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**Temporary Derailment or the End of the Line?  
Unemployed Managers at 50**

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# Temporary Derailment or the End of the Line? Unemployed Managers at 50

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## Abstract

Based on fieldwork conducted at the outset of the current economic downturn, this paper examines the experiences of a group of unemployed managers and professionals in their fifties. Following a review of existing literature, the authors use a narrative methodology to explore how these people incorporate the experience of job loss into their self-images and identities. They identify certain core similarities in the experiences of unemployed professionals and then discern three narrative strategies through which unemployed professionals tried to make sense of their dismissal and sustain their sense of selfhood. The first approached job loss as a temporary career derailment and insisted on seeing a future as a resumption of career, no matter how implausible such a prospect appeared to others. The second saw the job loss as the end of the line – a traumatic event, the product of cruelty, injustice and unfairness, from which there is no prospect of resuming or salvaging a career. The third narrative strategy accepted job loss as a radical discontinuity but refused to lapse into despondency, self-blame or in extreme blame and vilification of others. Instead, it attributed it to social factors, the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune or to other uncontrollable forces, towards which they adopted a philosophical attitude, seeking to live within their means and engage in temporary paid and unpaid work, studies and other creative activities. The term ‘narrative coping’ is proposed as a way of describing each unemployed professional’s struggle to construct a story that offers both meaning and consolation. The paper is intended as a contribution to two academic fields that in the past have generally stayed well clear of each other. One addresses the psychological consequences of job loss, along with coping mechanisms and the effectiveness of interventions intended to aid the unemployed. The second addresses narrative constructions of identity and career among professionals, focusing specifically on the effects of job loss on the way people construct and sustain their life stories.

## Keywords:

job loss, unemployment, storytelling methodology, identity, career narratives

# Temporary Derailment or the End of the Line – Unemployed Managers At 50

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## INTRODUCTION

To paraphrase Tolstoy (again), all boom times are the same, but every recession is different – it brings its unique medley of troubles and uncertainties, as though similar misfortunes never happened before. The credit crunch of 2008-9 has once again raised the prospect of mass unemployment in nations that had persuaded themselves that economic slumps were a thing of the past. One thing that is certain is that many of those affected by lay-offs and job insecurity in the current economic downturn will be managerial and professional employees. Most Western economies have dramatically reconfigured themselves as service economies; many of those afflicted will be people who view themselves as having careers rather than jobs. How will job loss and the more generalized job insecurity affect them? How will they impact on their physical emotional and psychological well-being? And what coping mechanisms will managers and professionals be able to mobilize in dealing with distress and uncertainty?

In this paper we examine the experiences of managers and professionals who lost their jobs in their 50s. Some of them were having their first taste of unemployment whereas others had had similar experiences in the past. The paper is based on field work carried out just as the magnitude of the current economic downturn was becoming clear, with bank bail-outs, plant closures and government interventions ‘to save the economy’ and assist those thrown out of work. We start with a review of some of the literature on unemployment generated mostly during earlier economic slumps. Using a narrative methodology, we then examine how today’s managers and professionals incorporate the experience of job loss into their self-images and identities and how this event features in their life stories. We identify certain core similarities in the experiences of our respondents and then discern three narrative strategies through which they each tried to make sense of their dismissal and sustain their sense of selfhood. The term ‘narrative coping’ is proposed as a way of describing each unemployed professional’s struggle to construct a story that offers both meaning and consolation.

The paper is intended as a contribution to two academic fields that in the past have generally stayed well clear of each other. One addresses the psychological consequences of job loss, along with coping mechanisms and the effectiveness of interventions intended to aid the unemployed. The second addresses narrative constructions of identity and career among professionals, focusing specifically on the effects of job loss on the way people construct and sustain their life stories.

## **SOME LESSONS FROM PREVIOUS ECONOMIC SLUMPS**

Research into unemployment and the experiences of the unemployed seems to match the periodic surges of unemployment as an economic and social phenomenon. Thus we have had two major phases of research into unemployment, an earlier one in the 1930s and then again in the late 1970s and 1980s. This latter was characterized by an early rush of publications into joblessness, followed by more modest crop of publications dealing predominantly with the effects of downsizing – the emphasis of more recent work shifted away from the victims of lay-offs to the perpetrators and the survivors.

Early research into unemployment is dominated by a study carried out by a team of Austrian researchers that included eminent sociologists Marie Jahoda and Paul Lazarsfeld (1933/1971). These researchers studied the Austrian village of Marienthal in the early 1930s when 77% of the families had no employed member, due to the collapse of the village's single textile factory. Their work helped to bring to the public's attention the far-reaching effects of joblessness. They identified three different types of attitude among the families of the unemployed:

1. unbroken – families that managed to maintain their morale through a period of unemployment, while making practical allowances to manage its adverse effects and continuing actively in attempts to find work; they maintained hopes of a better future;
2. resigned – families that have “no plans, no relation to the future, no hopes, extreme restriction of all needs beyond the bare necessities, yet at the same time maintenance of the household, care of the children, and an overall feeling of relative well-being” (Jahoda et al., 1933/1971, p. 53);
3. broken – these were families that could have lapsed into abject despair which had given up attempts to find work and lapsed into nostalgia for the past; some of these families moved beyond despair to a state of total apathy in which family life begins to disintegrate with no attempt to keep any semblance of respectability or order.

Within the entire community, the researchers estimated that resignation was by far the most common attitude. They also observed that the attitudes above – unbroken, resigned, despairing, apathetic – were associated with increasing poverty. They argued that they may be seen as stages along a route “of psychological deterioration that runs parallel to the narrowing of economic resources and the wear and tear on personal belongings. At the end of this process lies ruin and despair.” (Jahoda et al., 1933/1971, p. 87)

Another important researcher on unemployment from that time is Edward Bakke (1940a; 1940b) who conducted two studies on the unemployed, one in Greenwich, London, 1931, in which he used participant observation and one in New Haven Connecticut, 1932, which relied on family interviews, questionnaires and document analysis. Bakke encountered widespread psychological problems, including reduced self-confidence, despondency and isolation. But, like Jahoda et al, he also noted a degree of resilience among the unemployed and their families; in addition, the availability of some social security cushioning the impact of unemployment in

Greenwich, allowed the unemployed a greater degree of security. What is absent in these studies is any sign of rebelliousness, militance, anger or political mobilization among the unemployed and their families.

### **RESEARCH IN THE 1970s AND 1980s**

These themes return in the literature on unemployment that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s. Jahoda herself developed the view that the experience of unemployment brings about a collapse of meaning structures and a disintegration of the sense of time. Thus, unemployed people have trouble making a start at anything and concentrating at what they are doing; they feel rusty and uncertain when doing things and take longer to complete them. Why? Jahoda's explanation is that unemployment deprives a person of five key features indispensable to psychological well-being:

- compelling contact and shared experience outside the home
- goals and purposes beyond the scope of the individual
- imposed status and identity
- enforced activity
- time structure imposed by work

Being in a job, argued Jahoda, has numerous latent functions that only become apparent when the job is lost. Foremost among these, she argues “is the enforced destruction of a habitual time structure for the waking day with the sudden onset of unemployment. In modern industrialized societies the experience of time is shaped by public institutions. ... When this structure is removed as it is in unemployment its absence presents a major psychological burden” (Jahoda, 1982, p. 22). Thus Jahoda came to give greater prominence to the psychological deterioration brought about by not working per se rather than by the ensuing economic deprivation.

A similar approach was taken by Peter Warr (1987) who developed his well-known ‘vitamin model’ of the effects of unemployment on mental health. Just as vitamins are necessary for physical health and small deprivations lead to intense adverse effects, likewise small environmental deprivations brought about by unemployment lead to serious mental health consequences. Warr noted nine latent work functions indirectly ensuring psychological well-being – opportunity for control, skill use, interpersonal contact, external goal and task demands, variety, environmental clarity, availability of money, physical security, and valued social position.

Warr’s and Jahoda’s later work were criticized by Fryer (1992; 1984; 1986) for underestimating the importance of material deprivation and poverty. Their approaches, argued Fryer, reflect the prevailing ideologies of policy-makers, who would argue that the unemployed can be helped through better training and new skills rather than better state hand-outs. In place of Warr’s and Jahoda’s ‘social environmental approach’, Fryer (1992) advocates an ‘agency restriction approach’. Instead of looking at the unemployed person as a passive, dependent and reactive being, in short as a victim, “the agency restriction approach rests on a model of the unemployed, and indeed any other person as an active, initiating, future-oriented agent, striving to make sense of and influence events. It also rests upon an implicit model of that which is implicitly responsible for the unemployed person's plight - the social institution of unemployment - as impoverishing, restricting, baffling, discouraging and disabling.” (1992, p. 114). For some people, unemployment turns

out to be a blessing in disguise, opening up new career opportunities and unleashing a very proactive stance towards unemployment and job search (Fryer et al., 1984).

A similar image of the unemployed as afflicted but resilient comes across in Jeremy Seabrook's (1982) quasi-Orwellian ethnography of unemployed people in the early 1980s. Seabrook, like Fryer emphasizes the active qualities of many unemployed people, and like Fryer views poverty (rather than the lack of work per se) as "the greatest nightmare for those who fall out of work" (Seabrook, 1982, p. 24). What makes Seabrook's analysis particularly relevant to today's situation is his realization that the plight of the unemployed is exacerbated by the surrounding consumerist riot; if material deprivation and hunger were the primary consequences of unemployment in Marienthal, today's unemployed feel excluded from the blessings of consumer capitalism, forced, so to speak, to look desirously into the cathedrals of consumption from the outside. This is a theme that has resurfaced in the work of Bauman (1998) and other theorists of consumer capitalism.

The view that some unemployed cope quite well with the experience of unemployment resurfaces in some early studies that concentrated on white-collar employees. Little (1976) found that unemployment was less stressful than expected. The reason most frequently given for having a positive attitude toward job loss was that it represented an opportunity to escape from undesirable work. A decade later, Fineman (1983; 1987) found that nearly a third of the unemployed managers he interviewed were coping rather effectively with their job loss. This was explained not so much by personality factors as each manager's earlier relation to his job, the family dynamics and a whole host of other factors. Fineman, somewhat like a psychological equivalent to the Marienthal researchers' sociological model, proposed three fundamental categories describing the impact of unemployment on white-collar employees.

"Those feeling a profound rejection or failure (42 per cent); those feeling they had lost something of particular value (23 per cent); and those seeing their predicament as an acceptable, if not positive experience (35 per cent). These categories are based upon the dominant expressions portrayed in the interviews, but are not necessarily mutually exclusive." (Fineman, 1983, p. 36)

What we should not overlook is that in spite of sub-groups that appeared to cope well, the majority of white-collar workers suffered both physical and psychological deterioration as a result of job loss. In fact, there is some evidence that the better the job that was lost, the greater the deterioration, a view endorsed by Fineman himself and also by Kaufman (1982) and Podgursky and Swain (1987). As Latack et al argue "professional workers experience what might be termed a "harder-they-fall" effect. That is, for workers who are economically better off and who may derive a larger portion of their psychological identity from work, the discrepancies are more severe than for hourly workers." (Latack, Kinicki, & Prussia, 1995)

## **STAGES OF COPING AND COPING STRATEGIES**

Since the Marienthal study, two persistent questions have been raised by the differential impact of unemployment on different individuals. First, if losing one's job

is a traumatic experience, can it be argued that the unemployed go through different stages of response to shock, similar to those who experience bereavement or other traumatic loss (Kübler-Ross, 1969; Lindemann, 1944)? Second, if unemployment is indeed stressful, can the literature on strategies of coping with stress (e.g. Folkman & Lazarus, 1985; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) be applied to those who lose their jobs?

'Phasic' theories of unemployment, i.e. the view that the experience of unemployment follows a number of fairly distinct phases or stages have relied extensively on Fink's (1967) four-stage model. Fink argued that in coping with crisis, people first experience a period of shock when they deny the experience and feel a total loss of orientation. They then move to a period of defensive retreat, followed by acknowledgment, and finally, by a process of adaptation and change. Researchers who have made use of this model include Eisenberg (1938), Swinburne, (1981), Harrison (1973) and Hill (1977). This rather optimistic account where all troubles are eventually managed through adaptation has been severely criticized by Fineman (1983, pp. 8ff) as well as Fryer (1985) who find virtually no empirical evidence to support it. Fineman argues that looking closely at the experiences of different people who have lost their job reveals that each experience of unemployment is characterized by its own dynamics and follows its own trajectory.

Rather more resilient than phasic approaches to unemployment have been those that identify different coping strategies and then seek to assess their effectiveness in mitigating the distress and pain of unemployment and, in many cases, restoring the unemployed to work through effective job searches. Much of this literature is inspired by Lazarus and Folkman's work on stress (e.g. Folkman et al., 1985; Lazarus et al., 1984; Lazarus & Lazarus, 1994), who identified different coping strategies, such as problem solving, wishful thinking, detachment, seeking social support, maintaining positive thinking, self-blame, tension reduction and withdrawal. In general, coping literature distinguishes between problem focused strategies and emotion focused (also referred to as 'symptom-focused strategy') strategies, and there is overwhelming agreement that the former work better than the latter. Leana and Feldman (1992), found that the former strategies lead to quicker re-employment and better mental health. By contrast, emotion-focused coping, like all avoidance types of coping work against long-term coping. There is a fair degree of support for this (e.g. Gowan, Riordan, & Gatewood, 1999). Paton and Donohue, argue:

“Coping themes identified with negative well-being included keeping busy, emotional release, and withdrawal. These coping processes were generally viewed as transient and ineffectual. Conversely, coping strategies of those associated with positive well-being could be grouped into four themes, including keeping busy, having a positive outlook, religious faith, and re-evaluating expectations.” (Paton & Donohue, 1998, p. 331)

These views are broadly supported by Bennett et al (1995) who examined factors influencing the nature of strategy adopted by different unemployed including the perceived fairness of their dismissal, the intensity of emotions including self-blame, as well as the supporting structures (government, company and union). Generally, overwhelming emotions including anger, blame, self-blame, shame and guilt are

viewed as counter-productive, compounding rather than mitigating the distress and hampering effective job search.

“We found that as the intensity of the emotions declined, there was greater problem-focused coping by victims. This finding is consistent with the stress perspective on layoff victim coping strategies (Leana & Feldman, 1992), thus providing more evidence of the usefulness of that framework for understanding the responses of layoff victims. The perceptual variable, self-blame, had an impact on victim coping strategies, but in a completely unexpected manner. Self-blame was negatively related to problem-focused coping by victims, not positively related as predicted. Further, we found this negative relationship to be quite strong. Our finding is contrary to the coping literature, which suggests that self-blame will facilitate problem-focused coping by victims.” (Bennett et al., 1995, p. 1038)

Coping literature (Gowan & Gatewood, 1997; Kabbe, Setterlind, & Svensson, 1996) generally views unemployment as a traumatic event that requires both inner and outer resources to address. What is not so common is to find literature that examines in detail the nature of the trauma of job loss, the conflicts and contradictions experienced by the unemployed and the clash between different emotions. One study that sought to do this (Letkemann, 2002) used the concept of stigma to explore various strategies used by the unemployed to avoid disclosure. These include subterfuge (e.g. ‘I am a consultant’) or different forms of ‘masquerades’ to conceal unemployment even from members of the close family. Letkemann concluded that “any stigma management technique, whether masquerade, lying or withdrawing, contributes to social isolation and ‘introjection into the self’ (Burman 1988:200) and heightens the sense of self-blame, already so common among the unemployed.” (Letkemann, 2002, p. 519). The concept of stigma has also been used by other authors notably Willott (2004) who highlighted its adverse effect on men’s identity and self-image as chief family breadwinners.

One interesting feature of existing research into unemployment is a split between large-scale survey research (e.g. Creed & Moore, 2006; McKee-Ryan, Song, Wanberg, & Kinicki, 2005) (Jackson & Warr, 1984; A. Vinokur & Caplan, 1987; A. D. Vinokur & Caplan, 1986; A. D. Vinokur, Vanryn, Gramlich, & Price, 1991; P. Warr & Jackson, 1984, 1985) which suggests long-term and pronounced emotional and physical distress and small-scale, in-depth research that tends to suggest a wide kaleidoscope of varied experiences, coping strategies and even success in surviving unemployment. Thus, Zikic (2007) studied a small group of unemployed professionals in Canada who seemed to cope rather well, viewing unemployment as a blessing in disguise. Mendenhall and colleagues (2008) studied a small sample of recently unemployed mid-life professionals and found “that most respondents attributed their job loss to factors associated with globalization and used coping strategies that involved adapting a ‘free-agent’ mentality in the face of declining employer loyalty and deprofessionalization to manage perceptions of age bias.” (Mendenhall et al., 2008, p.185).

## **THE EFFECTIVENESS OF INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT STRUCTURES**

A strand of research that has come increasingly to the fore concerns the effectiveness of support structures, provided by employers, government and unions, at mitigating the effects of unemployment and helping the unemployed to find a job. This theme is sometimes interwoven with the study of coping strategies – by assessing how different forms of support affect coping strategies. Literature here is diverse. Leana and Ivancevich (1987) offer a fair but inconclusive literature review on institutional interventions to help the unemployed linking them to coping mechanisms. Institutional interventions may mitigate the effects of unemployment by offering a time structure and opportunities for social contact, thus restoring some sense of pride and control (Jahoda, 1982); Eby (1994) notes the beneficial effects of counselling and coaching whereas Sperra et al (1994) note the therapeutic effect of expressive writing. Yet, support without success in the job market, may raise false hopes which then lead to profound disillusionment (see, e.g. Kaufman, 1982). The emerging view seems to be that support without the promise of a job at the end of the unemployment period is counter-productive.

Based on data from 97 skilled laid off employees in a manufacturing firm, Bennett and colleagues (1995) considered the effect of four factors on mitigating the effects of unemployment; these included (1) corporate and government programmes to assist those laid off; (2) fairness of the layoff procedures; (3) perceptual and emotional reactions to the layoff; and (4) individual differences. Bennett et al found government assistance programs least effective and proceed to question them:

“If corporate and government assistance programs do not encourage problem-focused coping strategies among victims, then why are they presented as if they do? One explanation could be employers may not see these forms of assistance as necessarily aimed at facilitating re-employment. Instead, the goal may be to alleviate employer guilt over layoffs, to protect company image among layoff survivors, or to simply ‘buy’ victims ‘some time’.” (Bennett et al., 1995, p. 1037)

Bennett et al went on to argue that “being fair to victims may also be harmful to them. Specifically, by being fair the organization may reduce victims’ willingness to seek speedy re-employment.” Perhaps as stated by a respondent in an earlier investigation, “the very unfairness of the situation” forces layoff victims to “take the initiative” and turn the job loss into an opportunity (Schlossberg & Leibowitz, 1980, p. 214). In other words, being fair may be a “double-edged sword” in that while fairness may influence survivors to respond more positively to the layoff victims, it may paradoxically lead victims to react more negatively” (Bennett et al., 1995, p. 1037f). Yet, as noted earlier, the perceived injustice of the job loss may stimulate very powerful negative emotions that undermine coping in the long term.

A particular thread within this line of research is to study job seeking behaviour (Kanfer, Wanberg, & Kantrowitz, 2001) and identify factors, including demographics gender, age etc. that affect the speed with which the unemployed find new work (see, e.g. Kulik, 2000; Lippmann, 2008). Malen and Stroh (1998) argue that women need more support than men to help them get back into jobs. But some researchers, such Kinicki et al (2000) warn that in assessing the effectiveness of job search it is not

enough to look at how quickly a new job is found, but equally the quality of the job. They argue, contra Jahoda and Warr, that finding a poor job may amplify the psychological deterioration brought about by job loss rather than mitigate it. On the basis of a longitudinal panel study they warn that “coping with job loss continues [after a job has been found] until equilibrium is reached among multiple facets of a person's life” (Kinicki et al., 2000, p. 88).

The research outlined above does not exhaust the various strands of scholarship into unemployment and the unemployed. In addition to the huge medical literature on the effects of unemployment on health, physical and mental, and economic research into the causes and consequences of unemployment, there is considerable material on how those who are employed view the unemployed (e.g. Furnham, 1982), the influence of unemployment on those who are in jobs (e.g. Martin, 1987) and a hugely voluminous literature on downsizing and its effects on those who lose their jobs and those who temporarily keep them (e.g. Cameron, 1998; Ehrenreich, 2005; Kets de Vries & Balazs, 1997; Lamsa & Takala, 2000; Sennett, 1998; Stein, 2001; Thomas & Dunkerley, 1999; Uchitelle, 2006).

It is now time to recapitulate, drawing out some of the main themes from the literature we have examined. Nearly all researchers agree that unemployment has an adverse effect on the physical and psychological well-being of individuals and their families. There is agreement that there is variation in the extent to which unemployed people suffer and in the strategies they employ to cope with their situation. Generally, attempts by the unemployed to return to work are seen as more effective if driven by a calm and rational determination to deal with job loss as a problem; by contrast, acute emotional responses to job loss as a trauma and shock, including anger, guilt and shame are viewed as counter-productive. There is a degree of disagreement as to whether the causes of the distress experienced by the unemployed are to be found in the experience of not working per se, the adverse financial effects of being unemployed or the wider social stigma attached to joblessness; correspondingly, there is no agreement as to whether any job is better than no job or whether landing an undesirable job is liable to exacerbate the psychological distress caused by unemployment. There is, likewise, some disagreement as to whether the unemployed are to be seen as passive victims of a calamity that tests their resources in the extreme or as plucky survivors deploying a variety of strategies to make sense of their plight and endure adversity until better times arrive. There is no general agreement as to the effectiveness of institutional support systems, although there is a recognition that they can be of help at least for certain periods of time.

Overall, much of the literature tends to favour a somewhat rationalistic imagery of the unemployed, one that shows little acknowledgement of confusion, ambivalence, destructiveness and self-destructiveness. To the extent that emotions surface in these accounts, they are seen as essentially irrational, undermining the sensible and rational job search and accentuating trauma and loss. Job search, as well as emotional coping, are approached essentially as rational, goal-oriented, purposive behaviours. But could it not be that this is precisely how shocked, confused and anxious individuals do not behave? Could it not be that they act in a neurotic, fight or flight type of behaviour, coping with emotions, but not restoring themselves to work? Or, that they apply obsessively for many jobs without consideration of whether they are appropriate? Or,

that they lapse into apathy not as a form of denying reality but as a rational way of dealing with a situation in which there are no realistic prospects of resuming a career?

The term 'coping' itself seems to incorporate some rationalist instrumental assumptions. Latack and her colleagues (1995, p. 313), for example, view coping as "constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage the internal and external demands of transactions that tax or exceed a person's resources. Coping with job loss, therefore, refers to cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage the taxing demands posed by job loss." But what if coping is achieved by seeking or expressing supportive and caring emotions or redefining identity in ways that make the job loss less painful or less central to a person's sense of selfhood? And what if the responses given by some unemployed to researchers are themselves attempts to cope with their distress, for example by denying it, by downplaying it or by portraying themselves as dealing with it in rational and purposeful ways?

### **JOB LOSS AS PART OF A LIFE STORY**

One of the under-researched aspects of job loss is the way people incorporate it in their view of their lives, their life stories. It is well known that human beings can deal with very considerable pain and distress if they can make sense of them, for example, by viewing it as personal sacrifice in the interest of a superior goal. As Karl Weick (1979; 2001) and others have argued, people constantly strive to discover meanings for their experiences, and one of the most effective ways of creating meaning is by turning experience into narratives and stories. "When people punctuate their own living into stories, they impose a formal coherence on what is otherwise a flowing soup." (Weick, 1995, p. 28) By placing an event into a story and rehearsing the story to ourselves and others, we make sense of key events in our lives and we cast ourselves as a protagonist in the dramas that surround us. Through telling a compelling story, we discover our 'voice' (Gabriel, 2004b) and by sharing such stories we construct and sustain our identities (e.g. Brown, Humphreys, & Gurney, 2005; Brown & Starkey, 2000; Sims, 2003). The concept of narrative identity (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000; McAdams, Josselson, & Lieblich, 2006; Polkinghorne, 1996) suggests that our sense of selfhood emerges from the different stories we tell about ourselves, the tensions between different stories, and the struggles we have as we seek to make our stories heard and respected by others.

Narrative identity is a reflexive construct, in which the story's protagonist and the storyteller co-create each other. At every moment the narrator creates a protagonist, whose actions and predicaments redefine the narrator. In telling the story of my life, I make sense of past events and create a person living in the present as a continuation of that story. In this way our experience becomes digested, meaningful and the basis of our identities and actions (Gabriel, 2008, p. 196). It is both a continuous and discontinuous process. Identity is continuously created and recreated – yet there are sharp discontinuities in its construction. Some of these discontinuities are the results of life's big events or sudden events, like accidents, job losses, illness, opportunities and so forth (what Aristotle calls 'peripeteia'), all of which call for opening new chapters in our life's stories. But there is another type of discontinuity too – one that comes from the 'recognition' ('anagnorisis' is Aristotle's term) of the deeper significance of an event. Thus, an event that was originally seen as a calamity comes, in the light of future developments, to be seen as a blessing. Conversely, an event that

was seen as an triumph or a boon, comes to be seen as a reversal or even as a disaster. According to this view, the way we create our life stories involves various blessings in disguise and poisoned chalices – moments when we reassess the significance of earlier events.

## **THE FIELD RESEARCH**

Blessings in disguise and poisoned chalices are especially relevant in the case of job loss; under some circumstances, losing one's job may lead to better things; conversely, getting what seems like an excellent job may lead to unexpected troubles and eventual job loss. They were central features of the methodology adopted in our field research in which we sought to examine how unemployed professionals make sense of their predicament, how and how well they incorporate job loss in their life stories.

The methodology was derived from Gabriel's (1995; 2000; 2004a) research into organizational storytelling and McAdams's (1988; 1996; 2006) work on life stories; we invited our respondents to reflect on their experience of job loss as an episode in their life's story or as part of a journey that represents their career. The words 'career' and 'life journey' were used extensively in the questioning in order to identify how participants construct these terms, how they apply them to themselves and how their current predicament fits in. 11 male and one female professional, aged between 49 and 62, were interviewed, with most interviews lasting around two hours. Seven of these professionals (and one additional one) also participated in two focus groups, lasting between two and three hours. Finally, informal discussions were held with several of these individuals.

This research was undertaken as part of an on-going project which offered coaching to 28 professionals who had been unemployed in mid-career for between 6 and 18 months with a view to helping them return to work. Each participant was offered 10 hours of individual coaching as well as participation in group coaching events. Participants fell into three different types. Some had been employed by a single or a small number of organizations, rose to fairly high level and were then laid off. Some were information systems professionals whose careers had been linked with expertise in their particular domains. Finally, there were some oddballs, people who had frequently changed jobs and occupations, without encountering many difficulties; at some point in their 50s, they discovered that the 'next' job failed to arrive.

All conversations were recorded and subsequently transcribed. A key aspect of the analysis was that at least two of the researchers listened to the recordings more than once and then wrote extensive notes of their responses to the spoken text. These notes were then compared and different interpretations and impressions triangulated. This allowed the researchers to reflect not only to specific features of the text, but on the tone, the emotion and the changes undergone by respondents in the course of the conversations. Because of their unusual length, many of the interviews allowed the interviewees to reflect deeply on their experiences; in some cases, there were turning points in the interview when the tone, the mood and the 'story' changed dramatically – for example, a person who had for the first hour of the interview maintained that his life had been a series of successes reached a point of asking the interviewer "What is the point of all this when you cannot put bread on your family's table?" Such turning

points allowed us to observe the reflexive qualities of storytelling noted earlier, in other words, how in the telling of the story, the story's narrator and its protagonist co-create each other.

The tone of the two focus groups was widely different, the first, dominated by two exuberant personalities, verged on the euphoric, whereas the second was dominated by acknowledgements of failure and expressions of grief and despair. The interviews themselves varied in tone. Some were confessional, some were carefully fronted and controlled by the interviewee and only one was friendly, relaxed and informal. As noted earlier, the tone of several changed in the course of the conversation.

## **FINDINGS**

### **Some core similarities**

A central feature of the life stories which we collected was their intense individualism; several participants recounted numerous episodes from their lives, hardly ever referring to any other individuals. Another feature was an invisible barrier erected by the respondents between career and 'personal life'; unless the interviewer probed this barrier (for example with questions like "How does this affect your family life?") responses stayed firmly on the career side of the barrier. Many of the interviews were tinged with sadness and even nostalgia; the world has moved on, many of the respondents said in their different ways, and they felt left behind. Many felt that they had lost the good things of the past, and the 'modern world' has become harsh, inhospitable and nasty. Several mentioned age discrimination as a feature of their daily lives, especially in their search for a new job.

Nearly all our participants were confronted with a puzzle that we came to refer to as the 'experience/expertise conundrum'. Experience and expertise were viewed by our interviewees as their strongest cards in their search for new work – and yet, they invariably saw themselves being overlooked in favour of less experienced and less expert, younger people. This possibly was one of the most difficult aspect of their experience to make sense of. Acute mental distress, including depression, despair and anxiety were frequently referred to, but often they were attributed to others on the coaching programme or to earlier experiences, rather than to their current state.

Job loss itself was invariably a major landmark in the life stories we collected. For some people it came as a complete shock, for others as the culmination of a long process of tension and conflict at work, increasing isolation and eventual dismissal. For a few, dismissal had been a personal betrayal, usually by their immediate boss or by a new top manager who decide to wipe clear the slate. Bitterness and blame were intense for these people, often mitigated by an admission that they had failed to play the 'political games of the organization' effectively.

There was one final similarity that all researchers noted – a striking inflexibility or rigidity which manifested itself in different ways. It sometimes assumed the form of stereotypical or set opinions and fixed ways of thinking, an unwillingness to learn new skills or try new approaches (including job search approaches). In the focus groups, rigidity surfaced at times as an impatience, an inability to listen to others and a tendency to monopolize the discussion; in the interviews, it frequently manifested

itself as an unwillingness to contemplate a different way of looking at things. Above all, it was manifested in a general hostility and resistance to change, all change.

While several of our respondents expressed hostility to change, few did with the vehemence of Robert, who started his career as an insurance salesman but, at twenty four, moved into IT, ending up as a senior analyst. In the course of the interview, Robert stated no fewer than four times that he did not like change. Asked how he responded to change, he said:

I do sense a bit of negativity [in myself] sometimes, I can't do what I don't want to do. As I said earlier I don't like change; if somebody doesn't like change and becomes an expert, then he is a source of knowledge because he's been out there a long time he's always seen as being the rock of the institution and he's reliable and dependable. So when things go wrong that person can be looked upon as being the one who will sort everything out, or, you know, get the job done. So you don't see it [resistance to change] as a negative thing, but, of course, things do move on and that's perhaps why I've never seen it [the job loss] coming.<sup>1</sup>

Robert saw himself as the rock of the institution (rocks hardly change), so wrapped up in sorting out IT problems that he did not see the warning signs when a new director introduced far-reaching changes. Robert was summarily dismissed with three month's pay. Subsequently, Robert was offered a new job that required a house move – but he refused to take it:

I had some good friends up in Manchester so I thought I'd look at jobs up there. I got offered a job in another insurance company. Why didn't I take it, I don't know – it just wasn't right at the time, my emotional stability was quite low, I felt that taking a new job wasn't good so I decided to carry on what I was doing [looking for a job in the immediate locality where I lived]. I don't know what would make me change, because even when I'm not happy doing something, I'll rather do it because it's comfortable I'm familiar with it and I know I can do it than look towards change. So yes, this is not really an answer about what keeps me in this area, because I've got no people I really look to for support positively. What keeps myself going? I don't know, I think it's sort of just being in the present really, yes.

Robert's sincere introspection reveals this deeper inflexibility, an unwillingness to accept change – any change. Nearly all our respondents seemed unable to accept changes in their environment; they could certainly not envisage 're-inventing' themselves (although some had done so successfully in the past), as a way of moving sideways to a new career. In this regard, they seemed to be exactly the opposite of the 'chameleon characters' noted by Sennett (1998), those who thrive in the 'new flexible economy'. Matched against the saying "The fox knows many things, while the hedgehog knows one big thing" nearly all of our respondents were very clearly in the

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<sup>1</sup> Quotes have been lightly edited by omitting words (e.g. "you know") or non-sequiturs. When additions to the text are made, they are indicated by square brackets.

hedgehog camp; or had become hedgehogs, in the course of their careers. All in all, it would be fair to say that, as professionals who found themselves unemployed in their fifties, they tended to cling on to the professional skills and identities that have served them well in the past and were perplexed and unwilling to accept that old assets can turn into liabilities.

### **Some core differences**

Job loss was a major turning point, a painful disruption in the lives of all our respondents; but as suggested by the literature, they sought to cope with it in different ways. Nearly all of them experienced powerful negative emotions, including disappointment, anger, despair, fear, resignation, anxiety and depression. These emotions were closely linked with the ways that each professional tried to make sense of job loss as part of their life story. As a deep disruption, the experience of being fired had forced these professionals to re-examine their earlier working lives, past decisions and choices. What was very clear was that there were several distinct ways of incorporating this disruption into their life stories, some more successful than others. Overall, our respondents resorted to three narrative strategies – one was to view their current unemployment as a temporary disruption, a setback, but one from which their career would eventually recover. A different strategy was to see their job loss as marking the end of their career and the beginning of a new phase in their life. Finally, there were some who presented themselves as being in a kind of limbo-land, not knowing what lies ahead, whether the disruption of their career is a permanent or temporary one, but seeking to make the best out of their current situation.

### **JOB LOSS AS ‘TEMPORARY’ CAREER DISRUPTION**

Four of our respondents presented themselves as very actively looking for work, viewing their current status as a temporary one. Interestingly, they had very different life-stories to tell. Bill, an accountant, had wanted to be in control of his career, but an earlier experience of unemployment had forced him to reconsider:

When I started off, I expected to basically be more or less in control most of the time, until I got fired [*chuckles*] which is crazy now, I mean, I was 20-ish at that stage; yes, I'm now older and I know that you're just not in control, you're just an employee.

He subsequently progressed smoothly in his career to being departmental head of an insurance company, a position which had stretched him beyond his technical expertise. Losing his job had been a shock, but also a relief:

I was really shocked because I just didn't see it coming. I was also a little bit relieved because I thought you know, 'Thank God' you know, 'I don't have to do this any more', but then I thought 'I have to get another job!' and I knew how long it had taken last time, and I thought 'It's going to take even longer' because it always takes longer. And I thought, you know, this is an opportunity to think about what I really want to do and I will have a reasonable amount of money thrown at me to make me go away, ... so the money side is not really an issue to start with, I mean, I know other people would have very different problems so I was thinking 'I'm quite lucky, we're not going to run out of cash' and I was thinking you

know, 'I've got to be motivated to look for a job but I'm going to get a job I want, I'm not just going to get a job'; so at the beginning I was really, really picky, I'm much less picky now.

Bill's was a matter of fact handling of the job loss which disrupted a linear career; he was back in work shortly after the interview. Losing his job had been a reversal but not a disaster; he acknowledged that he had made mistakes, which he would not repeat. His integrity as a person had not been undermined in any way as a result of the job loss. His story could not be more different from that of Matthew, someone who had neither tried to be in control of his career, nor been restricted to a single career:

My career is rather unusual inasmuch as I've had probably three or four careers and I've fallen into each one of them by circumstances, some might say by luck; but I think it's just the circumstances that you have presented to you in your life and you either go one way or you go the other and that's how I've always been employed.

A verbose, seemingly self-confident man, Matthew had dominated his focus group, eliciting from some of the others responses like "What on earth are you doing here?" He had impressed them with his colourful tales of working as retail salesman, international operatic singer, director and impresario, entrepreneur, inventor and showman. His stories, exuding pride, combined the epic qualities of achievement against the odds with a self-deprecatory quality and usually a sting in the tail – some achievements turning out into disappointments. Matthew met and befriended numerous famous people – royalty, celebrities, operatic stars, sporting heroes; he was honoured in the queen's list for his services to the entertainment business. Yet, at 55, a venture to sell his invention on a large scale had failed (after he had mortgaged his house for several hundred thousand pounds), as a result of the cancellation of a major government contract. At this point, his Midas touch seemed to desert him and he had been unable to find work for what he variously described as 12 or 24 months.

Matthew's reversals of financial fortunes were matched by a dramatic change after about an hour and a half of his interview. At this point, the self-confident front was replaced by self-doubt. Asked whether he would re-write any parts of his life's journey, he said:

Oh gosh! I don't like being not employed now so, if I say I saw a thread through the whole of my career (and I don't because I don't think you can), I'm bound to say that it's led to where I am now, so by a perverse sort of judgement I've contributed to my own inability to be employed and so yes, I would change things.

Regrets soon turned into feelings of failure and despair:

Well you know, at sixty, fifty six years of age – I keep calling myself sixty, I don't know why – it's not pleasant to be not working, it's not pleasant to have to watch every single penny, and, I mean, there's millions of people in this country that have to do that, but you know, what use is a

[queen's decoration] if you can't afford to put bread on the table? What use is it having, you know, a glorified past if you can't actually front up and do a day's work? You know, I find, you know, and these are sort of conversations I don't have with people very often you know, I find it terribly distressing to actually think of, you know, am I going to be in this situation for the next ten years? And it's not a very pleasant thought.

Unwilling to accept this situation, Matthew insisted that he was still working, even if not employed:

I'm working and that would be true throughout my whole life, I've always worked, I mean, I feel like I'm being a professional job applicant at the moment, because I am working at 8 o'clock in the morning, I'm still working at 7 o'clock at night. ... I've become almost a professional application-filler.

Filling in on average 20 and at times up to 40 applications per week (precision is not his forte), Matthew is looking to restore his fortune:

What I'm looking for is a new career, you know, and I can see my next career lasting for 20 years, why not? I don't think I look 56 but if I do I do, you know, I don't feel it. I continue to look for employment. I've probably filled out two or three hundred applications in the last month or so and I would have said 10 or 20 of those jobs are absolutely definite ones, I could have done them very well and found satisfactory employment with and given some value-added experience and attitudes and so on to the company that - but, you know, I haven't even got an interview.

There is something tragic about Matthew's unwillingness to question his job searching strategy (or to acknowledge that his coach had anything to teach him), in spite of his constant failures and mounting despair. Of all our respondents, Matthew was the only one to conceal his unemployment even from his closest acquaintances, something that compounded his isolation and disillusionment. Matthew's story interweaves a confident, verbose and pompous persona with a deeply troubled selfhood that can only be sustained by finding a new career, a struggle sustained through phrenetic and ultimately futile activity. This antagonism defines his identity (Clarke, Brown, & Hailey, 2009), an identity that, unlike Bill's can fairly be described as fragmented.

### **JOB LOSS AS THE END OF CAREER**

In contrast to Bill and Matthew, who in their different ways were seeking to resume their careers, several of our respondents viewed their most recent job loss as marking the end of their careers. Like Bill and Matthew, these respondents were tainted by a sense of failure, but unlike Bill and Matthew, they had given up trying to find success in a new leaf of their career. In Jahoda's (1982; 1933/1971) terms, they were resigned or broken. For all, this had been a painful realization. We shall concentrate on the life stories of three individuals, all of whom had had particularly traumatic dismissals,

which they described in great detail and which still caused them deep trouble. All three had closed the book called career. Heather had moved on to part-time employment as gardener, then as carer for the Alzheimer's Society and increasingly drawn into the mystical world of Sufi religion; Peter saw himself as struggling to survive in a system that had wronged him and against which from time to time he railed; and Robert had come to the sad realization that he had never really had a career and had internalized a profound sense of failure.

Heather had worked as a gardener and then as a teacher for disabled people, eventually becoming the training manager for a charity offering services to disabled people. After seven years in this job, she was made redundant following the arrival of a new director. This coincided with her conversion to Sufi Islam, a factor that she believes led to discrimination by others and eventually to her dismissal. A deeply introspective person, she still felt deep pain while reminiscing of her dismissal in detail. She felt an acute lack of closure, as her departure had involved no farewells, no recognition of her contribution and no final meetings. Paradoxically, while she was one of the most traumatized people we interviewed, she instantly embraced 'blessing in disguise' as a description of her dismissal, following which she had dedicated more of her life to her religious faith as well as to short-term part-time gardening jobs. She had come to view herself as unsuited to managing difficult or toxic people and had almost given up hope resuming a management career.

I would hesitate [to take on a management position] but of course without that, then the income is always low, so that's a difficulty, but yes, I'm definitely not in a hurry to go back into a managerial role because I think in a sense it's a bit of a thankless task, you've got to be quite hard you know, you've got to have quite a strong streak - you certainly can't um, it's never friendships you can have. Because [if you do] people are shocked then, when you have to bring changes in or whatever, so it's a very difficult role, I found it very difficult to kind of, difficult, I do think I would continue to find it difficult to kind of retain my authenticity within it, it's hard, yes, very hard.

Another individual deeply traumatized from his job loss was Peter, who had worked as a local government officer, experienced dismissal several times, and alluded to having worked in rough manual jobs and ended up in police vans on some occasions. Peter struck the researchers as a thoughtful and introspective person when he participated in the focus group, where he had talked about his pain and disillusionment with the system. Interviewed some three months later, he cut a harsher, more cynical and far angrier figure. In his earlier career, Peter had frequently felt trapped and suffocated, using phrases "I couldn't breathe almost, without being criticised" and "felt like I was being imprisoned" and describing one incident when a superior had locked him in his office until he completed an assignment.

I would say the part I've reached now is my career's over, that's the part I feel I've reached now; and now, you know, it's over so I just take whatever is around really. You know, I've had my chances in employment, I've done as well as anyone could, anyhow in what I've had to face, so I'm reasonably overall satisfied with my working life over thirty-odd years,

I'm reasonably happy with that and as to where am I now, I really don't know anymore, I just, I don't really feel any great motivation now to prove myself or you know, achieve anything much else really, I- all the, certainly in the last few years where I've had a few, you know, had a few- you'd call them sort of stumbling blocks, things that you need to face up to, things- fears if you like and I've faced up to them all.

Peter presented his career as littered with adversity, betrayals and setbacks that had taken their toll on him. Post-career he expressed satisfaction with the freedom he had gained. During the interview, Peter casually mentioned that he had recently been divorced and suffered separation from his children, noting that the end of his family, like the end of his career, had freed him from suffocating obligations. Yet, shortly afterwards, he mentioned that, while unemployed, he had hit 'rock bottom' and his interview became increasingly confessional, emotional and angry. Peter's anger was unlike that of any of the other jobless professionals we interviewed. In the short extract that follows, an hour and a half into his interview, he moved from elation to tears, to speechless rage in seconds, while responding to an innocuous question of what advice he would give to a person who has just lost his/her job:

I would just, oh gosh you wouldn't really want you to hear my words! [*laughs exuberantly*] you know, I was tempted to say, I'd say to them, forgive me for this, but I'd say to them, f\*\*k the system, f\*\*k them all, get on with it yourself, you know because [*breaks down in tears*] I'd say the system doesn't care – people do, so that's what I'd say, you know, whatever is holding you back from getting on just forget it, just get on with it [.....] [*long pause*] just – yes, I don't know what more you can say to somebody because you can empathise and sympathise with them but unless you can actually give them re-employment ... sometimes you have .. to say no don't know haven't you, you know and er, you know you can put your arm around an unemployed person and give them lots of cups of tea but it doesn't necessarily solve the problem .... you know, I don't know how, you know, I haven't thought it out or thought it through, I've just responded emotionally to it I guess and that,- that's it and just say, you know, system's a system it doesn't care about you, you know [*becomes virtually incoherent*].

The premature end of Peter's career saw him overwhelmed by anger, cynicism and recourse to endless negative stereotypes against managers, gay and lesbian people, foreigners and so forth. A very different response to an equally overwhelming trauma was displayed by Robert, whose hostility to change we noted earlier. Robert was prompted to reflect on his life by a brutal dismissal from his job as systems analyst team-leader, reaching the conclusion that he had had no career.

If I had more of a career drive, I would have probably worked in the City on £50,000, you know, but I wasn't, you know, but never [....] that is that, I'm still in a little one bedroomed flat, rather than my three bedroomed detached house with half an acre or whatever you want. You have an idea of what you want and that's why I found myself to be a bit stuck at the age of 50 [.....] the significance of that is that I got made redundant just

as I turned 50. I felt that a 50 year old is not going to be living in a one bedroomed flat which he's lived in for 20 years, you know, so [.....] haven't really had a career.

Not having a career really, well not having made it, I suppose I'm getting more and more relaxed about it now, but you know haven't really in the grand scheme of things progressed very far I suppose probably suggests that I'm not very ambitious on the other hand you know I had a reasonable nice car with [...] and you know I was on £30,000 a year at the age of 50 ok so sometimes I would have more sometimes I would have less but you know but with more salary comes more responsibility and no more travelling and more stress and so what in hind sight I could have made more use of the time I have given myself you know both financially and [...] you know.

Robert has referred repeatedly, both in the focus group and the interview, to his 'one bedroomed flat' which he saw as evidence sometimes of his lack of ambition and sometimes of his failure to progress. His dismissal, the second one in his career, came to re-affirm his profound sense of failure. Unlike Peter, Robert showed limited signs of anger, but the depths of his despair were unmatched by any of the other interviewees. The powerful imagery and mixed metaphors in the following extract reveal something of his confusion, his shattered self-confidence, his sense of isolation and resignation:

[Being unemployed] it's a bit like walking on ice, when the water's frozen and you know at some stage that ice could melt, and the thing about that is that you know you can swim but don't know where the land is so it's like a sense of drowning really. And because everything is white you lose signs of detail as well but you have to get up every day you have to stay afloat so there is a sense there of trying to do little things each day. Bearing in mind that you used to go to work, you went to work for say 9 o'clock and finished at 6 – try to sustain that [.....] unemployed, that's a full 8 hour day and [.....] 8 hours work now. So there's no preparation for getting back into the work into employment you know expect that doing what I do to going back to doing an 8 hour day is going to be quite tiring I thing but you mustn't give up on the basics that you know I think the disappointing thing is that if I knew what I wanted to do [.....] one is am I the right age to do it and secondly can I do it realistically the answer is probably no now you know. You can't even train when you're unemployed [...] opportunities to getting a job because then you might have the qualifications but there'll be 20 other people with their qualifications and the experience so you're stuck and the only way out of that is perhaps is self-employment which people have done but doesn't necessarily suit me.

Robert matches accurately the broken-despairing category described by Jahoda (1982) with loneliness and isolation added. He sought some solace in walks in the countryside that gave him pleasure, as he said during the focus group:

I think the definition of happiness changes, doesn't it, as you get - as you move through life. Well, you know, I quite like the environment and I get a lot of pleasure out of seeing beautiful things in nature, whether it be, you know, a leaf-turn colour or a silent moment, you know. That's about being in the present, unfortunately all too often you're asked 'where do you see yourself being' well if you're in the present you can't see yourself being anywhere else but the present, can you?

The three individuals whose stories we have discussed in this section share a profound trauma resulting from their dismissal, a trauma that marks the end of their careers. In each case, the experience of dismissal had prompted a far-reaching re-evaluation of their earlier career, their values and their aims. Heather reached the conclusion that her move into management had been a mistake and her dismissal a blessing in disguise. While railing at the injustice done to her, she had moved on to a new phase where part-time work and dedication to religion filled a large part of her life. Peter's life story, his struggles against the system, his occasional victories and frequent failures, saw him defiant at times, broken at others. He had almost persuaded himself that career meant restriction and unfreedom and that drifting in and out of short-term jobs was preferable to commitments and disappointment. Finally, Robert's life story of failures had resulted in profound depression and isolation, disillusionment, guilt, shame and self-pity. All three professionals in this section revealed a deficit of meaning at the heart of their life's stories – the struggle to create a meaningful life's post-career narrative led them to all sorts of contradictions and non-sequiturs, as they tried to make light of what was still an unbearable burden.

### **JOB LOSS AS PROMPT FOR MORATORIUM**

The final narrative strategy for dealing with job loss was one deployed by individuals, whose dismissals had not been so traumatic; in all cases, dismissal may have been painful but had led to some positive outcomes or at least outcomes that were not viewed as failures. None of these individuals was seeking to resume their career; the best description that could be provided for them was moratorium (the term used in relation to identity by Erik Erikson (1959)), a kind of socially acceptable limbo-land of free experimentation with different post-career options. Self-employment (often captured by the very helpful term 'consultant'), early retirement, short-term ad hoc work and return to education and training, all featured as options within this strategy, which did not preclude a parallel attempt to return to more permanent forms of work.

An example of this strategy is provided by Raymond, who, like Peter, had experienced dismissal and divorce in close succession. Like Peter, Raymond reported feeling free following these events. Unlike Peter, he had used this freedom to retrain as an advocate for schizophrenic patients; there was no anger or bitterness in his verbose account:

I was freed from those [financial] responsibilities through a bad experience of divorce which, this is just my perception, is a destructive mechanism; and not just emotionally destructive but financially destructive. My view is that the legal system wish to take your accumulative matrimonial wealth away, they want a third, your partner

gets a third and you're left with a third of your residue, after you've paid the bill, so your bit is diminished right the way down the line. Due to life's experiences and those circumstances, I totally changed direction and then academically, I went through a process where I needed rapidly to be in a position, so I was trained by sponsorship from the National Schizophrenic Fellowship which is a national organisation to be an advocate for people that were in psychiatric lock-up and in the process. Anyone with a diagnosed mental illness had access to me so it was a nice learning experience.

Following his retraining, Raymond worked in a sequence of ad hoc unpaid assignments, interspersed with further periods of training. He was determined not to accept payment for his advocacy work ("I don't invoice people [*chuckles*] because I just feel that when they're in a predicament, to send them a bill for helping just makes things incredibly more difficult and harsh for them.") Playing the part of the good Samaritan and looking for further training opportunities seemed to sum up Raymond's post-career and post-unemployment life story.

I was in an academic programme, that concealed the unemployment process when I went for interviews, because I wasn't unemployed – there was no duplicity, I wasn't lying, concealing it with saying that I'm actually doing various other things and I've continued to do that by taking on Borough Council Scrutiny Committee and various other things; they're non-paid positions but to be able to do them competently I've gone to other locations like ... a training event near Liverpool that was residential, paid for by Local Authority for my training.

Another person who had reached a moratorium was Gerard, a marketing executive and, later, a marketing lecturer. His was the only interview that could be described as relaxed and friendly. Gerard was very articulate and portrayed himself confidently as someone who is in control of his life, even following redundancy from his earlier job. He held a wide range of opinions, mostly gentle disappointment with the 'modern world', a term he used 10 times in the course of the interview, always with negative connotations of harshness, greed and ceaseless work driven by fear. Gerard repeatedly described himself as 'philosophical'. He had experienced dismissal twice; once he had had felt 'stabbed in the back' and briefly lapsed into anger; however, his understanding of job loss was essentially sociological, rather than personal. He saw it as a fact of life for which he used the term 'setback', resulting from a world that was unequal and unjust.

Well, I suppose when you're made redundant that's a setback but you have to be philosophical about it. I mean, if you look around, I mean, it's changed actually from in the early days. Unemployment used to be almost a taboo, but these days it's become almost like it- it's acceptable and you're not a weak employee or anything like that. So I suppose those are setbacks, um, I think the other setback really has just been the increased pressures of work, generally, it has become incredibly pressured and that's been, not just for me but I think for a lot of people.

At 59, Gerard walks a very fine line between viewing himself as having retired already, keeping busy by reading, short lecturing contracts and occasional consulting assignments, and seeing himself as actively looking for a job. Asked how he sees himself in four years' time, he said:

Retired! [*Laughs heartily*] No. I'll, hopefully, I might do some more lecturing and I hope to - I hope to - I might do some other things, like maybe set up a business as well, but I just like keeping active, I mean my philosophy basically is if you're in good health and you want to do something then you should do it. So that's my main thing, work's not a driving force these days as much as it was ... - I actually find it hard to engage with a lot of the modern world in terms of the role it plays in people's lives, I think we all ought to take a big chill pill and think more carefully about what we're doing.

While none of our other interviewees had reached such a relaxed attitude as Gerard, several indicated that their current situation, one occupying an intermediate state between work and non-work was one they were content to occupy. Moratorium stories lacked closure, but this was not a great cause of concern or anxiety for the storyteller. None of them could be described as 'broken', though the philosophical attitude proclaimed by several could be seen as a front for resignation. These were people who were no longer defined by their career; hence they did not feel that, once unemployed, their careers had slipped out of their control. Nor did they feel that life without a career was meaningless or empty. Instead they tried to make the best out of the opportunities that came their way without despair or anxious urgency. Financially, they made the best out of their resources, having no major debts and moderating their aspirations as consumers. Their attitude might be described as one of bricolage (de Certeau, 1984; Lévi-Strauss, 1966), making the best out of the resources available, being on the look-out for opportunities, living within their means and, within these terms, feeling in control of their lives.

## **DISCUSSION**

We have described three narrative strategies deployed by our respondents as they tried to make sense of their experience of job loss and envisage a future growing out of the present. The first approached job loss as a temporary career derailment and insisted on seeing a future as a resumption of career, no matter how implausible such a prospect appeared to others. This may be seen as consistent with 'problem-focused' coping strategies noted earlier in the literature, which (unlike emotion-focused strategies) are viewed in positive terms as no-nonsense and effective. Equally, however, it may be seen as the product of psychological denial – denying the implications of dismissal, repressing the pain and throwing oneself into feverish job-seeking activity with little awareness of its direction and effectiveness.

The second narrative strategy saw the job loss as the end of the line – a painful event, the product of cruelty, injustice and unfairness, from which there is no prospect of resuming or salvaging a career. Job loss here was presented and accepted as an open wound, an enduringly painful experience with few redeeming qualities. Emotions ranged from intense despair to anger, associated with a powerful mixture of personal

failure and betrayal by others. Job search was erratic or spasmodic, often yielding to dejection or inertia.

The third narrative strategy accepted job loss as a radical discontinuity but refused to lapse into despondency, self-blame or in extreme blame and vilification of others. Instead, it attributed it to social factors, the slings and arrows of fortune or to other uncontrollable forces, towards which it adopted a philosophical attitude. Without seeking to resume a career, the ensuing attitude was of living within one's means and engage in temporary paid and unpaid work, studies and other creative activities.

These strategies can be seen as 'emplotting' strategies, i.e. strategies of converting experiences into stories. They are also coping strategies, aimed not only at creating a story that is credible or engaging for themselves and their audience, but one that brings emotional consolation and sustains selfhood. Could these strategies be linked to any specific factors affecting the job loss? The fourteen managers and professionals in our study do not constitute any type of sample; they enable, however, us to exclude certain possibilities. Things that did not seem to affect the choice of narrative strategy included the length of period spent unemployed, earlier experiences of dismissal and the number of earlier job moves. We found that these factors were randomly scattered among our respondents and would tend to agree with Fineman's (1983) view that generalizations about responses to job loss are difficult to make. Each story represented a unique construction, some more robust than others, some more believable or more gripping than others.

Some of our respondents (Bill, Heather, Raymond) had stories that had hardened – over an entire interview a more or less coherent narrative was communicated, one with fixed meanings and stable plot. Others (Matthew, Peter, Robert) had stories that evolved in front of our eyes and ears, experimenting with different storylines or in, a few cases, coming up with what seemed like a radically new and different storyline during a turning point of the interview. Some of these stories were fragile constructions, lacking the full-bodied consistency that one associates with stories of pure achievement or victimhood – instead, they entailed numerous loose ends, both narrative and emotional. The unemployed manager or professional may create a story in which he/she constantly mutates from wronged casualty to dignified survivor to dejected victim, from angry and rebellious fighter to resigned and apathetic victim. In such cases, far from having a ready-made story to describe their experience, the narrator is offering narrative fragments that struggle to coagulate into a coherent story and only falteringly do so. Some of these stay firmly in the space that Boje (2001; 2008) has described as antenarrative – the space before a true story can take shape. Whether successful or not, these stories then should be seen both as sensemaking attempts through which meaning is infused into distressing experiences but also as emotional attempts to come to terms with these experiences and maintain a sense of self. The term 'narrative coping' captures well this parallel struggle for meaning and for consolation.

One of the most significant distinguishing feature in the stories constructed by our respondents lies in the attribution of responsibility for the job loss. Attribution of responsibility is one of the eight key poetic tropes noted by Gabriel (2000) as decisive for the meaning of any story – the meaning of a story hinges on what or who is held responsible for a misfortune that befalls the storyteller. Stories dealing with job loss

must crucially address who is to blame for it. Was job loss the result of accidental factors, impersonal market forces, a malicious boss, or a personal failure of some sort? In attributing responsibility, it is futile to examine the ‘facts’ surrounding dismissal – what matters is where the meaning is sought. Jobless people may feel at fault and blame themselves, even when their plight is the result of macro factors, such as mass redundancies (Burman, 1988). Conversely they may deny responsibility even when they may have been directly responsible for their downfall through their own actions or negligence. What matters is where they place responsibility in constructing a story and whether they can make this ‘stick’, whether in other words they can present a narrative that is credible to themselves and others.

Narrative coping suggests that the narrator has managed to create a story that is both credible and brings consolation for the loss, no matter how distant this may be from any certifiable ‘facts’. Some of our respondents, like Gerard, generated good stories that were both credible and seemed to serve them well. Others generated stories that, in spite of loose ends, were gripping but failed in bringing consolation. These were stories successful in portraying failure but failures in bringing consolation – Matthew, Robert and Peter would be among them. Yet, others, like Bill and Raymond, came up with less good stories that were far from interesting, yet, they seemed to offer them much solace.

## **CONCLUSION**

Far from looking at coping as a rational, purposive behaviour aimed at returning a person to a comfortable state of equilibrium, our findings suggest that in dealing with a painful event, such as job loss, people seek to make sense of it by constructing a story that ‘explains’ the event, offers consolation and sustains their sense of selfhood. As David Sims has argued,

“Our stories of our lives are sense-making devices, but our relationship with our stories is less under our control and less utilitarian on our part than the 'sense-making' tag might suggest. There is always a tingle of uncertainty, which gives spice to our storied lives, an aleatoric element. The stories that we believe in are not completely plastic. As well as developing stories to understand what is happening to us, we make things happen to us and perceive events in particular ways in order to give a satisfying, interesting or convincing development to the plot that we are living out.” (Sims, 2003, pp.1198f)

Our findings add a counterview to those earlier studies (largely conducted in earlier recessions) that have regarded job-seeking as largely a rational, problem-focused activity, in which emotional responses such as anger, guilt or shame were seen as counter-productive. Our research suggests both rational and emotional responses, but not always at the same time. Indeed, in at least some of the interviews, respondents present a rational, logical ‘front’ which at some time breaks down into despair, distress and depression as their story unfolds, seeping into a negative and fragmented sense of self. These managers are more likely to view their career as disrupted or terminated – the end of the road for their chosen career at least, or even a journey to permanent unemployment, temporary employment or unpaid work.

Our study, conducted at the outset of a recession, reflects the unique composition, scale and shape of this recession, one that has hit managers and other professionals with particular ferocity. This is not surprising, given the expansion of the service sector of the economy (and particularly financial services) since the last downturn. But it raises the question as to how much we understand the experience of managerial unemployment, the developmental needs of managers as a particular social group, and their responses to unemployment itself, including their coping strategies. As our research has shown, running through the narratives is a painful vein – the trauma of unemployment, a trauma that evokes a wide spectrum of highly personal and individual responses. Finding typical or normative interventions (governmental or otherwise) to helping this group will therefore be highly challenging, a challenge for which our catalogue of previous experience is thin.

Another difference between the current and previous recessions is that the economic and social landscape is fundamentally different (a fact not lost on our respondents). The world has become more interconnected, through, for example, international trade, large-scale migration, and increasingly complex and integrated channels of communication (particularly mobile technologies and the Internet). Internet tools such as Ryze, LinkedIn and Xing, all of which are aimed at business professionals, allow for the creation of personal profiles, as well as participation in discussion forums, and, in the case of Xing, access to live, local business events. Klaassen (2009) (2009) notes that LinkedIn has doubled its monthly visitors from 3.6 million to 7.7 million in just 12 months, making it the third largest online job site. In principle, the use of social networks could allow unemployed managers to distribute their CVs, link up with like-minded professionals to provide each other with peer support, share information on employment opportunities, or even discuss joint entrepreneurial business ventures. They make for what Jahoda (1982), commenting during the last recession, calls compelling contacts and shared experience outside the home. There is no evidence, however, from our data that our group of unemployed managers made extensive use of social networking for these or any other purposes. It seems that, for virtually all our respondents, the experience of unemployment isolates and atomises them.

Finally, having identified three distinctive responses to managerial unemployment, what can this classification tell us about the kinds of interventions that might be appropriate? Our analysis suggests firmly that for a wide variety of reasons the needs of different unemployed managers and professionals differ widely. Some have a more robust, or at least phlegmatic response, than others and interpret their predicament in fundamentally different ways. In the ‘temporary’ career disruption category, Bill viewed his job loss as a reversal rather than a disaster. He bounced back. At the other end of the spectrum, Peter, saw his job loss as the end of the road, appeared traumatised and psychologically damaged by his experiences. Both received one-to-one executive coaching as part of the programme described earlier. Yet it is worth conjecturing that a more appropriate intervention for Peter would have been counselling or psychotherapy. The attitude of these managers to the coaching experience was also diverse, ranging from those who regarded their coach as a “messiah”, to others who could not see the point of it. This will be the focus of a future article. What is clear, however, is that coaching, counselling and psychotherapy may be the new growth industries of the new recession.

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