

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

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

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**Abstract:** This phenomenological study explores the meaning that older, professional men make as they cope with involuntary job loss, and describes how men cope adaptively with this unexpected life transition.

**Keywords:** adaptive change, transitional learning, adult development, gerontology

The global financial crisis has caused scores of professionals to experience job loss. In stark contrast to prior downturns, a large number of professional men—especially those over age 50 whose employment requires a 4-year college degree—lost jobs (Rampell, 2009). Dubbed the “mancession” (Marin & Dokoupil, 2011), the phenomenon reflects the relative novelty of professional men losing jobs with such frequency.

Forced, involuntary job loss can trigger a major life transition, and coping adaptively with a major life transition can challenge adults to make meaning of their circumstances. Because learning is an integral part of making meaning of lived experiences (Jarvis, 2007), men experiencing later-life job loss may require more complex ways of meaning making, especially as they may encounter a “crisis in unknowing” (Bauman, 2007).

A challenge for educators who help older men explore new directions for their lives following job loss, then, is to understand how these men learn from and through their circumstances. To that end, this study was guided by these research questions: What is the meaning that older, professional men make in coping with involuntary job loss? How does this population cope with involuntary job loss? What role does learning play in this coping process?

### **Conceptual Framework**

This study’s conceptual framework consists of several interrelated behavioral attributes that influence how adults appraise job loss. In particular, “coping” refers to cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage demands associated with situations that tax or exceed an adult’s resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

The literature on coping and job loss confirms that adults who cope adaptively with job loss demonstrate behaviors that reflect higher levels of cognitive well-being, or an adult’s thoughts about a life event or situation. Adults who demonstrate higher levels of cognitive well-being demonstrate, for example, a strong sense of coherence (i.e., a strong sense of self and one’s life story) (Diehl & Hay, 2010), optimism about the future (McKee-Ryan, Song, Wanberg, & Kinicki, 2005), and a problem-focused orientation to the loss (Sadeh & Karniol, 2012).

Also, adults who cope adaptively with job loss demonstrate higher levels of affective well-being, using their emotional responses positively to promote a problem-focused orientation. Positive emotions tend to broaden individuals’ meaning making, leading to more creative actions and responses to unanticipated life events (Frederickson, 2001). That said, the emotional shock of unexpected job loss appears to heighten the influence of affective well-being on subjective (or overall) well-being for adults coping with job loss (Vickers & Parriss, 2007).

The literature also suggests that adults who cope adaptively with job loss use time in ways

that promote higher levels of cognitive and affective well-being. Although unemployed adults who make more structured use of time reported higher levels of well-being (Ranzijn, Carson, Winefield, & Price, 2006), actively engaging in job search was actually found to be correlated with lower mental health among the unemployed, for constant rejections created additional stress (McKee-Ryan et al., 2005). Hence, although unemployed adults who 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.

Finally, adults who cope adaptively with job loss benefit from others' presence and support. Adults with ample social supports reported higher levels of life satisfaction (McKee-Ryan et al., 2005), and adults with dependable systems of support—be it family (Forret, Sullivan, & Mainiero, 2010) or extended community (Martella & Maass, 2000)—coped more adaptively with job loss.

### Methodology and Methods

I followed a phenomenological design of inquiry. As a philosophical, empirical approach to understanding participants' experience of a specific phenomenon (Husserl, 1970), this methodology helps researchers gain a deeper understanding of the meaning of lived experience.

The target population for this study was men over age 50 with a (minimum) bachelor's degree (to signal "professional" status) who experienced involuntary job loss since turning 50. I used this baseline age to designate "older," based upon the U.S. ideological apparatus (Althusser, 1971) that uses an adult's age as a benchmark for "older."— In addition, participants needed to have: (a) experienced their involuntary job loss in the past 5 years (to reflect the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis), (b) lost salaried (i.e., non-hourly wage) positions, and (c) worked at least 5 years with the employer who terminated employment.

**Table 1:** *Participant Profiles*

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

Following Seidman (2005), I conducted three in-depth interviews with each participant. For this study, I used inductive analysis, which allowed me to identify patterns across the data (Creswell, 2014), and then proceeded with open coding (Glaser, 1978). Using constant comparative analysis (Creswell, 2014), I then collapsed codes into categories that, in turn, coalesced into key themes. To identify these themes, I engaged in axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to examine how substantive categories across my data interrelated.

### Findings

First, *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,” offering them space to engage with their communities—and, indeed, themselves—in creative ways that not only enhanced job search, but also their well-being.

Some participants used their newfound time to engage explore ideas—especially through self-directed reading—that helped them appraise their situations. Tim, a former journalist for a mid-sized regional newspaper, said “I think you just need the time to remind yourself about the bigger picture” (lines 16773-16774), and he found respite in 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).

Other men valued the ways that their “gift” of time helped them explore new, creative ways to position themselves as job applicants. Rick, an accomplished research fellow scientist, 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. Ian, meanwhile, saw volunteer opportunities as a way to serve his community as well as seek new work: “these volunteer opportunities may open up new job opportunities” (lines 13523-13524).

Second, *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 lives that they could control helped them remain optimistic about the future.* Despite the loss of a perceived stability to their lives, men coped adaptively by focusing their attention on actions that they assessed as solely under their control, and they came to understand that managing their attention this way helped them think positively about their circumstances.

Participants 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 “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.

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” (line 13451). Chris’s gratitude emerged when he placed his own challenges in a broader, global context: “people are dying all over the world . . . I don’t think I could have the nerve to be depressed” (lines 12213-12219).

Because participants sensed that age bias was a particular reality they needed to address as job candidates, they focused their attention on job search strategies that they could control to combat this bias. 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), and Ken shared that he “[doesn’t] put the years down for my education” (line 10326). As Scott put it, “I had to think of how to make age an asset” (lines 933-934).

Third, *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.* By remaining open to new meaning making possibilities in later life, men accepted that the changing society in which they lived invited—indeed, demanded—them to change as well.

Men revealed that obtaining new work required them to discard former ways of knowing. Ian, for example, said that, in this highly competitive job market, 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). Hence, men 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 “script” on how to obtain new employment.

Participants remained largely open to new possibilities for employment. 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). Scott revealed “I knew I always had to have multiple irons in the fire,” (line 433) and he discussed the prospects of pursuing a range of consulting ventures during his job search.

Men also 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 new work in his field of expertise, “I’m still me; I still have all those skills . . . it didn’t go away” (lines 1115-1117).

*Finally, 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. Ethan shared that “even if it’s somebody I know, I just don’t like imposing on people” (lines 6339-6340), and Todd’s summed up his assessment of networking as “it’s so darn phony” (line 7673).

In contrast, men spoke enthusiastically about particular types of networking groups that resonated with them in ways that traditional networking did not. Ethan 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). Rick put it 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). Men also shared that learning through others’ experiences strengthened their own outlook—and 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” (lines 6227-6228). Rick appreciated that his group experiences promoted his creativity, “giving me a stimulus to innovate” (line 5084).

### **Conclusion**

Men who coped adaptively with later-life job loss demonstrated more developmentally complex ways of meaning making. Despite the loss of a time structure to their lives that employment once offered, men saw their newfound time as a “gift” that could help them broaden their meaning making. Also, emotional self-regulation—what amounts to Stoic wisdom as a philosophic response to loss—promoted high levels of cognitive well-being for men who coped adaptively. This Stoic wisdom helped men maintain a problem-focused orientation and avoid emotion-focused, unrealistic responses to life after job loss. Finally, men who coped adaptively “grieved well”: they accepted 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 who “grieved well” made use of learning relationships grounded in mutuality and interdependence to learn

through the uncertainties of later-life job loss.

### **Implications for Practice**

Because adults may be challenged to make optimal use of time outside the structure of employment, educators can help adults learn to self-regulate their time use as they search for new work and new engagement in their communities, for the latter not only creates value for the communities in which adults live, but also enhances adults' overall well-being. Also, because a strong sense of coherence and a "good, strong story" (Randall, 1996) promotes adaptive coping, educators can encourage older adults coping with job loss to acknowledge and honor their storied lives as they explore new possible directions in their lives. Finally, educators can engage adults in intentional "grief work" as part of the coping process; learning contexts grounded in mutual social supports can promote this grief work.

### **Future Research**

The extent to which individuals cope adaptively with loss will depend upon their life experiences and the contexts in which their lives unfolded. Men in this study fit a limited profile: all were Caucasian and of European descent, and a wide spectrum of identities (e.g., race, ethnicity) were not taken into account during this study's recruitment or analyses processes. Future studies that take these identities into account will enhance understanding of this problem.

### **Final Thoughts**

In *The Human Condition* (1958), Hannah Arendt lamented that adults in industrialized societies were conditioned to think of themselves primarily as laborers. In contrast, men in this study coped adaptively with job loss by the way they stood in relationship to work: their jobs offered them meaning and a livelihood, but their jobs were not necessarily their exclusive domain for meaning making in their lives. As labor's availability in an emerging gig economy shifts, the extent to which labor serves as a domain for meaning making in adults' lives may shift as well. If humans are the only creatures for whom existence is a "problem" (Fromm, 1947), then job loss in a culture that regards employment as the answer to this existential problem takes on potentially dire dimensions. And yet in his *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. These men, then, offered a philosophic response to job loss that illustrates what Lindeman (1926) insisted was the ultimate goal of adult learning: to grow and to become.

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