coming can allow preparation for the change. From simple transitions like the change of seasons to larger, more complex ones like going away to college or getting married, preparing for the change can make the transition easier. When knowledge or suspicion exists that being laid off is a possibility, is there any preparation that can be done? Does foreknowledge or suspicion soften the blow when it comes?

Most of the participants knew that layoffs were a possibility, because they were in positions of responsibility for company performance and for other employees. They were privy to details of their companies’ performance that gave them reason to fear, and their responsibility was to keep working hard and encourage their direct reports to do the same.

George had a strong indication that there would be layoffs. “Everybody knew it was coming, the firm had been struggling to communicate …” In fact, on the day he was laid off, he had been having meetings with groups of employees, and had to answer their
concerns about layoffs. He told them, “Right now, I know nothing. But I can tell you that whatever happens, the reflection is that it’s not you. It’s basically a restructuring ...” In his position, George needed to put his own worries aside to provide a calm voice to his subordinates.

Paul was working on new product opportunities, “the sort of thing they can always postpone.” However, he didn’t see the layoff coming, and it caught him by surprise. Paul’s experience was similar to most of the other participants’ in that regard. When you’ve been successful in a career, the thought that you might be targeted is hard to imagine. “I saw it as a possibility, but I wasn’t quite expecting it.”

Larry spent six weeks fretting about the looming change, and at least partially convinced that he might be a target. “I was never concerned too much, even with economies coming and going over all those years. But things at [the company] were getting pretty bleak at the end of last year. There had been a lot of changes in the past two years that made me feel like I wasn’t really in the center of attention anymore ... I lost more sleep in December, when I knew that there might be a layoff after the first of the year. I would wake up at four rather than five, and that last hour was lost because I’d start thinking about stuff.” As with other participants, Larry’s first concern was the financial impact of a layoff, and he realized that he and his family could manage for a while if he did lose his job.

Harold had strong suspicions that layoffs were imminent. His wife is employed by the same firm in human resources. Between them, they had a significant network within the company, and they trusted some of the rumors they heard. “… when the layoff talk started happening earlier this year, they had a layoff in [another location] in June, and my
wife’s boss was laid off. That hit pretty close to home. So, in your mind, you’re always thinking, ‘OK, what am I going to do if I get laid off?’”

Ted was the one participant who was fairly certain that he would be laid off. “They had requirements in terms of how much business you were bringing in. I knew I wasn’t meeting those goals … it wasn’t totally unexpected or out of the blue.” Not coincidentally, Ted was also the one participant who had been planning and acting to blunt the impact of the layoff. “I got some exposure in that field [alternative energy] … so when they decided to let me go, I was really ready to make a jump, to make a career change.”

Assigning Responsibility

As difficult as it is to accept the news that one’s job is gone, being able to blame external factors for the layoff can be an important factor in coping with unemployment effectively. Being laid off forces consideration of a career from a new perspective, but putting the blame on factors beyond one’s control can help make that perspective tolerable. Believing that job performance was not a factor in the layoff removes a significant obstacle from the search for a new position; managers put a high value on confidence and self-assurance in prospective employees.

Paul had been through layoffs before, and he was able to put the blame on the company’s fortunes and the state of the economy almost immediately. “I’ve been in management myself, been on the opposite side of the desk, having to let guys go. I can see the rationale behind it, so that helps a lot. It’s not … anything against me necessarily, just business as usual. I was working on creating new business, new product opportunities, the sort of thing they can always postpone. They tend to be the first ones
picked.” Paul articulated the need to put the responsibility on external forces. “You have to get to say that it wasn’t about me … the difficulty finding a new job doing the same work sort of reinforces the blow [to your self-esteem] if you’re not careful.”

George had been promoted to a new position within two years of the layoff, and was in a position that allowed him to see that changes in the company were inevitable. “I had just moved to a new position within the firm about a year and a half ago … I was the new guy on the block, I was new in my position … when they did the restructuring, it was, ‘OK, where were we two or three years ago, and can we make the organization go back there?’” George reported receiving calls and e-mails from former associates who couldn’t believe that he was being let go. “… some of the leaders I respected were reaching out … They worked harder at reinforcing the message that it’s not about you, it’s the way the business is.”

Harold was also able to point to external forces rather than his performance. “There was all kinds of conjecture. My boss said she had nothing to do with who was chosen. It was done at a high level. There were rumors that an outside service was used, but it was obvious that salaries and length of service were targeted. From that perspective, you feel like you got caught in this random thing.”

Larry had been laid off for the first time in his career, and he admitted to feeling somewhat embarrassed by it. Along with two of the other participants, he reported that he had been callous in his thinking when he heard about layoffs in other companies. It had been easy for Larry to dismiss other people losing their jobs as a result of poor performance. When his turn came, he wondered about why he was let go instead of somebody else, and questioned his recent job performance. “…you do sort of feel like
your best wasn’t good enough.” On reflection, Larry was able to put more of the onus of responsibility on the state of the economy and his company’s need to bring costs in line with their revenue. “…it’s so widespread right now. If I had been let go at the height of things, that would have felt different, more my fault.”

_Scarlet Letter?_

On April 28, 1966, Ronald Reagan, then the governor of California, was quoted in The Sacramento Bee as saying, “Unemployment insurance is a pre-paid vacation for freeloaders”. (Retrieved from www.geocities.com/thereaganyears/reaganquotes.htm on March 23, 2009) Perhaps spending the latter years of the Great Depression in Hollywood altered Mr. Reagan’s perspective. That harsh statement represents the extreme of the point of view that jobless people are to blame for their joblessness. In a robust economy, when jobs are being created, it is easier to be judgmental about individuals who lose their jobs. Companies sometimes _do_ use layoffs to weed out poor performers. However, in the economic climate of the first quarter of 2009, layoffs were commonplace. Many people had a friend or neighbor who had been affected. Did the participants in this study feel stigmatized by being laid off?

Harold knew too many people who had been laid off at some point in their careers for him to feel any stigma from his own layoff. His brother, who lives in another state, was laid off on the same day Harold was. “It’s interesting, because it’s so ubiquitous; it’s not like a scarlet letter or anything like that. In this neighborhood the guy across the street was laid off, the guy up the street said he’d been laid off three times in his career.”

Harold needed to get life insurance, because he had previously been covered only by his company’s benefits package. During the course of a phone conversation with an
insurance company representative, he was asked what his job was. When he replied that
he was unemployed, the representative asked him about his prospects. "I have a great
severance package, but now I’m unemployed, so now you’re labeled as that. It’s not like
you’re a non-person or anything, but unless you’re paying cash... That’s when it kind of
hit me... They tell you in outplacement, watch out how you treat this stuff. Don’t use the
term laid off, stuff like that. I’m not ashamed of it, but the whole life insurance thing kind
of put it in perspective."

Of all the study participants, Larry was the only one who reported feeling
diminished by the layoff. He was more hesitant than the others about spreading the news,
even though outplacement advice starts with telling everybody you know that you’re
looking for work. He said, “... you kind of feel embarrassed a little bit. And you feel like
everyone else is uncomfortable... You want to keep your head down, you don’t know
how people are going to react; I think the embarrassment is self-inflicted.”

Paul had experienced being laid off twice before, and believed that it was an
accepted fact of life in high technology. He said that “it’s very common for the
companies you work for to not last too long: get acquired, go out of business...” Paul saw
being laid off as part of the price to be paid in exchange for working on new technology.
Despite that, Paul knew that there were times and situations that required him to withhold
the fact of his being laid off. “I think it was more if I had a chance for an interview or a
telephone interview, I would generally not volunteer that I was out of work unless they’d
ask...” Paul also mentioned that the prevalence of layoffs was both a help and a
hindrance; helpful for the psyche, but it also means increased competition for the jobs
that become available. “It sort of helps and hurts, to know that other people are in the
same situation. It's much more common these days. I don't think it's seen as a stigma, like it might have been in the past."

George reported that he was much more at ease with being laid off than some of the people he told about it. He described two ways people responded. One was an overdose of sympathy: "...it's almost like you have cancer. People feel sorry for you, they talk to you like you're dying." The other unwelcome response was one that George likened to wanting to "see what a train wreck looks like up close". He had an interview for a different job with the firm that had laid him off. The hiring manager spent most of the interview trying to get details about the severance package, and then trying to convince George that the job was beneath his capabilities. "We spent more time talking about did you get a good severance, how does the severance work, what else did they give you in the package?"

With layoffs so commonplace, there is less of a stigma about being unemployed. That is not to diminish the impact of unemployment, but it is easier to cope with being laid off if shame about losing a job can be minimized

**Filling the Time**

When one is working full-time, there are periods when time away from work can be very appealing. Holidays and vacations can be like an oasis. However, because work takes up so much of our time, the routine that work provides can become something to be relied upon. What happens when that structure is suddenly removed? How do people who were fully engaged in their work handle the surfeit of unstructured time? Study participants used various means to give order to their days once they became unemployed.
Larry has found more time to spend with his family. When he was working, he saw his family mostly over dinner. He also continues to do the volunteer and church work he did while he was employed. “Having a church ... and the volunteer work to do, that’s very important for me.” Larry also goes to the gym regularly, has lunch with his daughter at school a couple times a week, and stays in touch with his network over coffee or lunch. “I try very hard to keep a schedule during the day. I don’t sleep in; I’m up between 5 and 6 normally. What I don’t like is a day that stretches ahead of me with nothing scheduled.”

Harold has also been spending additional time with his daughter and catching up with people and relationships that he didn’t have time for when he was working full-time. He has found that the outplacement services provide some of the structure that was lost along with his work. “I do struggle with, after outplacement is over, what then? I like to go into the office; sitting at home there are too many distractions... you have the interaction with people there. If you sit at home by yourself all day, the mind does funny things.”

Paul has had a couple of part-time jobs in the time since he was laid off, one of them with H & R Block, working on income taxes. He spends his time on his hobbies and family, and reported enjoying his free time. “Having the freedom to do things when you want to do them is a major advantage. I’ve not run out of things to do. It’s been a good indication of what retirement might be like, and it’s pretty good, actually.”

George spoke most directly about adjusting to the lack of requirements on his time. “The first day was the weirdest, because I remember coming home that day, and thinking, ‘What do I do now?’ I started work when I was 14, different odd jobs, you don’t realize how much of your life is a schedule. Get up at six every morning, get in the car by
a quarter after seven, at work by a quarter after eight, leave by a quarter to six, home by a quarter to seven, and you do that day in and day out. For vacations and things like that, you can plan around it, and you’re ready for it [lack of scheduled activity]. When it just comes at you like that, it was odd.”

In the absence of a workday routine, George has devised his own. “I get up in the morning and I take the kids to school. I check the alerts that I have set up in the different places. I do a little looking at the jobs they have there. If something catches my eye, I mark it to follow up on, potential targets. I postpone the Y now, I go down on the treadmill, exercise for probably an hour and a half. I check e-mail one more time, grab something to eat, then start writing thank you notes, making phone calls or at least applying out to some of these jobs. About three o’clock, I go pick up the kids and bring them home. Then more thank you notes, phone calls or doing research on some of these companies I’m interested in. I prep for the next day, and then about 5 I knock off. The kids go to bed about 9:30, and about 10:00, I’ll log back on and finish anything I was doing. I’ll either go to bed around midnight, or…What I’ve learned, this is going to sound funny, but Monster and CareerBuilders usually send out alerts about 12:30. InDeed usually hits about 10:00 in the morning, Dice usually shows up at about 7 AM. So, if I’m in the mood or I’ve stayed up late enough, I’ll check them before I go to bed. It’s almost routine now; it varies, but that’s the basic routine. Sometimes I’ll go have coffee with someone, but once you have a sense of purpose … I finally recognized that my job is to find a job.”
Work-Role Centrality

Work-role centrality (McKee-Ryan et al., 2005) refers to the relative importance work has in defining one’s identity. The McKee-Ryan et al. study found that as reliance on the work-role for identity increased, reported levels of mental health decreased after a layoff. The study participants had worked at their careers for many years. One could expect that the jobs they held were a large part of their self-concept. If work was central to their self image, being laid off could have been a terrible blow. How significant was work to their identity?

Ted had dealt with a couple of layoffs, and could have been expected to have kept work at the periphery of his identity. That expectation was borne out. Ted said, “You need to have more than your work. You need to have a life that isn’t tied to your job: family, hobbies, other interests, because work can be taken away in a heartbeat. If all your identity and self-worth is tied up in your work, you can be in serious trouble.”

Larry has a host of interests that help to define who he is. He is very involved in being a father to his teenage children and does a lot of volunteer work. Larry is also active in his church and in a couple of community music organizations. While his work was important to him, it was not central to his identity. “Most people think of me as a banker, but that’s just a piece of who I am...I don’t think I define my whole self-worth by what I did for a living, at least I hope not.”

Harold told people when he left that he would be fine, in part because he didn’t define himself by his job. After he had been out of work for a while, he refined that position. While his position at the firm was not central to his identity, he discovered that being employed was. “A lot of people you meet for the first time, they introduce
themselves as the VP of Development at XYZ Company, and that was something I never really defined myself as. A comment I made to one of my employees when I left, I said, ‘I don’t define myself by my job; I don’t walk around saying I’m a Director…’. What I learned after was that I do define myself as having a job. This part of not having a job, that’s the part that really threw me for a loop.”

**Time for a Change?**

The layoff can provide a period of self-assessment and reflection. Assessing one’s attributes and desires for future employment is necessary preparation for conducting a job search. Even those who are fully committed to doing the same sort of work they did before being laid off give some thought to what they have achieved. Once accomplishments have been counted do they measure up against long-held dreams? Is the work still fulfilling and intrinsically rewarding, or has one been working only for a paycheck? Is there a better way to make a living, perhaps one that would bring greater satisfaction?

Harold was openly questioning whether he wanted to find new employment in the corporate world, something he would not have done while he was employed. When he talked with people who were still working at his old firm, he recoiled in shock. “The projects haven’t really been cut back, they’ve lost people, they’re going crazy. I was talking to my wife, why would I crawl to get back to that … I’ve been on enough death marches in my life to know exactly what that is. I wouldn’t want to get back to that.” Harold is looking at employment opportunities carefully, quite sure that he doesn’t want to return to the same sort of work he was doing when he was laid off. He has looked at photography and non-profit jobs. Harold wants to do work that feeds his soul as well as
providing a paycheck. "The corporate grind has become a cliché. Is there something I could be passionate about?"

Larry had been thinking about doing something else with the balance of his working life before he was laid off. Even though he considered that the work he was doing was worthwhile, something was tugging at him, and suggesting that he could do more. "... the thing that I'd been kicking around before, for at least a year, was ... I'd done so much not-for-profit volunteering work, I'm good at relationship management and estate planning ideas, helping families plan for the future. Something like planned giving for a college or prep school, or a hospital or museum, always sounded like something I would enjoy doing ... being mission-driven rather than just paycheck driven."

Paul has thought about alternatives more broadly than the other participants. He actually got trained by H & R Block as a tax preparer, and has made some attempts to get into the education field. "According to the government, there's a dearth of engineers and mathematicians who teach. I thought it would be easy to get some sort of teaching job ... It was much harder to break into than I would have thought." Paul has also considered bringing his software skills up to date, since software engineering jobs seem to be more available than others. "I'm fairly certain with the right software qualifications, I could get work, more of the consulting variety."

Ted actually did switch careers, not the first time he has done so. He was laid off by a computer company more than ten years ago, and went to work in the information technology section of a large insurance company. When that job ended, he became a loan originator with a mortgage company. But "the company just closed, shut their doors. I had known for a while that the mortgage business really wasn't my forte. When that had
happened, I went to the unemployment office, and said that I really wanted to be doing something different. I did some work in energy efficiency, alternative energy ... that was a field I would be interested in getting into. But as I started doing the research, I realized it was going to take a while to do what I wanted to do in that area and I really couldn’t afford to be on unemployment for an extended period.”

Ted spent six months with another mortgage company, paying the bills but not at all happy in his work. “I got another job doing mortgages, and at the same time started getting involved in some other groups, doing some other things. I got some exposure in that field ... when I was let go, I was really ready to make a change ... So it really wasn’t a big deal when they decided to let me go, I wasn’t making that much money anyway. I got home, and sent an e-mail off to the unemployment office, to the retraining group I had started talking with before. I said, ‘I’m coming back, and this time, I’m going to make a change.’” The retraining group at the state Office of Employment Security worked with Ted to approve and fund a week-long training program in another state. He found the company he wanted to work for at a conference, and met the president. “I sent them a resume, and within a week, they offered to send me for training that they were willing to pay for if I went to work for them.” Ted took the training, and made a successful transition to a new career.

**Sharing the News**

One of the most difficult things the participants had to do was to tell their families and friends that they were no longer working. Sharing the news required the participants to admit to an event that could cast them in an unfavorable light, and to trust that the people they were telling would respond in a compassionate, caring way. Each of the men
reported thoughts and emotions that were uniquely his own, and each went about informing those closest to him in slightly different ways.

George reported that he delayed telling his wife immediately, because he didn’t want to spoil a rare night out for her. “... it was awkward, because my wife had worked there for ten years ... she was going out with friends that she used to work with, and I knew what the topic was going to be. Sure enough, she came home and asked me, ‘Aren’t you worried about tomorrow, you may have to let people go?’ And I said, ‘No, I don’t have to, because, basically ... I don’t have to because they let me go today.’”

Larry’s immediate concern was for the emotional impact on his family. One of his children had been in treatment for a serious illness in the months before he was laid off, and there was still a great deal of concern for her health. His layoff felt like one more brick on an already heavy load. He said, “… my feeling was: how am I going to make my wife and the kids not worry about this? I came home and told my wife before the kids were home. ‘I feel badly about this, but I think we’re going to be OK, I really do. And the same thing with the kids, I said, ‘Things are going to be OK. We’re luckier than 95% of the world to begin with.’ I think more than anything, showing that I wasn’t all beat up about it, that I wasn’t going to go off the deep end or start lying around in my sweats unshaven, or, you know, uproot everybody and move to Cuyahoga or something.”

Paul had been through layoffs before, and saw layoffs as part of the reality in high technology jobs. “I told my friends straightaway. I don’t think I hung back from sharing it.”

Harold had never been laid off, and had worked for the same firm since graduating from college. He expressed the least open attitude about spreading the news of
his job loss, possibly reflecting the time he needed to fully process the event for himself. In his words, “... my brother got laid off the same day I did. I didn’t tell my mother for a week. I called her up and broke the news, and she said ‘Oh my God, [your brother] got laid off, too’. My wife has not told her family, she’s down with our daughter for a visit. She hasn’t told them, her mother is going to be too stressed over it.”

**Reading the News**

In the economic recession of 2008, the news media provided a daily litany of doom and gloom that made maintaining a positive attitude difficult. If it wasn’t the media that made it necessary for the study participants to guard against pessimism about job prospects, there were always friends and neighbors to continue the conversation. The economy was the major topic of conversation for many months. Having been laid off personalized the bad economic news for the study participants. Was there a temptation to avoid the news altogether?

Paul’s reaction was just the opposite. Instead of trying to distance himself from the news, he found that his free time allowed him to immerse himself in it. “I’m a news junkie. I think I’ve been around long enough to be able to take this with a certain grain of salt. Nobody’s really an expert, but if you listen to enough, you can get a sense of what’s true and what is not. I like to understand it well enough that I can make the right personal decisions.”

Harold summed up the group’s attempts not to be deflated by the media. “The [Boston] Globe is the worst thing to read, at least one front-page story about it every day. But that’s the challenge, I think. You can read the statistics, but you’re living it.”
However, even though he was careful to monitor his consumption of the news, Harold
reported, “Some days, it just gets to you.”

Sources of Support

Social support from family and friends can make a huge difference in how people
respond to job loss. Love and support can help one feel that unemployment can be
endured. Each of the participants had relatively strong networks for support, especially
from their immediate families.

Larry made it clear that his support networks were of vital importance to him. He
said, “I just don’t know how people who don’t have a network of relationships … I don’t
really have a lot of close friends, just a few; my family is my main network. But I have a
really broad network of people who know me and think well of me, and that I think well
of and can call on. It’s important to be in Rotary, the church; it doesn’t have to be at the
center of your existence, but it should be an important part of your life. I just don’t know
how people in this world who are not connected like that manage, especially when
something like this happens. I don’t want to go on-line, I want to sit down and talk to
people … I want to have a real network of people I can talk to. I wouldn’t survive
without it.”

Harold looked to his outplacement services as a source of support, and noted, “I
look at what I will do from the middle of June when I don’t have outplacement services
anymore. Right now, it’s my focus; I see a lot of the people I used to work with.” Harold
also talked about connecting with people he had gone to school with, and about seeking
out networking groups that met near where he lived. He is also using Internet resources
such as LinkedIn and Facebook to expand his network of contacts and support.
George related the experience of people seeking him out to provide support. He said, "There were people, some of the leaders I respected, reaching out: 'Are you OK, what do you need, what do you want to do?'" George also respected the value of networking as a way to stay engaged in his job. He noted, "It gets you up and out, and stops you from focusing inward. The whole concept of networking, mentally and economically, it's a great thing to apply to this process, it's a great thing for your mental state."
CHAPTER IV

DISCUSSION

The in-depth interviewing that was done for this study elicited stories from the participants which provided rich detail about the variety of ways the individuals were coping with their unemployment. There were some common threads in their experiences that are instructive to an understanding of how coping behaviors are selected and employed. The participants talked openly about becoming and being unemployed, on topics ranging from finances and family life to self-perception and self-worth.

A review of the literature found many negative impacts of involuntary job loss. Studies have shown lowered self-esteem (Guindon and Smith, 2002; Ranzijn et al 2006), depression and anxiety (Guindon and Smith, 2002; Gallo et al, 2005). Ranzijn et al (2006) and McDaniel (2003) found reports of reduced quality of life, narrowed scope of opportunity, negative effects on family relationships and increased concerns about the future. McDaniel (2003) relates an anecdote in which a person relates that he will remember 2001 for the attacks on the World Trade Center and the loss of his job, and that the loss of his job made him feel worse. Hayhoe (2006) uses the language and stages of grief (denial, guilt, loss and loneliness, immobilization) in recommending how to guide families of the unemployed through their transition.

The negative consequences from studies in scholarly journals, and the emphasis on sad stories of the effects on people’s lives from the popular media were not supported by the stories told by the participants in this study. Rather than reporting psychic wounds
and the efforts required to heal them, the participants were philosophical about their loss of work, and optimistic on balance about their prospects for the future. One way to understand the absence of hurt and anger was to consider that the participants were highly self-determined.

In the Field and Hoffman model (1994) which was mentioned in the literature review, the five elements of self-determination were posited to be Know Yourself, Value Yourself, Plan, Act and Experience Outcomes. Following is a brief description of those elements as they pertain to coping with unemployment.

Know Yourself refers to the degree to which the individual is aware of his or her strengths, weaknesses and needs. In the context of coping with unemployment, each of the participants took stock of their skills and considered what they wanted from future employment. Each of them wrote or revised a resume that presented their skills in a way that would be attractive to potential employers. They contemplated acquiring new skills or refreshing their knowledge of ones they already had. They took courses to broaden the scope of work they were qualified to do, and considered new career paths. Knowing oneself is a necessary foundation of acting in self-determining ways.

Value Yourself refers to self-esteem and self-acceptance, believing in oneself and your right to pursue goals of your own choosing. It is the affect that results from the self-assessment in Know Yourself, an attitude of accepting and valuing one’s strengths and weaknesses. Value Yourself interacts in a reciprocal way with Know Yourself. Valuing oneself in a meaningful way requires self-knowledge. Valuing oneself promotes an honest assessment of one’s abilities and needs.
Plan and Act are categories of skills required to behave in a self-determined way. Planning involves goal-setting and determining a series of steps that should lead to the desired end. For the study participants, planning comprised setting schedules for contacting companies and individuals, for attending workshops, finding avenues to additional training, and establishing electronic links to job-search websites and networking groups. Each of the participants displayed a high degree of planning behavior. They mapped out schedules for meetings over coffee or lunch. They planned networking meetings and scheduled times to check on web-based job searches. They determined what additional training would be needed to make a career change, and planned to do research into alternative areas of employment.

Acting implies carrying out those activities, some of which may require a degree of risk-taking, that are planned in pursuit of a chosen goal. The ability to communicate one's goals, negotiate with others who may be involved, take advantage of available resources, and persevere when obstacles are encountered are components of the Act portion of the model of self-determination. Again, each of the participants reported carrying out their planned activities. Each made use of the resources available: outplacement services, networking groups, internet job search sites, family and friends. They reported persistence, detailing their struggles to overcome the news media's portrait of unemployment and the failure of some of their actions to yield tangible results.

The component that completes Field and Hoffman's model of self-determination is Experience Outcomes and Learn. "Any effort taken toward self-determination provides the opportunity to help an individual learn to become more self-determined." (Field and Hoffman, 1994, p 167) After planning and acting, one evaluates the results and can use
the results to modify future plans and actions. The base of self-knowledge and self-
valuing can be strengthened by temporary setbacks as well as by successes, provided that
the setbacks are not perceived to be catastrophic. Indeed, a strong foundation of self-
knowledge and self-esteem should enable one to roll with most of the punches
encountered. The process is iterative; most of the struggles the participants admitted were
in learning what actions were ineffective and adopting new strategies. The participants
discovered that some of the traditional tools they had used in previous job searches,
particularly headhunters and unsolicited applications, were no longer available or
effective. They worked on trying new tactics that would give them a chance for
conversation with people who might have a job to offer. When they learned that job fairs
had lost their utility, they vowed not to waste any more time with them. Outplacement
services were a mixed blessing. The services provided seminars and opportunities for
networking, but the one-on-one sessions with a consultant were too frequent to be of
benefit.
CHAPTER V

SUMMARY

In 2009, companies that have dominated the landscape of American commerce and industry for decades are failing. The tools that can lead to future employment are changing as well. The ability to plan and act from a foundation of self-knowledge and self-worth, and to adapt future plans in the light of the results of one’s actions, is especially important for job-seeking in a changing world.

There is a substantial body of literature on coping with unemployment, and several useful models have been proposed to categorize coping behavior in response to job loss. In this qualitative study, self-determination provided a useful lens for examining coping behavior in response to job loss. The study participants’ own words spoke of their high degree of self-determination. Believing that they could influence their environment by their actions led each to actively and confidently pursue further employment.

Looking at their lives from a longer perspective increases the utility of self-determination as a framework for the experience of unemployment. Each of the participants had been successful: in school and college, in making friends, raising a family and establishing social networks, and in their careers before being laid off. Their lives had not been free of difficulty, but they had established a sense of confidence in their ability to overcome obstacles that came between them and their goals. Their experience of life was that they could manage, or at least maneuver through, the challenges that life presented.


04-Dec-2008

Badeley, Mark
Education, Morrill Hall
37 Elk Drive
Bedford, NH 03110

IRB #: 4437
Study: Socioeconomic Status and Involuntary Unemployment: Appraisal, Coping and Subjective Well-Being
Approval Date: 03-Dec-2008

The Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research (IRB) has reviewed and approved the protocol for your study as Exempt as described in Title 45, Code of Federal Regulations (CFR), Part 46, Subsection 101(b) with the following comment(s):

1. At the DES site where the meeting is mandatory for anyone seeking unemployment benefits, the researcher needs to ensure that potential participants know that participation in the study is voluntary and is not connected to the provision of unemployment benefits.

Researchers who conduct studies involving human subjects have responsibilities as outlined in the attached document, Responsibilities of Directors of Research Studies Involving Human Subjects. (This document is also available at http://www.unh.edu/osr/compliance/irb.html.) Please read this document carefully before commencing your work involving human subjects.

Upon completion of your study, please complete the enclosed Exempt Study Final Report form and return it to this office along with a report of your findings.

If you have questions or concerns about your study or this approval, please feel free to contact me at 603-862-2003 or Julie.simson@unh.edu. Please refer to the IRB # above in all correspondence related to this study. The IRB wishes you success with your research.

For the IRB,
Julie F. Simpson
Manager

cc: File
   Hebert, David
Factors in Successfully Coping with Involuntary Unemployment

Investigator: Mark Baddeley, M.Ed.

Background: I am doing research for a Master’s degree in Counseling at the University of New Hampshire in Durham. My faculty advisor is Dr. David Hebert. The purpose of the study is to look at the ways people respond to involuntary job loss, and to identify the factors that contribute to successful re-employment. Participants in the study are being selected because they are or have recently been unemployed as a result of involuntary layoff or firing.

Procedure: The investigator will select 6 participants from the group of individuals who indicate their willingness to participate in the study. Participants will be contacted by the investigator. Each participant will be interviewed for approximately 90 minutes by the investigator. The interview will be audio recorded.

The results of this study will be based on the interviews that the researcher has with each participant. Audio tapes will be transcribed verbatim, allowing the researcher to examine them in detail. The researcher will use significant statements made by each participant and draw out common themes and ideas among the interviews. Common themes will be explored to extend these individual experiences to the wider population in general. Access to the recordings and the transcripts will be strictly limited to the researcher and his faculty advisor. Following transcription, the audio tapes will be destroyed.

There are no anticipated risks from participating in the study. It is hoped that the research will improve understanding of the factors that contribute to successful coping with unemployment.

Each participant who completes the interview will be offered a Home Depot gift card or a contribution to the charity of their choice, each option in the amount of 25 dollars.

Voluntary Participation: Participating in this study is voluntary. You may stop at any time without penalty. You may also decline to answer any of the researcher’s questions, without penalty.

Who to Contact for Research Related Questions: For questions about the research, contact the researcher, Mark Baddeley, at 603-714-0677 or at mbaddeley@comcast.net, or the faculty advisor, Dr. David Hebert, at dj.hebert@unh.edu

Who to Contact Regarding Your Rights as a Participant: If you have questions about your rights as a participant, please contact the Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects Protection at 603-862-2003.

I understand the foregoing, and am willing to participate in this study.

Signed ______________________________ Date ____________________
Thank you for your participation in this study. The focus of the study is a better understanding of how people cope with the stress of involuntary unemployment.

Involuntary loss of a job is among the largest stressors adults can face. The ability to cope with the loss of employment, the ability to adjust and move toward future employment, is important for the affected individuals, for those who depend upon them, and for the communities in which they live.

This is a qualitative study. Our goal is to capture the unique experiences of individuals who are coping with involuntary unemployment. Qualitative research is a methodical, subjective approach which examines life experiences and attempts to give them meaning. The results of this study will be based on the interviews that the researcher has with each participant. Audio tapes will be transcribed verbatim, allowing the researcher to examine them in detail. The researcher will use significant statements made by each participant and draw out common themes and ideas among the interviews. Common themes will be explored to extend these individual experiences to the wider population in general.

The confidentiality of your identity and interview is of the utmost importance. All interviews will be anonymous; a pseudonym will be used in the written thesis to protect your identity; and your identity will never be revealed. Access to the audio tapes and transcriptions will be strictly limited to the researcher and his faculty adviser. Once the audio tapes have been transcribed, they will be destroyed. If you have further questions about this research, please contact the principal researcher, Mark Baddeley, via e-mail at mae52@unh.edu.

Sometimes when people are asked to think and talk about their own lives, they feel a need to talk further with someone about their thoughts. There are many places you can go to do just that. Here are the names and phone numbers and/or websites of some nearby resources:

Northstar Guidance Center    978-256-0667
d www.northstarguidanceinc.com
Chelmsford Family Counseling Center    978-251-7806
d www.chelmsfordfamilycounselingcenter.com
Family Associates of Merrimack Valley    978-256-1467
d www.familyassociates.org
SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Describe the experience of losing your job.

Other than this event, have you experienced any significant life stressors (loss of a loved one or relationship, or significant failure)? How did you respond to that event?

Who have been your primary supports during this time?

Describe your feelings during this time.

What has been most difficult about the experience?

What was the first thing you did after becoming unemployed?

How did you tell your family, and what were their reactions?

Describe the process of telling friends or other relatives.

When and how did you find out you were being let go?

Tell me about some of the thoughts you had in the first week.

Have there been benefits to being unemployed?

Has your role in your family changed? Describe.

Have you been able to discuss your feelings? If so, with whom?

Have there been changes in your behavior since the event?

How have your thoughts about being unemployed changed?