

Re-Creation in the Age of Wisdom: Involuntary Job Transition in Women over 50

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“There is no medicine like hope, no incentive so great, and no tonic so powerful as expectation of something tomorrow.”

O.S. Marden, From the U.S. TV Show: *Coming of Age* (1988-1989)

Dedication

This work is dedicated to my parents, James H. Lyon and JoAnn Reeves Lyon, who have modeled and supported life-long learning. I am forever grateful for their love and support.

Acknowledgment

There are many people who have helped make this journey meaningful and hopeful, and I would like to thank them for their support and encouragement along the way.

The co-researchers, some close friends and some new friends, were the ones who gave life to a topic that, at the beginning, felt lonely and solitary to me. Hopefully you will get to know them as you read what we shared, and your thoughts and emotions will be touched by them, as mine have been.

Dr. Sheila McNamee helped me greatly in getting started in the program, encouraging me in my pursuit of understanding social construction, and assisting me in building my inquiry. The TAOS Institute provided me with many new friends and supporters along the way, and I am extremely grateful for all of them.

I have enjoyed getting to know dr. Gerda vanDijk, one of my Tilburg University promoters, and thank her for her encouragement, feedback, and coordination with my TAOS advisor, helping us navigate the PhD process. She took time to meet me in New York City while on a family vacation so that we would have face-to-face interaction early on. Her advice to me during that meeting was “just start writing”, and I heard this message again and again in my head throughout the process. My second Tilburg promotor, dr. Rens van Loon, provided extremely valuable and thought-provoking feedback, encouraging me to think beyond the inquiry and to expand my reflections on the experience.

Dr. Ginny Belden-Charles, my TAOS advisor, has become a personal friend, mentor, and constant source of helpful thoughts, comments and cheerleading throughout this journey. She helped me build a realistic timeline for the project, one that kept the goal at the end alive and vibrant. I looked forward to our many meetings with cups of coffee and tea, catching up on family news, and exchanging ideas about so many things in our lives that have converged. I can't imagine a better match of student and advisor.

Friends and colleagues from the colleges where I teach, my book club, professional groups, Facebook and other circles in my life, past, present and lifelong, kept me motivated through their questions, their interest, their challenges, and their affirmation. The choice to do this was reaffirmed time and again by their nurturing.

My family provided endless encouragement and, at times, prodding, to keep the end goal in sight, even when it seemed to be only a distant glimmer. My husband, Bruce, gave me inspiration, hope, and his unique humor when it was needed most. Thank you all for your love and support.

Abstract

This inquiry is built around the stories and dialogue among six women who experienced job transition when they were over 50 years of age. Background about the economic times in which these transitions occurred, input from individuals supporting people in job transition and related literature around the topic provide context for the rich narrative of the women involved. Generativity is built through their common feelings, language, and themes and reveals their passion for sharing, their eagerness to adapt and recreate themselves, and their desire to share their wisdom with others in new roles.

In order to fully explore the shared ways of experiencing transition and derive the greatest shared meaning from the inquiry, a social construction framework and stance is used. The methods within this framework are co-researcher one-on-one dialogues done in an Appreciative Inquiry (AI) style, autoethnography, narrative analysis, and a focus group dialogue around the narrative themes using the Art of Focused Conversation process (Stanfield, 2000). The women, as co-researchers, generate new meaning around the transition experience through their narratives and dialogue.

What emerges from the collective voices and dialogue is a message of connection, resilience, and re-creation, along with a strongly expressed desire to mentor and share wisdom with others in future roles. Negative, challenging feelings are explored through the dialogue, but the focus turns to hope and renewed energy. Relationships that held value during the process are nurtured and expanded. Positive connections are built with new enthusiasm, and the women highlight their relatedness and their desire to continue engagement with others.

A possibility for this inquiry includes connecting the positive, re-creative energy of the over 50 woman in transition with entrepreneurial environments and those workplaces experiencing high rates of change. Maximizing the desire of women over 50 to mentor and share their wisdom could also add richness to the shared community of women.

Continued dialogue with the over 50 worker to explore implicit biases, prejudice, stigma and ageism in the employment process and workplace is needed. Explorative dialogue around increasing the economic and human vitality of the over 50 worker could help address future labor shortages, ensure financial security and optimize the value and contributions of workers of all ages.

Keywords: involuntary job transition, women in transition, over 50 worker, age discrimination

Introduction

A new kind of transition

In the midst of the interview, I feel a strange tension developing in the room among the director, the two subordinates (both twenty-somethings), and myself, the 53-year-old candidate. The director says, "So, how do you handle multiple priorities? What would you do if there were two projects that you had to finish and you couldn't possibly finish them both?" I say, "Well, I have learned how to prioritize and perform the work so that I can handle multiple projects and meet deadlines. I use spreadsheets or Microsoft Project ® for managing projects and milestones, and my years of management experience have allowed me to learn to deal with many interruptions during the day. I am also great with to-do lists for daily work. " She presses on, her young face illuminating doubt and a tad bit of patronizing, "But you just can't possibly finish both projects. What do you do?" The two subordinates both look at me and there is dead silence. One says, "I think she answered the question." We all look at each other awkwardly and I know that I have lost the job. We finish up with standard questions, exchange niceties and I try to leave gracefully. A 30+ year career and resume full of great jobs, promotions, goals met, only to be "here" again....laid off and without a job. Inside I feel shame, humiliation, anger. How can so much accomplishment count for so little? What is happening? (Autoethnography, Fran Lyon-Dugin, 2016)

Re-Creation in the Age of Wisdom: Involuntary Job Transition in Women over 50 is a dissertation that explores the narratives and generative dialogue among six women who have experienced involuntary job loss over age 50. Background about the economic times in which these transitions occurred, perspectives of four individuals supporting people in job transition, and related literature around the topic are included to provide context around the stories. Narrative analysis reveals themes and relational meaning among the co-researchers, distinguishing the experience from job transitions at younger ages and exploring the possibilities of new conversations around job transition over 50.

I was motivated to immerse myself in this research largely because of my own career experiences thus far. I experienced multiple job transitions, mainly due to mergers of companies and follow-on reorganizations. My values around education, hard work, persistence and resulting career success were challenged. In the early and middle years of my career, it was fairly easy to bounce back, or bounce 'up'. Job opportunities took twists and turns to different industries, providing a myriad of experience across multiple roles. The levels got higher; the salaries got bigger.

The transitions that happened in my 50s were different in that new jobs didn't come as easily. The economy was tougher; jobs were scarcer. The reactions to me as a person and as a candidate felt different. Over 50, recruiters started shaking their heads and saying, "Your experience is not focused; it's too broad. I can't sell you." I had machines generate

rejection letters based on lack of key words, certifications, or the right degrees. I also sensed that they generated them based on the dates in my resume.

The career coaches, consultants, and agencies that help displaced workers all had the same message: dye your hair, get new glasses, buy some new clothes, take the years off your resume, get out there and network. Yet, what about what was happening to my identity, my relationships with others, and my relationship with 'work'? In discussions with friends and in networking environments, I found others like myself who were discouraged and struggling. Eventually they 'landed' or forged new paths, but usually with a kind of struggle they had not encountered earlier in life. Who had gone through the experience and ended up 'on the other side' and what might those stories have in common? Could a dialogue among those experiencing these feelings open new possibilities for others? This is the drive that I felt to embark on this relational journey with others.

Why it matters

A large share of our time with each other is centered around employment or 'work', however we define it. We also talk about our work and it contributes to who we are outside of work: at home, among our extended families, at school, at places of worship and meditation, in volunteer settings, in our communities. As the literature will reveal, the impact of work on our being is not to be minimized. A time of transition between jobs, especially when a job is lost through no choice of our own, is stressful.

For women over 50, there are unique challenges. Ageism and sexism exist in U.S. culture, and the job-seeking environment is no exception, as this research will illuminate. Job seekers are told to be optimistic and positive, possibly leading to less exploration and open dialogue around their stress and struggles. They can feel isolated, detached from communities of support and nurturing (Price, Friedland, & Vinokur, Anuram D., 1998). Price et al. (1998) describe job loss as a "network event" (p. 303), involving personal and family relationships, with a successful navigation requiring effective coping resources.

In "From Mirroring to Making", Ken Gergen (2015b) states that "The aim of research would not be to illuminate what is, but to create what is to become" (p. 6). He cites Ingold (2011), describing life "in terms of continuous becoming, a conception in which our major challenges are found within the emerging and ever shifting conditions of moment to moment existence" (p. 7). Difficulties can be broken apart and in the process, perhaps better understood. This dissertation is intended to explore and build support for women over 50 in "becoming" through the transition of involuntary job loss, and into their next phase, whatever that might be.

Methodology

This chapter explains the methodology used for the research, hereafter referred to as an inquiry, positioned within the social construction discourse. There is an introduction to the discourse, providing definitions and the broad context of social construction. The explanation of the positioning of the research provides guidance as to where the inquiry fits within that broad context, and leads to addressing more specific elements of the discourse that apply to the inquiry. The specific research methods are then explained, and the way the methods were implemented in the inquiry is described.

Introduction to the social construction discourse

Giambattista Vico, in the late 1600s and early 1700s, contributed to some of the deepest roots of social construction, proposing that humans are constantly forming and reforming their world and their relationship to it, and that human language is integral to the emergence and development of social groups and institutions (Lock & Strong, 2010). These have become basic building blocks for social construction discourse. Lock and Strong (2010) explain the term ‘social construction’ within the psychological realm as the idea that “we are humans who are constructed through our inherent immersion in a shared experiential world with other people” and, further, that “psychology needs to be about how people make sense of and influence each other” (p. 5). McNamee (2010) expands on this idea, referencing social construction threads in many areas of social science that focus on the postmodern and post-structuralism “concern with processes of communication as opposed to concern with discovering phenomenon in the ‘real world’” (p. 11).

While acknowledging a broad range of social construction definitions, some of the common elements are communication, language and the relational nature of language (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010; Lock & Strong, 2010; McNamee, 2010; McNamee & Hosking, 2013). Hacking (1999) suggests that objects, ideas, and “higher level” items such as “facts, trust, reality and knowledge”, are all included in the realm of things that are socially constructed (p. 21-23). Hermeneutics scholars have honed in on how language and meaning are interrelated, and how culture and tradition factor into the communication process (Lock & Strong, 2010). Citing Mead, Wittgenstein, Vygotsky, the Bakhtin group, Harding and Code, all important figures in the discourse, Sampson (2008) posits that although there are significant differences in the studies of these scholars, they agree that “the dialogic process that occurs between specific people in specific settings who are engaged in specific activities is the originating and ongoing source of mind, of self and of society” (p. 98).

Given the definitions and areas potentially influenced by social construction, it is no surprise that disciplines from psychology to organizational behavior to leadership to education have embraced the possibilities afforded by the central element of communication and the relational nature of the social construction discourse. In order to position this inquiry within the broader realm, it is helpful to explore how some of the

literature breaks down the expanse of the social construction discourse into areas of shared emphasis or focus.

Referencing Danziger (1997), Lock and Strong (2010) suggest that there is a “dark strand” of social construction that is “largely Continental” and a “light strand” that is predominantly “Anglo-American”. While the former focuses more on challenging how language influences power and dominance, the latter stresses possibilities and the generative nature of language and dialogue (Lock & Strong, 2010). Referencing Pearce’s “A Sailing Guide for Social Constructionists” (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1995), Fairhurst and Grant (2010) suggest that in approaching leadership, the framework of four dimensions, each along an axis, can be used to navigate the various facets of the social construction discourse. The dimensions are: construction of social reality versus social construction of reality, multimodal versus monomodal, critical/emancipatory versus pragmatic interventionist, and theory versus praxis (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010, p. 177). Considering these suggested orientations, the inquiry in this dissertation would be related to the “light strand” and navigating toward social construction of reality, practice-oriented, pragmatic/interventionist, and monomodal. I will explain this positioning and its impact on the inquiry methods in the following paragraphs.

Positioning within the discourse

In supporting the “light” orientation suggested by Lock and Strong (2010), I turn to discourses that refer to meaning-making as specific to the experiences of people who share them together. There are “multiple possibilities for meaning and transformative action” (Lock & Strong, 2010, p. 9) when we open up dialogue among people who can share experiences from their own viewpoints. The focus of this inquiry is allowing those involved in the layoff experience, from a variety of roles, to dialogue together and generate new meaning, moving to new perspectives and understandings among each other. In this view, social construction seeks out wider understanding of experiences based upon the unique perspectives of people in relationship with one another, a constantly evolving phenomenon. A prominent figure in this part of the discourse is Ken Gergen.

Ken Gergen (2015a) explains, “what we take to be the truth about the world importantly depends on the social relationships of which we are a part” (p. 3). The social constructionist relational view of the world contrasts with individualism, where experiencing ourselves as isolated beings can cause us to be more guarded and suspicious of others, and lead to isolation and separation (K. Gergen & M. Gergen, 2004). Our understanding of what is real or true is derived from our culture, traditions, upbringing, religion, and is “socially constructed”. This means that those understandings differ from person to person, community to community, and are ever-changing as relationships among people evolve and change. In his book, “Relational Being, Beyond Self and Community” (2009), Ken Gergen explains that “...there is no isolated self or fully private experience. Rather, we exist in a world of co-constitution” (p. xv).

In his book, “An Invitation to Social Construction”, Ken Gergen (2015a) discusses the differences between empiricism (also called positivism or post-positivism) and constructionism (sometimes referred to as relational construction and postmodernism) (McNamee & Hosking, 2013), relative to research. The empiricist, believing in observation and measurement as core elements of scientific research, highlights elements such as scientific accuracy, removal of personal bias, predicting and controlling a research environment, and measuring data. The constructionist responds by pointing out that it is impossible to isolate and study individuals and groups. There is no ability to predict or replicate behavior that is constantly changing as people construct their reality together. While the empiricist approach can provide helpful observations, the constructionist approach can deepen understanding through “thick” descriptions that provide context and perspectives not provided by statistical data, drawing on all research traditions and methods, especially those involving language and narrative.

McNamee and Hosking (2013), other participants in this realm of the discourse, highlight the relational focus of research when using a social construction framework: “We do not concern ourselves with individual mental processes or individual traits and characteristics. Rather, our focus is on what people do together and what their “doing” makes.” (p. 1). For the constructionist in this area of the discourse, the value of research is seen as that which can be shared within and among community, for the greater good. The relational constructionist or social constructionist looks for opportunities in research to engage a variety of people and professions in exploring ways to “broaden our resources for social life” (McNamee & Hosking, 2013, p. 35).

The navigation metaphor of Pearce (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1995) is helpful in further positioning this inquiry. This project’s positioning along the axis of construction of social reality versus social construction of reality leans toward the social construction of reality, emphasizing the generativity arising out of the interactions among people. There is very little motivation toward creating frames or categories that are built from past experiences. It is through experiencing the interactions themselves that the participants make new meaning of what has happened and determine how they can move forward in new relational ways.

The axis of multimodal versus monomodal is rather simple here in that the focus was primarily on the language and dialogue among the co-researchers. Although the setting, environments and technology involved in the dialogues and focus groups were considered, there was little attention paid to modal inputs other than language. There was an early determination to limit the inquiry to women, so the mode of women’s voices, emotions, body movement, etc. was consistent throughout the inquiry.

The positioning of the inquiry along the axis of critical/emancipatory versus pragmatic/interventionist relates to the importance of power dynamics in the inquiry (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010). Although issues of power related to employers or the politics of a market-based economy could have been considered, there was no positioning of the inquiry to examine these elements. Instead, the focus was on the experiences of the co-researchers within the structures that are in place; how they worked within them and how their shared experiences might generate new ways of navigating them in the future.

Along the axis of theory versus praxis, this inquiry sails toward praxis (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1995). Cunliffe (2003) expounds on this when she discusses reflexive inquiry and explains that constructionist-oriented researchers focus on “ontological issues of who we are and how we interact and create our realities with others” (p. 990). In embarking on this inquiry, I sought to find positive, practical use through dialogue with other women about our experiences and how we might explore new meaning through them.

The navigation metaphor and discussion of where it fits on the various axes of the dimensions described by Leeds-Hurwitz (1995) further provide a framing of the inquiry. With this frame in mind, there are a few more unique aspects of the social construction discourse and their applicability to this inquiry that are important to explain in more detail.

Focus on relationships

“Rather than a growing skepticism, constructionist ideas invite us to appreciate multiple perspectives. They vastly expand the range of our imagination, our capacities to innovate, and our potentials for living together in more viable ways”
(K. Gergen, 2015a, pp. 61–62)

The social constructionist theory and practice is one that creates new possibilities because of its focus on the value of relationships. It “concerns the processes by which humans generate meaning together” (“Theoretical Background and Mission Statement | The Taos Institute”, n.d., para 2). Although social construction is a broad and vast dialogue, the relational aspect is particularly key to this inquiry. In “Social Construction: Orienting Principles”, Ken Gergen relates that “We act largely in terms of what we interpret to be real, rational, satisfying, and good,” and that those interpretations are born in relationships (“Theoretical Background | The Taos Institute,” n.d., para 3). Because we make meaning together, in relationships, new possibilities can be created when we redefine our ways of being with each other.

This is not to say that negative or more challenging aspects of involuntary job transition over 50 are ignored or diminished. Indeed, they are in the stories of the co-researchers that are shared in this inquiry, and reactions to them among the co-researchers are evident. However, they contribute to the larger focus of the inquiry being what we, as co-researchers, can build together, in relationship with each other, that might be transformative for us and for others going forward (K. Gergen & M. Gergen, 2004).

The role of dialogue

One of the key components within this social constructionist-oriented inquiry is the role of dialogue, “a form of conversation through which we examine and question ourselves and others on points of view, values, visions and opinions” (van Loon & van Dijk, 2015, p. 66). In order to encourage generative dialogue, where new, shared meaning is created among

the participants, the inquiry should involve “suspending assumptions and certainties, observing the observer, listening to your own listening, slowing down the process of inquiry” (van Loon & van Dijk, 2015, p. 66). A relational dialogue allows the uniqueness of each person’s beliefs, values and experiences to be expressed in an open way, “filled with the challenges and opportunities of tension, unclarity, ambiguity and incoherency as well as harmony, intelligibility, synchronicity and agreement” (Anderson, 2014, p. 68). Emphasis on relational dialogue “enable(s) the participants to generate a new and more promising domain of shared meaning” (K. Gergen, 2009, p. 193)

Social poetics as a research practice

Ann Cunliffe (2000) describes poetic methods as “non-theoretical, unpredictable, practical ways of talking that occur in the living, responsive moment” (p. 4). Examples include metaphors, analogy, instructive language (“do this,” “look at that”), body language, images, and humor (Ann Cunliffe, 2000, p. 4). She suggests that in a postmodern or social constructionist research approach, rather than a researcher observing the language of others, we can use poetic methods as an actual practice, called “social poetics”, to interpret our world through language. She suggests that:

...accepting research as an ongoing, multivoiced, and multi-meaning process requires us not only to explore different meanings and how they may be constituted in particular circumstances but also to recognize that no one interpretation or theory will be adequate in explaining what might be happening. Consequently, new, more participative forms of inquiry are encouraged that accept that research participants (“subjects”) have their own practical ways of “theorizing” their lives that are equally as valid as academic theorizing (e.g., Cooperrider, 1990; McNamee, 2000; Reason, 1994)” (Cunliffe, 2002, p. 131).

This is supported through research that positions language as ontology (the nature of being), focusing on the critical nature of language in creating “social realities and identities” (Cunliffe, 2002; Katz & Shotter, 1996). Meaning is created through the “dance” of the words exchanged and emotions expressed. This was very evident in the back and forth stories, facial expressions, passionate outbursts, and even hugs exchanged during the dialogues of this inquiry. In the “language as ontology” stance, we understand ourselves and what happens in our lives in new ways through the language and narratives we share (Cunliffe, 2002; Katz & Shotter, 1996; Shotter, 2006).

Through the dialogues with co-researchers and the focus group, women expressed who they were, what happened to them through their transition experiences, how they had changed, and, in some cases, who they had become “on the other side”. They talked about their lives and experiences with passion and commitment, wanting to express and share their stories, expanding and reflecting on the comments of others in the group, making meaning for themselves and those with whom they were sharing. This is the “dance” of

social poetics, and serves as a valid way that the co-researchers created their own “theory” as to what the transition experience meant to them.

Terminology: An unfolding inquiry versus research

I refer to this research as an “inquiry” and the participants, including myself, as “co-researchers” (McNamee, 2010; McNamee & Hosking, 2013). McNamee and Hosking (2013) choose the word “inquiry” as opposed to “research” to reflect the normal interaction among people in relation to one another, contrasted with scientists drawing observation from outside a test environment. The co-researchers participated in one-on-one dialogues with me, and later, together in a focus group. In an inquiry, the researcher is actively involved. (K. Gergen, 2015a; McNamee & Hosking, 2013). Inquiry is “open and curious” (McNamee & Hosking, 2013, p. 100), with engagement that encourages exploration and growth. In this inquiry, the co-researchers were friends, friends of friends, professional colleagues, and people with whom I had a relationship, either directly or through a friend. I was engaged actively in the dialogues with each participant, and in the focus group; “engaged” meaning I shared my stories and reactions as part of the dialogues and focus group interaction. I chose various methods, explained in detail in the next section of this chapter, that would build upon the relationships we were forming and encourage a robust dialogue.

McNamee & Hosking (2013) describe relational inquiry as an “engaged unfolding” (p. 45); Maxwell (2005) describes it as “tacking back and forth between the different components of the design (p. 3). These descriptors fit this inquiry well, as the co-researchers (researcher and participants) were fluidly going back and forth, with the design evolving and developing with an iterative style. As narratives and autoethnography were reviewed and examined, questions arose that helped clarify the purpose and focus of the inquiry. Participants and activities were added to the inquiry to enrich the data and the possibilities (McNamee & Hosking, 2013; Shotter, 2006). The inquiry shifted over the course of the study, as each step of the process revealed new insights upon which subsequent processes were built. Co-researcher situations changed, and their stories were revisited and built upon throughout the inquiry, adding further insight to the findings.

Future-forming possibilities and generativity

The methodology of the inquiry was designed to look to the future as one with new possibilities (K. Gergen, 2015a; Lock & Strong, 2010; McNamee & Hosking, 2013). “Generative capacity” is defined as a “capacity to challenge the guiding assumptions of the culture, to raise fundamental questions regarding contemporary social life, to foster reconsideration of that which is ‘taken for granted’ and thereby furnish new alternatives for social action” (K. Gergen, 1978, p. 1346). Rather than focus on identifying or dwelling on negative aspects of job transition from a “past” perspective, the goal was to bring multiple voices together and possibly generate energy around sharing new ways of being in these transitional times. The purpose of the inquiry was to build relationships and community among the participants and to build meaning together that might be useful to

others (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013; K. Gergen, 2009; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; McNamee & Hosking, 2013).

Lock and Strong (2010) explain that the manner in which we go about meaning-making “inherently embedded in socio-cultural processes, are specific to particular times and places, (and) vary over different situations” (p. 7). Using a stance that is a combination of subjective (others within context) and intersubjective (selves in relation to others), I joined the participants in shaping a perspective together (Cunliffe, 2002) .

In this inquiry, the narratives of the dialogues with co-researchers, the autoethnography and the focus group built a relational approach to exploring the topic of transition over 50. Together, the co-researchers attempted to make sense of the experience and test possible metaphors that may help others make sense of it. By making sense of it, they may be strengthened in creating a more positive, less declarative and more tentative view of their experience, in keeping with a constructionist approach.

Ken Gergen (2015b) explains that we can reposition research not to reveal “what is”, but to generate “what is to become” (p. 6). There was no expectation that co-researchers would arrive at conclusions about “what to do” or how to resolve issues related to transition over 50, but that sharing of stories, experiences, emotions, challenges, hopes, expectations, and other aspects of their journeys might lead to greater understanding, hope, courage, empathy, and a sense of community among these women and others with whom they might come into relationship in the future.

Hibbert, Sillince, Diefenbach, & Cunliffe (2014) posit that generativity in organizational studies can be improved through the use of “relationally reflexive practices” (p. 278). They draw upon definitions of relational practices and reflexivity as “methodological self-consciousness” (Lynch, 2008, p. 29). This calls for researchers to not discount, but to include in their study “critical questioning” of the environment, their own “limits and prejudices,” their relationships with the co-researchers, and any other relevant factors that might impact the inquiry (Hibbert et al., 2014, p. 283).

I chose to bring together the voices of the co-researchers, the narrative accounts and themes from dialogues, and engage in further dialogue in the focus group setting. I sought to encourage greater generativity through the gathering of the voices to explore possible metaphors and the common themes from the dialogues. The focus groups were also considered a variation of interactive ethnography, merging the stories of a number of participants involved in a similar experience (Ellingson & Ellis, 2007). Although this process could open up “a degree of exposure”, it could also allow for greater connectedness and generation of new ways of being and going on together (Hibbert et al., 2014, p. 288; Shotter, 2006).

Relational research approach and methods

McNamee (2010) proposes that “The human sciences are no longer characterized by one generally agreed paradigm but by a variety that exist simultaneously” (p. 11). Numerous scholars have analyzed social construction inquiry, approaches and methods, expounding upon their benefits, value, and challenges (Anderson, 2014; Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993; Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Hibbert et al., 2014; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Lynch, 2008; McNamee & Hosking, 2013). I found the chart provided by Raboin, Uhlig and McNamee (2013) to be particularly useful, contrasting the research “worlds” of diagnostic (traditionally called quantitative), interpretive (traditionally called qualitative) and relational (emerging framework) in the following chart (2013, p. 11):

Research World One Diagnostic	Research World Two Interpretive	Research World Three Relational
Prove	Understand	Continuous Change
Observe	Describe/Interpret	Co-Create
Researcher/Subject	Researcher/Participant	Co-Researchers
True or False	In-Depth Descriptions/ Situated Meanings	Generate New Meaning
Discoverable Truth and Cause/Effect Mechanisms	Contextualized Knowledge/ Multiple Realities	Generate New Realities
Statistically Valid	Authentic to Participants	Locally Useful
Generalizable and Repeatable	Possibly Transferable	Local & Historical/Co-Evolving
Discover Truth	Expand Insight	Generate Possibilities

The authors further explain that it is important for the researcher to match the motivations and potential results of the approaches above to his/her own values and beliefs; no one approach stands above or below another in quality or value (McNamee et al., 2013). As I examined my topic and potential value, I was drawn to the relational research “world”,

especially with its focus on co-creation, creating new meaning, and generating possibilities (McNamee et al., 2013). Through the interaction among women who had experienced job transition over 50, including myself, I was energized by the opportunity to build meaning together.

McNamee and Hosking (2013) carefully point out that a relational orientation towards research doesn't prescribe specific methods; it is more about "how we practice any particular 'method', or, more generally, how we 'do' our inquiry" (McNamee & Hosking, 2013, p. 45). Being relationally responsive to the co-researchers, listening and responding to their stories, and focusing on how we could support each other and those in similar situations were criteria I used in selecting methods. I was also cognizant of the inquiry's positioning within the social construction discourse and how the methods coincided with the navigational metaphor previously explored in this chapter, supporting praxis, pragmatic and the social construction of reality (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010).

Chosen methods

The methods that I chose to use included dialogue with each co-researcher done in an Appreciative Inquiry (AI) style, autoethnography, a focus group and dialogue around the narrative themes using the Art of Focused Conversation process (Stanfield, 2000), and narrative inquiry and analysis. An ancillary method that I brought into the inquiry was metaphor, although it was treated as something that the co-researchers could choose to employ or not as we felt it fit into our co-construction. These methods were chosen to create the most meaning-making among the co-researchers, and to maximize the generative possibilities of the inquiry. These methods are described in more detail below.

One-on-one dialogue in Appreciative Inquiry (AI) style

Appreciative Inquiry, or "AI", is one of the newer practices that has arisen from the constructionist approach since the 1980s (Coughlan, Preskill, & Tzavaras Catsambas, 2003; Marshak & Grant, 2008). Developed by David Cooperrider and his colleagues, AI seeks to use affirmation of stories of past success among a group of people or an organization to facilitate construction of a positive future (Troxel, 2002). The "4D Model" of the AI framework includes: Discovery, Dreaming, Designing and Destiny (Cooperrider, 1996). These steps are focused around the heliotropic metaphor of plants growing toward the light, "drawn towards positive images of the future and positive actions, based on the affirming energizing moments of their past and present" (Cooperrider, 1990; Postma, 1998, as cited by Michael, 2005, p. 222). The AI experience is propelled by the energy of people expressing and sharing themselves through narratives and relational dialogue. AI is a holistic approach to change that, as a methodology, "takes the idea of the social construction of reality to its positive extreme" (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005, Chapter Two). Indeed, Cooperrider and his colleagues' core principles for the practice of AI reflect strong alliance with social construction discourse (Coughlan et al., 2003).

Focusing on building from the positive, versus analyzing the negative, AI has proven to be an effective framework for narrative-based change, generativity, and new meaning-making or world-making (Bodiford & Camargo-Borges, 2014; Bushe, 2010; Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005; K. Gergen, 1978, 2015b; Hibbert et al., 2014; Troxel, 2002; Zandee, 2015).

Coghlan et al. propose that AI is “both a philosophy and a worldview, with particular principles and assumptions and a structured set of core processes and practices for engaging people in identifying and co-creating an organization’s future” (2003, p. 6).

Although the complete four step model is used most frequently by organizations to initiate change, AI style dialogue initiated by open-ended questions has been used as a “discovery” phase methodology in research (Goldman, 2014; Michael, 2005; Reed, 2007). I was interested in narrative that encompassed many facets of the transition experience so that together, the co-researchers could create new meaning for themselves and, perhaps, others. Rather than uncovering facts through pointed, direct questions, the AI style dialogue opens up a shared relationship and experience between co-researchers, and features open-ended questions that emphasize story telling. Where traditional interview questions and answers might turn the co-researchers toward “what happened to me” or “what’s wrong with me”, the AI framework with its emphasis on story telling creates engagement, enthusiasm, spontaneity, and less inhibited narrative (Michael, 2005). Reed posits that an AI approach examines “how people feel and think” about “naturally occurring phenomena rather than controlled experimentation” (2007, pp. 53–54).

In opening up the dialogue there were prepared questions, but I tried to stay in a position of “not-knowing” (Anderson, 2014), encouraging storytelling and empathy between the co-researchers. (See Appendix II for Dialogue-Initiating Questions.) These one-on-one sessions took place in my home or the home of the co-researcher. We made an effort to stress comfort and relaxation; a cup of tea or coffee was offered and there was initial dialogue around home, family and other relationship-building areas. I used a non-invasive recording application on the computer (Audacity®) that didn’t require attention during the dialogue. The questions were designed to introduce ideas but allow free-flowing dialogue that might veer in other directions. As a co-researcher, I participated, sharing my own stories and thoughts reflexively. Using AI, the engagement of everyone involved in the inquiry was deepened, an experience that honored all of the voices (O’Mahony, 2016). The dialogues, recorded and transcribed, were used to provide “rich” data (Maxwell, 2005).

The open-ended questions led to the sharing of stories of success, accounts of “what worked,” and considerations of what contributions were made by her or others in the process. The questions were designed for reflection, but with focus on where energy was felt, how growth and learning was evident, and what possibilities were revealed. Talking about being unemployed, and specifically being over 50 and unemployed, can be difficult. Lives can be changed, relationships can be lost, financial repercussions can be devastating, and identities and purpose can be in flux. Without minimizing or trivializing these aspects, the purpose of the inquiry was to develop deeper understanding of how participants make it to the other side, discover what they learn about themselves and their relationships, and try to find ways to build greater community around others facing the same challenges

(Bushe, 2010). The AI-oriented dialogues focused on learning, discovering, growing, and sharing, which led to high engagement in the inquiry and high anticipation of the focus group.

Autoethnography

I chose to include autoethnography as a method due to my personal experience around this topic and the influence that it had on me throughout my life. “Autoethnography can be defined as ‘a research method in which the researcher’s personal experiences form both the starting point and the central material of study’ ” (Totinen, 2001, p. 1308, as cited by Denshire & Lee, 2013, p. 222). As a co-researcher in the inquiry, autoethnography provided a way for me to participate with the others, including my own stories and experiences. Given that I had chosen friends and connected acquaintances to be co-researchers, the dialogues were a sharing of stories and a relating of our own personal experiences within contexts that we created together. Denshire and Lee (2013) describe the value of autoethnography as a way to expand the understanding of the writer through multiple identities of self and professional, allowing her to “re-present” a situation “in relation to larger social, cultural, geographical and historical frames” (p. 232). Similarly, Ellis, a significant researcher of autoethnography, summarizes it as a “research, writing, story and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social and political” (2003, p. xix).

It was actually through the autoethnographical exercise in an early TAOS Institute Research Methods Workshop that this inquiry topic was revealed to me. As this topic had personal significance to me, it was intentional that I was transparent in the expression of where bias may enter in, to “understand it, and to use it productively” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 109). Through my own autoethnography of my experiences during transitions, as well as during this research, I was able to recognize my own biases as it related to my culture, aging realities, family status, social status, and other factors, while also attempting to further understand my own experiences. My own experiences became a filter when listening to the voices of others, and that contributed to the co-construction of the inquiry.

“Autoethnography is a blurred genre”(Ellingson & Ellis, 2007, p. 449) and includes a long list of forms. For purposes of this inquiry, the forms were predominantly personal narratives/short stories, combining creative writing with the inquiry. These enabled me to fully embrace the role of co-researcher, re-exploring my own transition experience, as well as my role within the larger inquiry context. While I did not incorporate all of my autoethnographical writing into the dissertation, it informed and contributed to the shaping of my experience throughout the inquiry.

Focus group and dialogic conversation

‘Dialogic conversation’ involves mutual inquiry: an engaging connection of sharing, exploring, crisscrossing, and weaving of ideas, thoughts, opinions, and feelings through which newness and possibility emerge (Anderson, 2012, pp. 14–15).

Since the first dialogues for this inquiry were conducted in 2015, there has been evolution of the topic of job transition in women over age 50 in the media, in blogs, in educational circles, and in business settings. The economy has improved, there is more literature about ageism and specifically feminine ageism, and there has been growth in female-owned businesses (“Signs that the US Economy Is Improving - Yahoo Finance,” 2015, “Womenable.com,” 2016).

Part of the purpose of the inquiry process is to keep the dialogue alive, so that others may join in, other voices can be heard, new relationships can be formed, and new actions can be explored. After dialogues with co-researchers, each one expressed great interest in participating in a focus group and gathering with other women to explore the topic further. They were interested in each other’s stories, challenges, and triumphs.

The process used for the focus group was “The Art of Focused Conversation” (Stanfield, 2000). The objective of this process is to help groups reach deeper levels of understanding and meaning through dialogue by using a prescribed method of questioning. There are four levels of questioning: objective, reflective, interpretive and decisional (Stanfield, 2013). The questions at the “objective” level ask the participants to share facts about the topic. The “reflective” questions lead the group to begin building dialogue around how they relate the facts to feelings, emotions and observations. The “interpretive” level allows the group to elaborate on what those feelings, emotions and observations might mean. In the case of this inquiry, we considered how possible metaphors might be related to the topic. Finally, the “decisional” level leads to dialogue around conclusions and possible actions as follow up to the inquiry. The format and questions used in the focus group are in Appendix III.

Narrative inquiry and analysis

Polkinghorne (1988) refers to narrative as “a meaning structure that organizes events and human actions into a whole” (p. 18), with the whole being referred to as “a scheme by means of which human beings give meaning to their experiences of temporality and personal actions” (p. 11). Similar to AI, narrative inquiry and the interest in “stories” and “the ways in which discourse in turn creates and reinforces mindsets” are considered a more contemporary approach and practice within social construction and the organizational behavior discipline (Marshak & Grant, 2008, p. S12). The narrative in this

inquiry is made up of many stories told among the co-researchers and is used “to generate understanding through sharing first-hand experience” (K. Gergen, 2015a, p. 73). Given my personal experiences with involuntary transition and the large numbers of my colleagues who had had similar experiences, the opportunity for narrative inquiry was readily available and could provide the first-hand experiences I desired for the study.

Clandinin (2006) discusses narrative as both “phenomenon and method” (p. 45) in that humans live their lives through experiences and stories, and that researchers are part of the relational space of the narratives they study. She goes on to explain that although narrative inquiry has a long history, its use as a “methodological response to positivist and post positivist paradigms” is newer to the social sciences (Clandinin, 2006, p. 45). It is especially interesting to note the three dimensions of narrative inquiry that Clandinin (2006) proposes: “the personal and social (interaction); the past, present and future (continuity); and place (situation)” (p. 47). These dimensions, particularly the first two, were both challenging and enriching in this inquiry due to the unfolding process that occurred. The narratives, as revealed in the dialogues, took place over a period of two years, during which the personal and employment circumstances of the co-researchers were changing and evolving. During the same time, the economy was improving and somewhat stabilizing. The effects of the interaction and continuity can be seen in the analysis and contributes to the findings that resulted.

The dimensions are also important to the “co-constructed experiences developed through the relational inquiry process among the co-researchers” (Clandinin, 2006, p. 47). The interaction between myself and the co-researchers during the dialogues, sharing in the telling of stories that touched my own sensitivities and emotions, resulted in “a sense of shared constructions” (Gemignani, 2011, p. 706) of the experiences. There was also continuity as we examined together the timeframes and how our lives had evolved and were continuing to evolve. I was able to remain vulnerable and open to changes in my own awareness and thinking, to question my own thoughts, and to share these with my co-researchers.

The narrative analysis process was conducted for both the AI-style dialogues and the focus group dialogue. I used a process for the analysis similar to the one described in the inquiry done by Blustein, Kozan and Connors-Kellgren (2013), who did an inquiry into unemployment and loss. They used somewhat of a “holistic-content approach” (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998), which focuses on the whole story of a co-researcher while examining larger themes among the whole group. However, I did isolate and group portions of the narratives that supported the themes as well. I did not attempt to identify any specific biases of my own, since I was a co-researcher in the inquiry. The co-researchers did at times dialogue about our individual and shared biases.

Following each dialogue and the focus group, the recordings were transcribed into Word format. I mentally noted for myself other factors involved in the dialogue experience, such as the general “mood” of the co-researcher(s), emotions, facial expressions and body language. I used those mental notes in writing up the summaries, using them, for example, to guide me in where to use direct quotes to emphasize the co-researcher’s exact words or

in what words to use to describe the co-researcher's comments (i.e. shared, expressed). I created summaries of each dialogue for the co-researcher to review and approve before the focus group was conducted. I performed analysis of both the interviews and the focus group with key words and phrases using a coding software (MAXDA12 ®) in order to pull out themes and ideas that might be common, similar or related to one another. The themes from the dialogues were reviewed with co-researchers and informed the focus group session. I weaved back and forth between the field and the analysis, in this case, between the dialogues and the analysis, in a fluid manner (Clandinin, 2006). This was to ensure that our combined construction was meaningful to the co-researchers, and that they agreed that it was an accurate accounting of the experience. Gemignani (2011), proposes that "It is in the critical space in between the researcher and the researched that the inquiry develops provocatively as an endeavor to generate new knowledge" (p. 706).

In writing up the summaries and themes, I chose to use a very storytelling style to communicate the narrative analysis within the inquiry. The common threads are loosely combined, while keeping the integrity of the words of the co-researchers intact. Direct quotes are used extensively to capture the richness of the narrative.

Metaphor

Metaphor can be used "to evoke, discover, and create meaning – expanding consciousness even as it organizes it" (Seiden, 2004, p. 639). It opens up other possible meanings of the experience, while it also helps create an image around which participants can consider and relate, strengthening their relationships (Seiden, 2004). Kovecses (2005) posits that American life is filled with metaphors, and that they are an integral part of our culture.

One metaphor I considered, the literary "coming of age" metaphor, came about through conversation with my advisor when we talked about common themes from the dialogues. Some of the themes that had surfaced were around participants' struggle with identity, not knowing whether the participant wanted to recreate a past life or to create a uniquely different one, their growth and change throughout the process, and the forming of new relationships through networking. We considered whether this metaphor might resonate with the co-researchers and decided that building the topic of metaphors into the focus group session might be helpful.

Variations in metaphors exist among individuals based on their histories and are also created in the context of shared histories (Kövecses, 2005). Creating a communicative environment where the participants could experience the topic in a comfortable setting and relate their personal, specific and unique past and present lives could allow them to engage in a metaphoric conversation, deepen their relationships, and possibly create new meaning together (Kövecses, 2005; Seiden, 2004). Metaphors may also help participants temper their experience through symbolism, allowing them to "move into and move away from vital but potentially overwhelming experiencing" (Seiden, 2004, p. 642).

Ethical considerations

Clandinin (2006) states, “We need to imagine ethics as being about negotiation, respect, mutuality and openness to multiple voices” (p. 52). McNamee and Hosking suggest a “broadening” of the ethical scope in that “relational constructionism invites a reconstructed and expanded notion of ethics that center the entire inquiry process” (2013, p. 106). Recognizing the value of multiple realities, values, and beliefs of co-researchers (including the one initiating the inquiry) becomes a focus for the ethics of the inquiry (McNamee & Hosking, 2013).

I embarked on this inquiry in order to learn about others’ stories, experiences, and perspectives around something I had also experienced. Quite honestly, I was looking for an enhanced community and dialogue, as well as further reflection, around an experience that had previously felt quite lonely. I felt that deepening my experience through dialogue with others might help me further understand how it had impacted my life and my relationships. I purposely went about finding co-researchers through friends, existing relationships and word of mouth. In most cases, I knew of the co-researcher’s experience with involuntary job transition from previous social interaction with them. Each co-researcher invited to be a part of the inquiry was very enthused to do so, and expressed a strong desire to contribute to a meaningful dialogue that might help the other co-researchers and perhaps others. McNamee and Hosking explain that a ‘researcher’ (practitioner, professional) can relate to co-researchers, “inviting them into dialogues of equals, to co-create responsibility for the process” (2013, p. 109).

Engaging more focused and meaningful dialogue could bring out more about our unique experiences, enable us to find common themes, and lead to new meaning. McNamee and Hosking (2013) describe the drive to “coordinate multiplicity”: “If our realities are created in what we do together, then continuing our engagements (or our ‘doings’ with each other) opens the possibility for continued and ongoing coordination and meaning-making” (p. 106). Rather than a subject-object relation and focus on distinguishing self from others, the ethics of the relational inquiry involve honoring the process of the relation itself and the stance of openness. While attempting to keep an open stance and to value all of the voices, I was also aware of the limited communities involved in the dialogue (see Relationships and demographics).

During the dialogues, co-researchers were quite passionate about their stories. In some cases the stories went off on tangents, and I was quite careful not to “disturb” the direction of the stories by interrupting or redirecting. This was done to safeguard the participants from experiencing any “harm” or feeling that their voices were not being heard and acknowledged (Erlandson et al., 1993). Our dialogue was open, honest and impassioned at times. Many feelings were awakened in me during our dialogues, some that I hadn’t experienced in some time and some that I hadn’t experienced before: renewed pain, sadness, grief, empathy, and also hope, confidence and exhilaration. To openly and honestly share these feelings together further enhanced the relationships that I already had with each co-researcher, and among us collectively.

There were certain administrative efforts put forth as well, to adhere to high standards around the inquiry. In order to ensure safety of the co-researchers, there was informed consent around the interactions with them and around processes used for collection of data. A consent form (See Appendix I) was used for each dialogue, informing the participant about the inquiry, including some background, the intent of the inquiry, who was involved, and who could be contacted if the participants (co-researchers) had concerns. Although most participants were very willing to share a wide range of information, they were informed that their participation was voluntary, and that they could refuse to answer any question posed to them. They all consented to have their first names used in the inquiry report. (The exception was Marcia, who allowed me to use her complete name and reference the book she has written.) They were told that fictitious company names would be used, and that companies would be identified in generalized terms, such as “a large nonprofit” or “a small investment firm.” I selected to do transcription of the dialogues using a virtual, one-person administrative services business owned by a woman. She has a background in human resources (HR) and was acquainted with the style and type of inquiry being conducted. Her services were contracted to be confidential, with all data turned over to me upon completion of the transcripts.

Methods used to increase credibility, generativity and utility

Designing a qualitative inquiry using a social construction framework leads us to a discussion of credibility, generativity and utility versus validity and reliability (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012, p. 112; Erlandson et al., 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Rather than trying to validate if something is “true” or repeatable under similar circumstances, we are trying to demonstrate how accurately the inquiry matches the reality of those involved. Does the methodology effectively reveal a good representation of what was said and done during the inquiry?

McNamee (2010) proposes generativity as “how will this information help us ‘go on together’?” and utility as “for whom is it useful?” (p. 17). Indeed, the motivation for the inquiry was to create something useful for women in transition over age 50, something that would possibly be helpful and encouraging at a time of great challenge. I wished that this type of inquiry had been available to me as I transitioned; even now as I am conducting it, I know it is having an impact on my life. Whether the inquiry is shared in the form of the dissertation for which it was conducted, turned into a book, reported in a journal, or used as a starting point for a continued dialogue, I want to share it with others who might derive meaning from it through the language and possibly shared or relatable experience. Some of the methods I employed to increase credibility, generativity and utility include triangulation, member checking, reflexivity and reflexive journaling, which will be described in this section.

Triangulation

Triangulation includes not only use of different sources, but verification of those sources through various means (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This improves credibility, and also usability and generativity as it invites others into the dialogue through common experiences and language. I had the AI style dialogues transcribed and used in several ways. Excerpts of quotations from the dialogues were referenced throughout the inquiry, used to emphasize various themes and observations. I tried as much as possible to use the co-researcher's own words, since they carry the most meaning and are the closest source of their expression available to me. I developed summaries of the dialogues and gave them to the co-researchers, asking for comments and confirmation that they correctly reflected our dialogue. Finally, coordination of themes and ideas from the dialogues were grouped and validated with the co-researchers, and used as a springboard for the dialogue of the focus group session.

Member checking

Member checking allows each co-researcher to verify that her "reconstructions are recognizable to audience members as adequate representation of their own (and multiple) realities" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 314). Again, this method helps increase credibility in making sure that the inquiry relates meaning that was intended. Member checking took place in the form of review of dialogue summaries, and dialogue around common themes from the focus group. Co-researchers were able to react to summaries, correct or elaborate on elements used for thematic study, and ensure proper intention.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity refers to the observations or actions of observers in the social system that affect the very situations they are observing. Using a social construction and relational stance, reflexivity takes on meaning that is nuanced from its more positive science context of "assessing the quality of the knowledge *produced by* (i.e., discovered by) the research design and practices"; rather, it focuses on "the *possible worlds* that are (not) opened up, the 'new' ways of being in relation that can (not) emerge, and how helpful these are to the different local forms of life that are implicated" (McNamee & Hosking, 2013, p. 99). Hosking and Pluut (2010) describe three discourses of reflexivity in a relational constructionist approach: minimizing bias, making bias visible, and ongoing dialoguing. In "ongoing dialoguing", the reflexive engagement addresses values, concerns, and meaning-making of our everyday lives among all of the participants, looping back and forth, such that we might strengthen each other and our communities. Joining in researcher-participant relationships allows for "relational practice with reflexivity" (Hibbert et al., 2014, p. 283; McNamee & Hosking, 2013) and enables the researcher to more fully engage in the environment and the relationships involved in the inquiry.

The process really has no end or “reporting” per se: “the process is the product” (Hosking & Pluut, 2010, p. 70). It is this type of reflexivity that created excitement among the co-researchers of this inquiry, sharing voices and making meaning together of what might have previously or currently been viewed as a difficult time in their lives. When mentioning the focus group interaction, they were very anxious for this dialogue to take place, and to share and create future-forming possibilities.

Limitations and delimitations

It is important to identify both the boundaries of the inquiry, or the delimitations, as well as the potential weaknesses, or the limitations (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). Within the social and relational framework, this is more a matter of acknowledging whose voices are being heard and whose are not included (McNamee & Hosking, 2013). In this section I will articulate the characteristics of the voices used in this inquiry.

Relationships and demographics

I purposely chose co-researchers who were colleagues or friends, or were one step removed from that level of community. The six co-researchers (including myself) chosen for the dialogues about transition experience were all Midwestern American, female, Caucasian, over-50 years of age, and of middle socio-economic status. These characteristics were chosen to match the profile of the population representative of the desired inquiry. These characteristics, while limited, still offered a diversity of religious traditions, family background, marital status, education, industry, and social community relationships.

Other dialogues with individuals who support those in transition (recruiters, career transition advisors) included two women and two men, also from the Midwestern United States, over 50 years of age, and of middle socio-economic status.

Delimitation of the co-researchers to those with whom I have a relationship was done to ensure a somewhat personal knowledge of their transition situation through relationships already established, and, in a few cases, close, current friendships. I thought that this would allow for deeper, stronger narratives of possible shared experiences, not having to establish an initial bond of trust and rapport. Having worked and talked with these individuals on many occasions, there was also an interest and enthusiasm in assisting me with the inquiry. When asked to participate, all said, “I would love to!” Each co-researcher had a desire to share her story and experiences with me and with others involved in the inquiry. Delimitation of geography allowed for easier access to the co-researchers for dialogues and the focus group.

Limitation of the co-researchers in some qualitative research might be considered to reduce generalizability. However, that element is not considered relevant in this inquiry due to the social construction and generative stance. In this inquiry, it is about whose voices are heard, whose values are involved, and what meaning the participants can make

together of *their* experiences (McNamee & Hosking, 2013), rather than focusing on whether or not that meaning can be generalized to “all others.” Thus, the focus is not on making the experience “dependable” or “replicable,” but looking for patterns and insights among the participants that they can use to make meaning together. This might include illuminating patterns and themes that might exist, developing provocative questions that spark further inquiry, or creating stronger relationships that will provide future support for those within the group.

One of the benefits of the limited amount of participants and geography is that the inquiry can remain “organic and dynamic” (Bodiford & Camargo-Borges, 2014, p. 6). For example, the participants could be contacted multiple times, and the focus group could be conducted face-to-face, allowing the inquiry to “unfold” and be adjusted as the process moved forward (Bodiford & Camargo-Borges, 2014; McNamee & Hosking, 2013). The experience created through the dialogues and focus groups was designed for the co-researchers to maximize meaning-making together.

Inquiry topic and design

This inquiry centers around involuntary job transition experiences of middle-class women over 50 in the U.S. While there has been some research done on job loss for women over 50, there has not been much shared from the voices of those affected. And, there is even less written about how women might be sharing and reshaping their experiences of job loss to find new meaning. The challenge of this research is to learn how women might reshape these realities through a joint inquiry, sharing their experiences, their stories and their insights as co-researchers:

- What are some shared ways of experiencing and being in transition for women over 50?
- What relational, generative meaning is revealed through the inquiry that can more positively position and support this type of transition?

As McNamee and Hosking (2013) explain:

When we position ourselves as inquirers, we have ideas about what and who and where and how we want to focus our inquiry. Yet, as a constructionist inquirer, that original positioning is always open to amendment (p. 48).

Harlene Anderson (2014) also proposes that “the initial question(s), goals and “method” often change as the research proceeds” (p. 70). The design of the inquiry evolved over time and with various moments of insight throughout the period in which it was conducted.

The original design

The original design concept for the inquiry was to participate in six Appreciative Inquiry-style dialogues with men and women who had experienced involuntary job transition over 50, and to layer it with my own autoethnography. I also planned to dialogue with four professionals who work with or support individuals in transition. The individuals in professional roles included a recruiter, a self-ascribed professional “networker,” and two independent outplacement professionals. The plan was to analyze the narratives of these co-researchers and reveal some overall themes. Following that analysis, I would conduct a focus group of the co-researchers who had experienced transition and have dialogue around the themes.

The uniqueness of the women’s voices

Through the course of the initial literature search and dialogues, gender differences emerged and intrigued me. Phelps and Mason (1991) found differences between men and women in their transition experiences. Balan (2008) used a relational approach to help explore women’s “common themes related to learning during workplace transition” (p. 3).

In the initial dialogues for this inquiry, the men generally expressed that throughout the transition experience, they just wanted to “get another job,” and they worked tirelessly through various means to accomplish that goal. They were willing to do whatever it took to land a new position, usually in the same field or a slight variation of it. The women, on the other hand, expressed many other emotions, feelings, attitudes, and possibilities of what they might do in the future. Their stories and exchanges wove around the topic of profession or career, and into family life, finances, relationships with friends and family, children, aging parents, and many other dynamics in their lives. They talked about identity and how it had changed for them. They talked about finances and their role in providing income for their families, or contributing to retirement. There was sometimes tension, sometimes confusion, sometimes doubt, and sometimes exhilaration, around what might come next for them.

It was at this point that I felt a distinct pull to explore more deeply what was happening in these women’s lives at this time. Was it a time for rearranging priorities? Could this be an opportunity to start something new and different? I wanted to explore with them some of the dynamics, with an eye toward generative possibilities (K. Gergen, 1978; Hibbert et al., 2014; Maxwell, 2005; McNamee & Hosking, 2013).

The inquiry then shifted to listening to the women’s voices and how they might come together around some common themes. The one-on-one dialogue pool was expanded to a total of six women, including myself as a co-researcher.

More unfolding and consideration of a metaphor

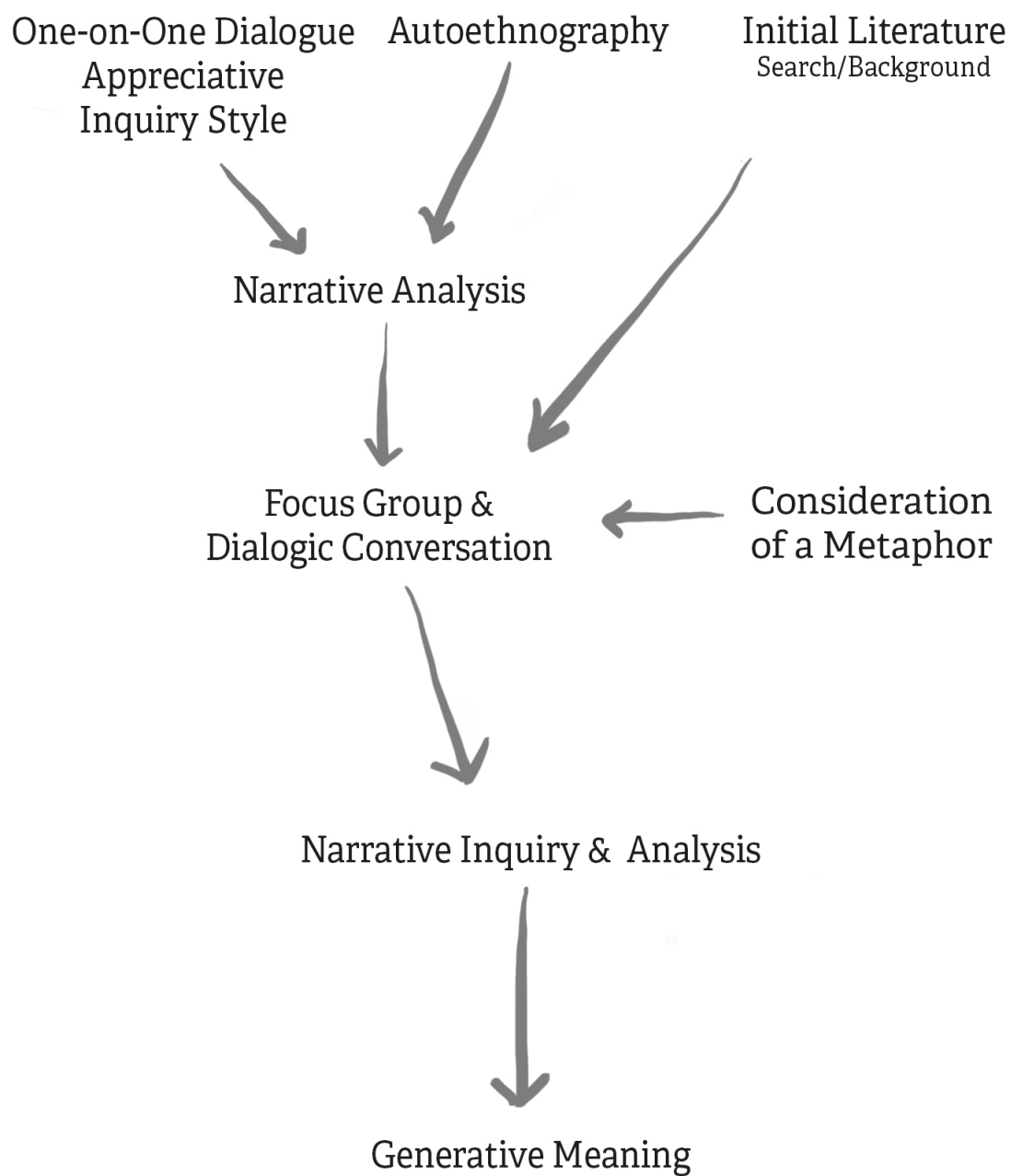
Due to the passage of time, there was other “unfolding” of the inquiry process that took place (McNamee & Hosking, 2013, p. 47). The autoethnographies took some turns as I resurrected feelings aroused in me from the one-on-one dialogue experiences. The economy was improving and presented new dynamics related to job opportunities, career opportunities, or financial changes for the co-researchers and their families. E-mails from some of the co-researchers told of new happenings in their lives, and we revisited how some of their feelings and attitudes had changed.

It was about this time that my advisor, Ginny Belden-Charles, and I met to review the inquiry process. We had a dialogue around our own lives and transitional changes, and some of the themes from the co-researcher narratives. We were working with the language, trying to find words or phrases that captured some of what was being expressed by the co-researchers. The power of metaphor and how that might bring the themes together arose. Kovecses (2005) proposes that “most aspects of American culture are described in metaphorical language” (p. 190) and that they can be used in describing social-cultural experiences. We talked about how the focus group would be a good time to explore the possibility of a metaphor that would resonate with the co-researchers.

The unfolding of the inquiry was not without challenges, given the passage of time, changes to the research process and players, and changes in the economy and lives of the co-researchers. It meant having to go back and revisit the one-on-one dialogues, make changes in plans, and reschedule the focus group a few times. However, I think this speaks to the very essence of social construction, and that our lives are a constant evolution of culture and relationships that affect how we conduct our activities and perceive our world.

Diagram of the design

The design of the inquiry can be represented by the following diagram:



Introduction to the co-researchers

Heather

When Heather found herself suddenly out of a job, she did some real soul searching as to how she might move forward. She had experienced a few layoffs in the past several years, so she started looking for jobs, but she also considered how she might go into business for herself. She talked with small graphic art and design firms and found that they had a need for marketing, communications and recruiting services, but could not afford to hire full time staff. These areas were a specialty for her and she felt that she could offer these services on a contract basis and create a business for herself. This new, independent business gave her flexibility, new challenge, and a new social construction of work in her “next phase” of life. It also gave her a new identity tied to her own talents and skills honed over years of experience.

Sally

When Sally abruptly left her “big corporate job” due to professional ethics reasons, she looked into other employment, but also started her own marketing consulting firm. She found this a tough road, especially in a community that was new to her and where she was not professionally connected. She ended up piecing together a variety of roles, including adjunct teaching, a temporary job with the US Department of Labor, and retail work, in order to make ends meet. She also significantly downsized her home and lifestyle. She experienced serious financial loss due to the 2008 recession. She said she will “never go back to corporate America.” She has a different lifestyle, but she is happy. Some friends have gone by the wayside, but she has a small group of loyal ones. About a year following our initial one-on-one dialogue, I contacted her to see how things had progressed for her. She said she had finally found what she believed was the perfect position: a consultant for a department that assists small businesses and technology start ups, associated with a major midwestern university. Her enthusiasm was evident in her description of how her life had finally turned a corner.

Beth

Beth was widowed suddenly at a young age a number of years ago. Following that, she found a job she loved with a nonprofit that works with unwed mothers. Her colleagues became her social group, her surrogate family. She was very close to staff, donors, and clients. When a new CEO was hired, she clashed with that person and was fired shortly thereafter. She was devastated, personally as well as professionally. Her work and social life were shattered all at once, and she re-experienced the grief of her husband’s death along with the grief of losing her job. It took a long time for her to regroup and figure out

what she was going to do employment-wise, and she was in her second transition since that job. She said that work would be different now, and she would not build the same type of work identity that she had in that previous position.

Linda

Linda relocated from Minneapolis to Denver when her company moved its headquarters, only to have her division soon divested, resulting in the possibility of another move. Although her only son and young family lived in Denver, once jobless, she found that she felt displaced, lonely, and wanting to move back to Minnesota. She did so, without a job, and moved in with a friend. After much networking and searching, she was ready to downsize her lifestyle and retire for good. On the day she was to go to the Social Security office to file, an human resources representative from a company called and offered her a job exactly fitting her background and needs. She accepted that job and it has made use of her vast experience and skill set, and she has mentored younger staff. She says that she loves it, but that if someday she decides she no longer enjoys getting up each morning and going to work, she says she will quit and retire.

Kolean

Kolean developed and taught history of graphic design and history of illustration courses at a small design school in St Paul for over 25 years, until the school closed in 2013. She was very emotionally invested in this small school, its faculty and its students, and she was involved in efforts to “save” the school in its last year of operation. Devastated at its closure, she was excited about the offer of an interview at another institution, where many of the closed school’s students had transferred. The interview was cancelled at the last minute for what she suspected was her involvement in the political turmoil over the closure of the school. She increased her volunteer work as an archivist for a local chapter of a professional design association and for a nonprofit that provides art experiences for elementary school students. She continues to contemplate what she might do in what she calls the “next chapter” of her professional life.

Fran

I provided autoethnography and participated in the dialogues and focus group as a co-researcher, so I include myself in this group. I considered myself to be in a new phase of my career following over 30 years in for-profit and nonprofit fulltime work in various corporations and businesses, including operations, business process and management roles. Numerous mergers, reorganizations and downsizings marked my career and put me in transitions. Each transition meant finding a new full time job. When my father passed away in 2013, I needed to have a more flexible schedule to care for my mother in another state, so I engaged in work as an independent consultant and continued with my higher

education adjunct teaching role. I launched a small business helping elderly people manage their household finances, keeping that business to just a few clients.

Introduction to the supporters of those in transition

The “supporters of those in transition” were searched out and contacted because of their interaction with people professionally and personally during career transition. Three of them are in professional roles, and one is a self-proclaimed “networker”. They provided insights into the types of struggles that are most common during this time, and a professional perspective of some of the dynamics involved within their industry around transition challenges and issues.

Marcia

Marcia is the owner of an executive search firm specializing in nonprofit recruiting. I met Marcia when I first moved to the Twin Cities and found her especially approachable. She co-authored “The 20-Minute Networking Meeting”, a series of books on networking, and speaks professionally on the topics of networking, career management and executive recruiting. (Note: Permission to disclose her connection to the book was granted.) My more personal connection with Marcia is that she is related to the board president of a nonprofit where I served as a director and interim CEO, and which she supported as a donor. I knew Marcia would provide candid and insightful perspective.

George

George is a specialist in career planning and development, and was referred to me because of his work with those in later career stages. He said, “Usually, fifties is my typical clientele”. George recognizes the psychological challenges that come with being let go from a job, and said that his role is to “help re-inflate their balloon,” helping them believe in themselves again. His methods include getting an in-depth understanding of his clients: “I’m going to hear your story. I’m going to do assessments. I’m going to get you and me on the same page about what makes you tick. I’m going to get to know you really, really well.” It was the intense focus on the personal aspects of his clients that drew me to George for this inquiry.

Tony

Tony is a self-declared “networker” I met when I first moved to Minneapolis, Minnesota and was searching for a job, and we have stayed in touch for almost ten years. He is retired from corporate work, but has decided to spend a great deal of his time connecting people. He describes his role as “a listening, caring type of arrangement. As I’m listening, it’s pretty easy to pick up on things and offer some insight.” I also chose Tony because of his work with many people over fifty. He receives six to eight requests every week for one-on-one

meetings. He says most are from those who are over 50. I felt that with the number of people he talks to and the approach he takes, he would have some great insights to offer.

Barb

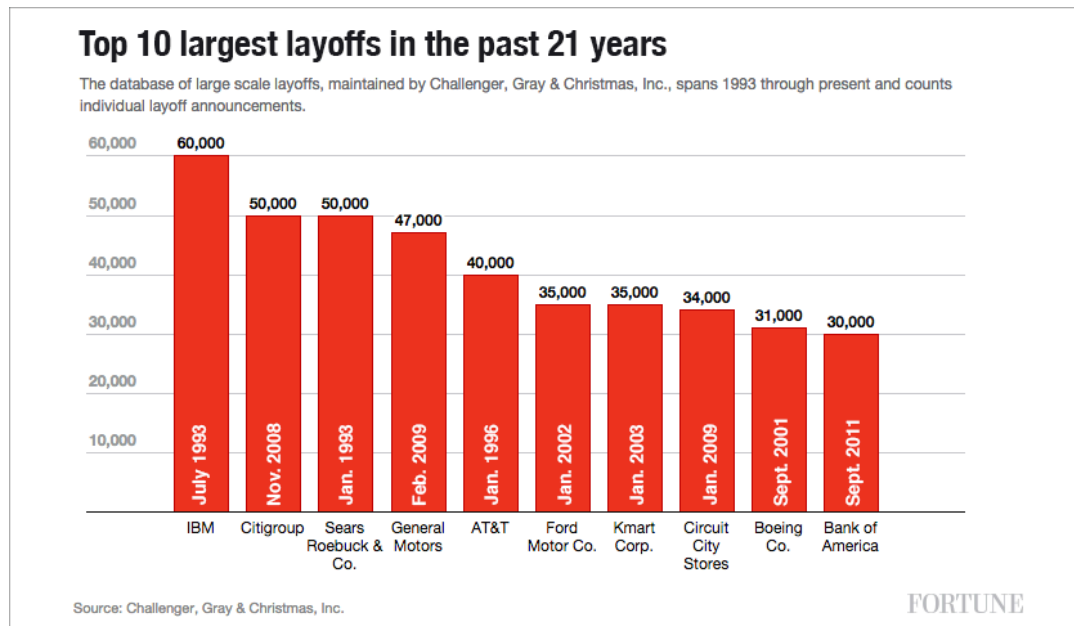
Barb started her career in organizational development, training and development, and migrated later on to outplacement and career coaching. I met her, like Tony, when I first moved to the Minneapolis and was trying to find employment. I have gotten to know Barb over the years on a more personal level, and she has great stories and experience related to assisting over-fifty individuals in transition. She also has personal experience with involuntary job transition in her own career.

Background

The job market is constantly shifting. There are ebbs and flows due to the economy, changing demographics, politics, and other factors. This inquiry reflects a particularly challenging time in U.S. employment history, around the time of the “great recession” between 2000 and 2015. Prior to being laid off one or more times, the co-researchers involved in this inquiry had largely robust careers in one or more industries. The demographics of age and gender also played a role in their experiences. The time frame and characteristics surrounding the U.S. job market is important, as it provides a distinctive context for the inquiry.

The great recession

The year 2008 was the culmination of years of downturn in the U.S. economy. The housing market had crashed, bailouts were promised to banks, and the Troubled Asset Relief Program (T.A.R.P.) was the new answer for recovery of the American job market (“TARP Programs,” n.d.). However, even before this major turn, layoffs had become common in major U.S. industries as an answer to global competition (Smith, 2009). The list below shows some of the largest layoffs in corporate America in the last two decades.



(Claire, 2015)

Between the years of 2000 and 2015, hundreds of thousands of jobs in the U.S. were lost due to downsizing, rightsizing, or any number of other euphemisms that might be applied (Goodman & Mance, n.d.). The media, human resource staff, and public relations professionals developed a whole new language for it, presumably to make people feel better about what was happening to their jobs and their lives. Gordon and Harold (1997) identify the many words and phrases used to describe involuntary transition of employees, including:

career change opportunity, career transition program, coerced transition, recruiting, deployment, destuffing, elimination of employment security policy, focused reduction, force management, involuntary separation from payroll, involuntary severance, not going forward, payroll adjustment, personnel surplus reduction, redeployment, redundancy elimination, repositioning, reshaping, resource release, riffed (from reduction in force, or "RIF"), rightsizing, schedule adjustment, severed, skill mix adjustment, strengthening global security, unassignment, work force adjustment, work force imbalance correction (p. 6)

The identity of work

No matter what you call it, involuntary job loss impacts individual identity, especially later in life. "Work can be psychologically gratifying and provide a sense of self-fulfillment to an individual; thus, it is a key component of an individual's identity " (Hughes, 1971, as cited by Berger, 2006).

In the world of work, the end of one's career due to retirement is often recognized and celebrated. It might involve moving into a consultant or emeritus role. Parties, speeches and programs memorialize contributions to the company, and highlight expertise and wisdom that can be shared with younger workers. This doesn't happen in the case of the involuntarily downsized person. There is no ceremony, no gift, no speech. The transition is not celebrated; in fact, many workers are escorted to the door in a matter of minutes after hearing about the loss of their position. To capture the cruel reality of those moments, producers of the movie "Up in the Air", featuring George Clooney as a hired-gun firing agent, interviewed and hired people who had actually lost their jobs to downsizing to portray their true reactions (LaPorte, 2010). There are more humane ways to downsize, but they are rarely considered in today's financially-driven decision making processes ("There are kinder ways to lay people off - So why don't we use them?", 2014).

Researching changes in identity of those 45 – 60 years of age involved in job search and transition, Ellie D. Berger (2006) found that they became susceptible to identity degradation and may question their self-worth. On the other hand, a longitudinal study done by Schaie (1994) found that "being satisfied with one's life's accomplishments in midlife or early old age" is a variable that has a positive effect on intellectual capabilities in later years (p. 310). One's work and career are no doubt a strong element of "life accomplishments" for many people. Despite the linkage between identity and work, a group of researchers in the field noted that "Even where researchers have considered the experiences of older people in the employment context, the identity of being older and out of work has remained unexplored" (McVittie, McKinlay, & Widdicombe, 2008, p. 249).

Toll on older workers

For older workers, the economic, emotional, and social toll of losing a job is great. The New York Times (Kelly, 2013) states:

Almost overnight, skills honed over a lifetime seem tired, passé. Twenty- and thirty-somethings will gladly do the work you used to do, and probably for less money. Yes, businesses are hiring again, but not nearly fast enough. Many people are so disheartened that they've simply stopped looking for work (para 2).

Finding themselves suddenly cast away from a job creates difficulties for those over 50. They may not have been in the thick of the job market, especially if they have been working for the same company for many years. They may be behind on technology or other newer skillsets. Even if they are up to date, there is both perception and reality in the job market that younger people will be preferred (Belz, 2014; Bendick, Brown, & Wall, 1999; Cohen, 2016; Neumark, n.d.; Kurtz, 2013; Roscigno, Mong, Byron, & Tester, 2007).

Those in transition may already have the sense that because of difficulty in finding a job or for other reasons, they are ready for a change. They are not ready to retire but may want a shift in priorities and a lifestyle that reflects it. The sudden joblessness brings these ideas

and arguments to the forefront. The co-researchers in this inquiry definitely identified “not ready to retire” as a theme.

Involuntary job loss is abrupt, unplanned and may leave one not knowing what’s next. The path forward may not be clear. Having no pattern, no path to follow, there may be searching, there may be pain, resulting in unplanned change and growth. These feelings and experiences were explored in depth in the inquiry by the co-researchers.

Differences for women

The job transition experience has also been documented as different between women and men. Shifman (2012) says, “Appearance-related age discrimination may be against the law but it’s still a fact of life for older female and male job hunters, particularly for women” (para. 2). Once unemployed, the time it takes for a woman over 50 to find a job has increased. In 2006, less than 25 percent of women over 50 had been out of work for more than six months. In 2012, it was 50 percent (Cohen, 2016). Research has found that women don’t want to “settle”. They want the right fit (Cohen, 2016). Women over 50 are pickier about their jobs, more reluctant to relocate away from family, or to do certain kinds of jobs (Cohen, 2016).

Impact of transition

The study of job loss and unemployment revealed many negative impacts on individuals, including isolation and loss of relationships, that increase the longer a person is unemployed (Leana & Feldman, 1992; Price et al., 1998; Root & Park, 2008). Personal accounts in the literature included stories of broken marriages, loss of contact with siblings and children, disrupted or ended friendships. Lengthy unemployment can lead people to become housebound and unable to connect with others, due to declining physical and emotional health, lack of finances, and feelings of guilt that they should be “job hunting” on their computer all the time.

In the dialogues with those in transition, we heard sadness regarding loss of long-time colleagues and shared goals and dreams. Some talked about friends who fell by the wayside, and those who “stuck around” for support and comfort. One wife recounted that her husband, in transition, didn’t like to go out with friends socially during that time. Some talked about how their children were reacting to their transition experience.

When job loss is involuntary, the experience can bring additional challenges around identity and capability, feelings of shame and embarrassment (Bell, Berry, Marquardt, & Green, 2013; Berger, 2006; Mallinckrodt, 1990; Prussia, Kinicki, & Bracker, 1993; Uchitelle, 2006). Companies often lead displaced workers to their desks to gather belongings and then to the door, without even a chance to say good-bye to colleagues they have known for years. They may wonder how their loyalty to a company, or industry, suddenly seems to be

meaningless. They may be reluctant to contact former co-workers, because they don't know what to say, or feel that the co-worker may not know how to react either. One of the co-researchers had very close relationships with donors in her position with a nonprofit, and she struggled with how and when to reach out to them, from both an ethical and emotional perspective. An outplacement professional talked about how he had to work with clients to help them rebuild their confidence and re-find their strengths.

Adding in the age factor

For those middle-aged and beyond, age discrimination (ageism) in job transition leads to questioning of one's value, resentment, weakening of social stature in the community, and questioning of financial stability in retirement (Belz, 2014; Berger, 2006; Delaney, 400AD; Kurtz, 2013; McMullin & Marshall, 2001; McVittie et al., 2008; Redek, Susjan, & Kostevc, 2013; Roscigno, 2010; Roscigno et al., 2007). Applications can go unanswered; interviews can be rare, even when candidates feel that they fit every qualification.

Loss of meaningful work can also have an effect on maintaining intellectual ability in aging adults. Schaie's (1994) Seattle Longitudinal Study, examining cognitive decline in aging, revealed that adults who continue to engage in professional endeavors and are satisfied with their accomplishments lower their risk of losing cognitive function; indeed, "low satisfaction with life success" was one of the most significant variables in cognitive decline (p. 310).

Just when they thought they were the ones full of wisdom and experience, some of the co-researchers in this inquiry felt they were no longer needed or valued in the workforce. One individual in transition talked about how his career coach encouraged him to get new glasses and dye his hair to look younger in order to be more competitive. One woman was encouraged when she got a job with a much younger group of workers in a start-up, but later quit because she felt such a severe gender gap, and their strategy and plans seemed too unclear for her. One woman said she was very thankful that her husband made enough money that her income was optional for their continued lifestyle, while others, a single woman and a widowed single mother, said finding another job was essential for financial wellbeing.

Berger (2006) explored the degradation of identity and the perception of people as "old" during the job transition experience. Ironically, some of the support and help provided to older workers, such as workshops, can cause further identification challenges by isolating and distinguishing them as "different". Several of the co-researchers recalled job assistance programs required by the state or county that were quite helpful, while others were poorly conducted and only served to exacerbate the negative emotions and discouraged feelings they were experiencing.

From “fixing” to “reframing”

Most of the research done with older participants around unemployment has been quantitative, and there is still more to learn from a qualitative perspective about people in this age group facing job transition challenges (Berger, 2006; Leana & Feldman, 1992). There were facts and figures about how employment numbers have changed for older workers over the years, and as the economy has fluctuated (Nelson, 2004). However, there was very little research about the changes they were experiencing in themselves and with others, and how they were handling them. Much of the literature focused on the negative aspects and “getting beyond them” or “fixing” them. For women, the “fixing” was even more challenging.

Rather than talking about depression, isolation, ageism, identity crises, and decreased job prospects, I wanted to bring voices together in a new, more generative way. Could the co-researchers share and discover some common themes and threads that could create new meaning for those going through the involuntary job transition experience over 50? Could the dialogue be reframed into one that was positive and future-forming?

The methods used for the inquiry: one-on-one dialogues, autoethnography, narrative analysis, focus group, were designed to go deeper into the culture of job transition among the women involved, and to allow the co-researchers to create new dialogue around the experience, and possibly new ways of moving forward.

Narrative Analysis of One-on-One Dialogues

The Appreciate Inquiry-style dialogues that were conducted with the six women have been described in the methodology section. Recordings of the dialogues were sent to the transcription service and then analyzed using MAXQDA 12 ® software. I read through the transcripts online and used the software to create categories for the major and minor themes. I then blocked sections of text from the transcripts and put them into those categories. This was very helpful in performing the analysis that follows.

Feelings following layoff

There were colorful words used by the co-researchers to describe their initial feelings following a layoff. These words were rich with emotion and meaning, sometimes accompanied by strong body language and direct eye contact. Here are the words and phrases used:

- Devastated
- Kicked in the teeth

- Diminished, physically, emotionally, psychologically, maybe even spiritually
- Shocked
- Chaos
- Feeling no control
- Frustration
- Apprehensive
- Broken hearted
- Fear
- Worry
- Angry
- Challenging emotionally
- Grief
- Sadness
- Denial
- Isolation, feeling alone

Some of these feelings were expressed quite intensely. Kolean said,

This was really an impressive team that had been put in place and I just loved my colleagues and the people in the design department and I was bereft. To say I was depressed didn't even cover it. I knew that I would probably retire in my early 60s, but I wanted to do it on my terms and I wanted to go out on a high note.

Sally expressed her level of "shock" when it happened:

After XYZ company I was shocked. I mean, it was almost like post traumatic stress syndrome. I mean, I was so shocked. I was so shocked about the environment, everything that I had been through there was shocking and the end was shocking. So I was really shocked and also I was here (in this new city) when it happened and, literally, I knew no one.

Some felt that they should have seen it coming. Heather said,

I was really enjoying it (her previous job). On the other hand I knew that business had gotten slow and it was kind of like, oops. I should have been looking.

I felt that way, as expressed in my own ethnography, at a layoff that occurred at a small consulting company I worked for in St Louis, Missouri. Billable work had been nil, and we were all having a hard time "creating" administrative work. Then came the day that the vice president started calling people into his office, and they would come out only to go pack their bags and leave. He headed to my office and I thought, "Oh, he is going to fill me in on what's happening." When I found out I too was being laid off, I was shocked, but I really shouldn't have been.

Several co-researchers mentioned decreased energy levels and fatigue, sometimes fatigue from a career itself. Kolean said, “especially after you go through losing your job, my energy level, in my late 50s, it’s not like it was, even when I was 50.”

Sally expressed similar views:

I’m just tired. Maybe I could have had a job and maybe I could have been in a better situation financially if I had been more driven and I really lost that. I mean, it was just too much at the end. I was tired after thirty years of doing everything I had to do in business.

There seemed to be resentment, as Sally went on to say,

I had worked really hard and so it was just sort of like, hey, if I do everything that I have done and this is where I am, then screw it. I mean, really. I just went, all that, it gets you in the end. It gets you nowhere. So I said, what do I really want? And what I really want is to have work that I enjoy. I want to be able to express my creativity some way, but it doesn’t have to be at work anymore. I can do that in my garden and I can do that in decorating my little rented house and I can do that in reading and I can do that with music.

Heather acknowledged that her new business venture was taking a toll, energy-wise:

Well, I wonder how hard I do want to keep working to some degree. I mean I feel like since starting this business, I’ve been working night and day, seven days a week and it gets old. I was really glad to recently take a five-day trip away, although I did bring my computer and I did some work while I was there, but it was really a nice break.

Beth, having been through the death of her spouse, related the transition experience to grief, especially given her close relationship with the nonprofit clients she served, who were single mothers:

Well, and because of where I was working, I mean, the work that I was doing was tied into becoming a single mother and being on my own. What happened, to be very realistic, was that I went back into grief. I went into grief mode and grieving the job. I was also going back and grieving my husband’s death. So it was a very difficult grief. It was much more difficult financially, and you don’t have someone to talk to at home. I mean, it made me feel more alone. It was kind of like working through a double grief for me.

As I was in dialogue with Beth, I felt my own feelings surface about the experience relating to grief. I could relate to the pain of that progression of feelings. She continued:

And I know the times I’ve gone through it, the multiple times I’ve gone through it, I’ve been through all those phases (of grief) and some of them I’ve been more stuck

in than others. The first one was the worst in terms of the anger and resentment phases. And other aspects of the sadness have been more prominent, but it follows the same sequence every time. I just may not be in each phase the same amount of time.

Linda used an interesting metaphor to explain her feelings following layoff:

I was at a stage where that door that closes. Everybody talks about a door that closes. Don't worry, a window will open up. Yes, it does. Or another door. And something will open up, but it's when you're in that hallway and it's dark and the door's closed behind you and nothing has opened up yet. And that's how I felt. And for me, I was apprehensive. I didn't know what was going to happen because you've got this hallway, in my head. I have this hallway, there's all sorts of doors and windows but there's no light coming in and all I know is I have to keep putting one foot in front of the other.

According to outplacement professionals Barb and George, their clients who have been laid off after 50 have similar questions:

- What's wrong with me?
- What did I do wrong?
- Who am I?
- Who is going to hire me?
- Am I over the hill?
- Do I still have it?
- Can I learn new tricks as an old dog?
- Will I be a fit in a younger culture?
- Am I too expensive?
- Will I be a threat to my boss?
- Do I have the energy?
- Am I willing to do what I need to do to win in this environment and to fit in this environment?

Feelings about new career opportunities

There were many feelings, and some apprehension, expressed about the possibility of new career opportunities, and the attitudes within oneself as those opportunities were being considered, evaluated, and decided upon.

Co-researchers had questions such as:

- Will I be able to live up to their expectations?
- Will I know how to do everything they want me to do?
- Do I have the current knowledge needed for this job?

There was a limbo state that perhaps had not been there in earlier years, when one simply went back out and started searching the same market she had been in before. Sally said, "I'm still in the figuring out phase. I don't think I have my path done yet." In several cases, there was a limbo factor relative to a caretaking role and what form that might take, or how long they might be in that role. In my own case, I was not able to keep a full time, traditional position after my father died several years ago, because I am the primary caregiver for my mother who lives two states away. There were others who had similar responsibilities. There are limitations of caregiving that play a huge role in evaluating future opportunities.

Although they found the challenge extremely difficult, the co-researchers involved in this study were overall extremely optimistic and positive in their outlook. They were willing to look hard, look at all the options, and stay determined to find the right "next step". Linda said,

Looking for a job is the hardest job that you will ever find. It really stretches you, because I'm not comfortable just saying, "Hi, I'm so and so, and you need to hire me" and all that stuff. And I think the one thing that I learned through that experience is, yes, make yourself indispensable, not so much for the company, as this is hard to admit, but if you're indispensable, you're also valuable elsewhere. So, your choice, their choice. If you continue to make sure that you do good work, you keep learning; you will be valuable.

There were reflections of attitude and the role it played in how people "showed up" to others during the transition. Marcia, in a recruiter role, indicated that people who were successful "have done some internal work....they have taken their outplacement to heart." She said this was necessary for them to present themselves positively in the market, to have worked through the pain and "calmed their inner self." With Linda, it was the recognition that each time she had been laid off, she ended up better than before, and a more positive outlook resulted each time it happened. She said that each new opportunity in the past had offered more money, a better environment, a better position, so she was able to remain positive.

Somewhat related to this self-reflection and self-actualization was the stance that whatever choice they made was not a "do-all, end-all". Linda said, "I'm kind of on the one year plan. If I'm jumping out of bed in the morning, if I'm still learning, if I still feel like I'm contributing and I'm having fun....if any of those are a "no" at the end of the year, then it's time for me to reevaluate and kind of adjust."

In several dialogues, there was an enthusiasm to do something "new". Sally said, "I'd like to use my business experience to help other people. I would really like to work with some start-ups, because I know how to start up a business." In Heather's case, she reviewed open positions and always seemed to find one or two requirements against which she was overqualified or under qualified. Given her many skills, she finally realized that she could design her own business that exactly fit her qualifications.

Sally said that she went through consideration of several options when she was first laid off. She considered consulting, training, and adjunct teaching, and ended up combining a few options together as a stopgap. She mentioned that others she knew during the recession had to “cobble” together multiple part time jobs in order to remain financially stable.

Heather also brought up the idea of doing multiple things, mentioning a neighbor’s experience with starting up a new business: “My neighbor next door is also laid off and she’s trying to start a business, but feeling like she needs to find a part time job while she gets her business going. So, I have a feeling that we all may be doing multiple things.”

There was definitely some element of serendipity, or chance, that entered into several of the co-researchers experiences, and thus in their attitudes about how things might fall into place eventually. Heather said she was “bumping into people” as she was networking, and that “bumping” eventually turned into a contracting opportunity. She recalled, “In my case, I met two people networking who knew each other. They came up with an opportunity for me, and one of them called me.” Linda summed it up as she shared,

Things kind of happen the way they’re going to happen and you just never know where it’s going to come from, but you just have the faith that you just keep putting one foot in front of the other and that’s where I get it. I know that I’m going to meet people and I know that it’s going to work out fine and I’m going to learn something. I’m going to end up being better at the end of this than I was before, and just keep doing it.

Support systems

There were a number of organizations and programs mentioned by the co-researchers that they say provided support to them, but the knowledge of them, the quality of the services, and the ability to navigate them seemed haphazard at best for most of them. What was obvious through the comments was that a person needed to take the initiative to go looking for these services. Heather mentioned that, “people who are going through it need to maybe take a more active part in shaping how those services are delivered.” Job support groups through churches and services through workforce development were used by a number of the co-researchers. Some utilized professional groups that are made up of those that are employed, although they usually had a cost associated with them that was not always affordable.

Some government agencies offered services, but they were sometimes viewed as very general, not at all tailored to individual needs. I attended a seminar where the presenter read the PowerPoint® slides and I felt the whole time that I could have presented it better. Beth shared,

One of the seminars that I went to, most of the people there were older. My impression was they pretty much have their spiel and you go to maybe three sessions for an hour. They kind of have their program and they're spitting out their program; just catch the wave and figure out if you get anything. It was not individualized at all. I had to just take what I could learn and apply it. I think our workforce centers could take it up a notch in terms of process and caliber of what they are teaching.

Heather took advantage of a number of classes for the unemployed. "You know, that seemed to make sense for me. They had one for 'job search over forty.' They have interviewing skills, resume writing, and there was one on starting a business, which I didn't realize they would offer. And then I heard in that course that unemployment has this 'Climb' program converting layoffs into Minnesota businesses where I could continue to receive my benefits while trying to start a business." Although she was pleased with these programs, she said, "It's not real obvious to people what all their options are, unless you start really digging in and paying attention."

Beth said that she took some computer classes to "refresh" her computer skills. She, as well as Sally, mentioned that at director levels, they had people doing those things for them, and now they felt they would be on their own with computer tasks. Beth shared, "I mean, I could do it if I had to, but I wasn't really quick and fast and the programs changed and the platforms changed."

Some expressed positive feelings about outplacement services offered by large companies to those let go in a large layoff. Beth said, "Well, from an HR (human resources) standpoint, I think that every employer ought to offer that as a part of departure."

In some cases, mental health professionals provided needed support. Kolean shared, "I was seeing a therapist and I was just physically wiped out too." For Sally, a therapist helped sort through some of the emotional issues. She said, "It was just feeling so stuck. I went to therapy because I knew I was really depressed and I found a great therapist and she really helped me. Then, I gardened a bunch because I needed to work through it. I needed to physically do something that did not cause me pain."

Networking

Networking was by far the most prevalent, well-regarded and relied upon tool that the co-researchers referenced. Marcia, a recruiter, wrote a book on networking, *The 20 Minute Networking Meeting* (Ballinger & Perez, 2012) (referenced with permission). For the person in transition, she says, "Networking meetings are uplifting. It feels like a meeting. It feels like we're in a professional discussion." Co-researchers felt that networking came more naturally for women but was vital to staying on track with both finding a job and staying involved with people. In reference to networking groups at local churches, Beth said, "People said that had become a turning point for them. They gave me ideas or

suggestions of people to meet and that's what you do. You just keep going. Meet one person, ask for three more to get together with."

Tony, who is a self-declared volunteer networker, has a somewhat different approach to networking. His philosophy is that you don't network to find a job; you network to meet interesting people.

You want to pick people's brains. You want to meet with people in various walks of the workday world. You want to get different insights and different perspectives. Why? Because you want to know, you want to get an idea of what the heck has been going on all these years that I've missed. 'Cause the world is passing me by. I mean, I worked 40-50-60 hours a week, every week. I got my family. I got my recreation. I got these other things that I do and I got all these things in my life. The last thing I've done is network and gone back and rekindled relationships. I haven't done any of that and the world has passed me by. I have no idea what's out there. Even if you were taking full time to keep up with what's going on in the world, you couldn't do it. So, guess what's happened out there. The world has really changed. The opportunities are endless. What I'm doing is meeting with interesting, seasoned, savvy people like you to pick your brain.

Linda met with Tony and used his approach. She recalled, "And he said, you know what? You need to stop looking for a job. I love this guy. He is absolutely phenomenal. He said that you need to find interesting people. And I went, 'wow'. It hasn't changed. What I would do has not changed, but it just made all the difference in the world. I was so energized." Tony says that it is a myth that by the time people are in their 50s, they know what they want to do: "You've been working for 30 or 35 years and doing these things. Yes, it's varied. It's wonderful. You've got all this great experience. But you know, in the grand scheme of things, it's such a sliver of what's out there. If you have the time, take the time, make the effort to broaden your horizon."

Beth said that she immediately called upon past colleagues to provide her with a reference letter, even if they might have provided it outside the normal HR channels. She felt that aside from the validation it provided, it also helped her from an emotional standpoint when she was most vulnerable. "It's very emotional and so you have to really work on that emotional regulation and I think being honest and getting perspective from others is important."

Linda said that friends made a big difference. She was also in a walking/hiking group that provided support. She referenced a mentoring group that evolved from four people meeting at a cabin for a weekend.

We were sitting in somebody's cabin and we just said, 'You know, nobody mentored us. How did we get through it?' We would just call each other even when we weren't working together any longer. We could say 'I just got this project, what do you think? This is what I'm thinking.' You know, we would just bounce ideas. How are

we going to stay vibrant? How are we going to stay so that we can continue our careers as we get older?

Beth suggested setting up a 'personal board of directors':

...a handful of people, that when you need a pick me up, you need some perspective, you need to be open and honest about where you are. Find those people that you can just pick up the phone, any time, day or night, and talk with about where you are and they can help get you back on the path, because it's hard to do entirely by yourself. I think it's really having people provide a perspective that might make you think about things differently than you have been in your own head.

Heather had many professional and personal friends who were "willing to have a conversation about it" (i.e., the layoff). She said these people would be willing to have coffee or lunch, send her leads for job postings, or even refer her to others looking for someone with her skills. Beth referred to people close to her as her "personal advisors" for "just a pat on the back or people that I could just call and very openly express wherever I was, whatever I was feeling."

Beth referred to the "second ring" of connections: "Usually people think that the people I know best, my closest friends and relationships are going to be the ones who are going to help me get a job. I don't necessarily think that's the case. It's the people that they know, the next ring out. I think typically it's that second or third ring of connections where you will find your next opportunity."

Sally had moved to a new community and had a job that involved traveling each week. When she left her job, she knew no one in the community, but she felt that even strangers were open to helping her. "I feel very connected to people and I have people who are willing to help me out. What I don't have is someone to hang out with on Saturday night."

Inner power and resilience

There was a sense of inner power and resilience expressed by a number of the co-researchers. In starting up a new consulting business, Heather expressed that "I just decided 'Well, I may as well try this and not have that risk of getting laid off again.'" Beth shared, "I haven't lost anything. I'm back in the groove again. So, if I get off the groove, I know I can get back in."

George, an outplacement professional, agreed: "Once they get themselves back up they tend to be more resilient and they will have dusted themselves off a little quicker if and when it happens again."

Linda expressed that,

Things that I would have really gotten upset about or would have worried me or whatever, you go through a series of these challenges and life presents them whether it's in a work environment or just in life, and it's amazing how you can handle things. You actually do become stronger and you can look at things much more logically and 'I can handle this'. I know there's a way that whatever the problem is, that there are some actionable things that can be done to either minimize it or eliminate it.

Linda also shared that it helps to keep your confidence level high and "not allow your thinking that someone else is saying you don't have the value that you thought you did or you weren't bringing value that you thought you did." Expressing that resiliency and positivity, Linda said, was key in how you present yourself: "...knowing that you do have skills and value that you can bring, because you have to stay resilient and you have to stay positive and up when you're going out and selling yourself. You can't go out and then feel like you're going to start crying when you're interviewing, because you're so sad about where you've been."

Beth felt that the experience brought her to a "new level of resiliency":

Because of my personal life experience through my husband's sudden death and trying to raise my kids by myself, I mean, I've been through several steps of resiliency. But this was just one more that kind of took me up to a new perspective and a broader perspective and I think every challenge that you meet does give us an opportunity to increase our capacity for resilience.

Later in the dialogue, Beth shared,

I'm pretty close to the top of the vista where nobody is going to faze me anymore. Nobody is going to faze me.

Along with drawing on inner power was a willingness to be realistic and reflective. Beth said,

I think you have to dig deep and be honest with yourself in terms of what could you have done differently? How did I perhaps contribute to the situation? Or what were my blind sides that I wasn't acknowledging or seeing in the dynamic? I think you have to be brutally honest with yourself and then I think in that honesty, really assess the skills that you have and bring and not lose that.

Faith and tenacity were mentioned by several of the co-researchers, and were called out as especially important when you weren't in a situation where you were getting feedback every day as you might have when you were on the job. Beth said, "I think that tenacity and the continuing to just keep going and not losing steam and getting disconnected is like the secret ingredient."

Barb, an outplacement professional, in talking about working with those who have been laid off, said,

We need the time to get rejuvenated. So, really helping to alleviate this fear of the unknown, the fear of uncertainty comes in, because they get through some of the basic fears of the job loss and they meet other people. They realize they have a network and now the trust piece comes in. This is where the spiritual piece comes in, trusting that there is a plan there and right now, this is a transition.

There was some expression of learning from a layoff how to be better prepared the next time. Linda shared,

And you build your skills and I think the attitude is a little different after the first time you've been laid off because all of a sudden you realize that you are dispensable no matter how skilled you are, for some reason. And you need to make sure that you remember that you have to plan ahead. Like your parents planned ahead with you around, realistically, everybody that's our friends that's the same age, things are going to change. They are never, ever, ever going to stay the same no matter how much you love it. No matter how great it is, things are going to change. So I think being proactive about that. Somebody that's always worked for the same company may not have that realization that things are never going to stay the same. I may not work for this company forever, what am I going to prepare for? How am I going to prepare the best that I can, best laid plans, but how can I prepare not only in life but in my career because it's a given, things are going to change.

In my own case, my career developed a theme of layoffs, downsizings, acquisitions, and transition. I learned to have my resume updated at all times, and to keep my networking going all the time, and I encouraged others with whom I worked to do the same. I kept up to date with various industries I had been a part of, and kept in touch with people who might be helpful the next time I found myself in transition.

Changes in values

There were numerous expressions of change in values throughout the layoff and transition time period. Some of these had to do with finances, some elements of employment and the workplace, and some having to do with relationships and people. While some of these changes were uninvited, some brought with them feelings of peace and comfort for the co-researchers.

Sally, being single and having survived both her parents, said she had to seriously re-evaluate her material priorities.

I think I finally turned to resignation and a year after I left XYZ company, I went, I'm going to really have to change my life. It's never going to be what it was, in terms of

finances. By changing my life, that wasn't all bad. On the financial side, I was very sad. I learned in the process that all these things I had were 'stuff'. For example, I sold my family's silver. And for a long time I thought, oh, how can I do that, and then I went, it's 'stuff'. I mean, yeah, it came from my mother, but it's 'stuff'. How often do I use it? Almost never. It sits in my chest. It looks beautiful, like I made it. And really, what is it? So someday, if I find that I really need it, I can buy some more. And I kind of went, you know what, if it's stuff that someday I may need, I can buy some more, honestly, how important is that? It really changed my values a lot.

Later, in talking more about money issues, Sally added a statement that continued the dialogue around material things:

Honestly, I will say, I'm extremely poor, but I'm very happy. I don't need anything, really. At some point I need a new sofa, because mine's falling apart, but I mean, I don't need anything.

Sally also shared changes in her perception of work and the role it played in her life.

What I really value now are experiences, and I used to be into my title and I wanted to be a vice president and you know what, so I got there. What was that worth? Nothing. I've started looking at the purpose of work as giving me money instead of the purpose of work is to fulfill me. Cause it used to be work was my fulfillment, and I realized that it isn't. And honestly, more people should probably look at it like that. It's great to be fulfilled, but way too much of it's out of your control.

Beth shared a similar sentiment when she said,

It's easy, I think sometimes, to get sucked in, if you will. But when I was at ABC nonprofit, I made that conscious decision. I knew I was making it. I wanted to. That work helped heal me and I knew that I had the capacity. I had the time. I had the interest. That's where I felt I was placed there, to really invest in their work. So, I was conscious about what I was doing. I will now be much more conscious and I won't, I don't think, I won't ever again have my work have that much meaning. I won't allow my work to have that much meaning.

Regarding status in the workplace, Linda said, "I don't need that corner office anymore. It's not really important to me. I can work in a cubicle; it's ok. But I can remember a time in my career when that was a big deal. It was."

The question "How do you define success?" led some of the co-researchers to talk about relationships. Some were working toward changing their values around the types of relationships they would cultivate, desiring deeper and more fulfilling ones than they had had before.

Sally indicated that her values around what was important relating to people had changed.

I'm into relationships now. I want to be with people who are real. I'm tired of being in a world that's not real. I feel like I can be real. I can be me. I can tell the real story of what really happens, what really goes on and I can help people in that.

And later, she shared, "I want to be around people who are real. I want to be in situations that are real. That's what it's all kind of taught me. Success is kind of living your life and being happy."

Beth expressed similar views, saying

I define success as creating deep, authentic relationships in my life. Of having an, I don't know the right word, but a diversified satisfaction in many areas of your life....health, professional, financial, personal friendships, spiritual, that in all of those that make up the wheel of your life that I have areas that I want to improve, but I'm pretty high percentage of how that's all balancing out and weaving into my life and that to me is success. And my kids are doing well. They're at least making their way and moving forward and I have a good relationship with them; that's pretty big.

Changes in relationships

Several of the co-researchers experienced changes in relationships, mostly related to former colleagues and friends.

Both Sally and Linda experienced a change in relationships with some people during their transition, a situation that they had not expected and had to deal with. This clearly hurt them, as evidenced in the way they expressed it. Sally said,

There are people who don't want to be around you if you're not employed. Definitely. There were definitely people who think that's all bad. That anybody who loses their job, that's bad and all I say to them is, just wait until it happens to you. There are people who I just had to end a twenty-year friendship because that person's not in reality and they could not understand what I had been going through.

Linda shared,

It is amazing to me who ends up standing next to you when you go through this kind of transition. It's not always the people that you think would be standing next to you. The first time it happened I was really hurt. I was like, oh my gosh, I'm going through this terrible time and the people that I, at least the one or two people that I had thought would be there for me, just kind of disappeared. It's that feeling of, oh I have cooties, you know like a little kid. I had cooties.

Beth's work relationships changed when she was laid off, which impacted her ability to network with former colleagues in her job search.

Their allegiance had to stay with the organization versus with an individual that left, and with the new management. I lost, really, my best referral and connections. I lost the ability to re-leverage those and that was very frustrating. They couldn't be loyal to the organization and really try and meet with me and guide and help.

Changes in finances

For some of the co-researchers, there were definitely impacts of the family's reduced income, or lack of income altogether. Sally, Beth and Linda are single and expressed the deepest concerns. Kolean expressed that she felt safe financially, but only because her husband had a good job and had always been the major breadwinner of the family. Heather and her husband were both unemployed at the same time but had savings to fall back on.

Sally's transition occurred right at the time of the latest "great recession" in 2008, and she shared,

So I was just like, oh my God, here I am. I have this house I just bought....then immediately the recession hit and I can remember just watching my money go away and knowing that I didn't have a job and I can remember that three months, when everything fell apart, it took until March, for the market to bottom out, and I could remember just calling my broker and saying, oh my God, I have nothing. This is all I have and it's going away and I was just like, oh my God, I can't believe this. Not only have I lost my job, I've lost my retirement, I've lost my savings and how could this be at one time. I just felt devastated and it felt like I had no control. I think that was the biggest thing, feeling no control. And nobody to turn to.

Her anxiety was very evident as she recalled the feelings of desperation she had during that time. She continued,

So I realized I'm going to have to change my life because I'm not going to have the money I had before and I've lost a lot of money in the process of changing my life and going through the recession and having to pay for myself without jobs.

Linda had concerns about retirement funding too:

Just even psychologically and financially for me, I was off pretty close to a year and actually almost nine months without saving for my 401(k) (retirement funding). I didn't have to go into savings, thank goodness, but bottom line, I need to have a certain amount of money to feel comfortable in order to be able to retire, and I wasn't quite there yet.

At the same time, Linda felt that she had defined some of her priorities, like housing, for example: “I’m getting to a point now where I’ve got some parameters that say ‘I don’t want a big house’.... what I can afford, realistically, what I can afford versus what I want, and to be comfortable. I don’t want more than 2000 square feet. I want it to be comfortable.”

For Beth, being a single head of household meant doing what she had to do in order to keep some money coming in: “I didn’t have another income to keep my household going and my family going, so filing for unemployment and going through that whole process was important to do even if it’s not necessarily pleasant.” She also felt that it limited her choices for future income. When it came to considering starting up her own business, she said,

Again, being a single parent, I really didn’t have flexibility. I needed benefits; I needed the stability of a paycheck. I didn’t really have time for ramp up and starting my own business. Not that I don’t think that it’s valuable; I do, but I was very cautious from an economics standpoint. I just didn’t want to end up spending a lot of money that I didn’t have coming in.

In terms of finding help with gaining employment, such as career coaching and counseling, Beth said she “did some of those types of things where you were investing fifty to seventy-five dollars, not two thousand.”

In my own experience, I know that I found myself becoming very conscious of spending habits and especially feeling badly about not being able to help my kids more. I also felt that I needed to stay at home much more, because I knew that if I went out with friends, I would be tempted to spend more money when there wasn’t any coming in.

Priorities and challenges of being unemployed and over 50

There was a great deal of dialogue around changes in priorities and what’s important to those over 50, and how that affects the choices that they feel they have. There was a feeling that they had “paid their dues” and were “owed” more independence, the ability to make more of their own decisions, and set their own pace. That seemed to be the impetus for some to consider going out on their own to start a business or work freelance or teach in an adjunct capacity. Most expressed a desire to be part of meaningful work, work that was moving things ahead and showing progress. Some wanted to “give back” in a more meaningful way at this stage of life. They wanted a better balance of personal, professional and community “work”, often referred to as a “portfolio life” (Corbett & Higgins, 2009).

George, who works with people in an outplacement business, expressed the priorities he saw in most of the people over 50, the concept of mixing personal, professional and community, and also delineated the differences between men and women that he had observed:

'I want to get off the hamster wheel,' they often say; 'the pursuit of more power and status and money isn't necessarily doing it for me anymore. I like the game still of success and business, but I've also got some things to give to the community. I'd like to be a little bit more available to my family and my friends.' So, this notion of a blended life, it tends to all three. I do also have a theory of why I think women live longer than men: historically women have understood this for more of their life, that you've got personal, professional and community responsibilities.

Some of the co-researchers brought up reflections of their early careers that had caused them to change courses in later life. Sally had been in corporate America and over the years had found it difficult, so that she now didn't see herself a fit for it. "One time I thought, did I get raised wrong, because if I had really realized what it was like in corporate America, the whole political side of it, which I'm really bad at and I hate, I don't know if I would have done it."

Priorities were often expressed in terms of relationships. Kolean said, "I like to be able to be flexible in my schedule, because I really, early on it was the kids, but now I have friendships that I would like to maintain and classes that I would like to take, travel that I would like to do, but I also want to give something back. I want to do something meaningful." Heather also said that it was important to her to be doing "meaningful work".

Linda also expressed an interest in spending time with friends and giving back:

But I was thinking of long term, what financially, what's good for me as far as feeling like I'm contributing. I was looking into ok, if I do retire, what am I going to do that I can still feel like I'm contributing back, that I'm going to remain relevant, that I'm going to be challenged in thoughts mentally, and so those were the kinds of things that I was kind of looking at. Long term/short term. There are people that we're losing and you don't know if you're going to be able to live to 88, 92, or 72 and how much time do I really want to spend working day in and day out and not having fun like some of my friends that are truly retired. Am I going to miss out on that? Am I going to be like, I should have quit working?

Sally also had a desire to "give back" in what she called her "third act":

I do believe in a third act. It's a term I heard Jane Fonda use about her own life. Part of my thing with success, I'm not sure that I know what success is, but I know that I've got thirty more years on this planet, probably. I just turned sixty and I want to enjoy them. I'm really more focusing on giving back. I know that might sound cliché but that's what I feel like. I feel like I have all this experience that I've learned in thirty years in business and surely I can help somebody with it.

A number of the co-researchers were interested in, were investigating, or had already embarked on freelance work as a next step, for various reasons. Sally said,

I think essentially that's what I'm doing. I'm being a freelancer in some ways or am going to be a freelancer and to me, that's a really attractive model. There are lots of good things about being a freelancer. Especially to have time flexibility and things like that are really good. The big problem is most freelancers say the money is not steady.

Linda shared that she thought consulting would be the perfect option, her first choice: "I would be able to dive into a project, work three months, six months, whatever, and have some income coming in, not go into my 401(k) or retirement or whatever, and still have time to play."

Feeling ageism

Feeling ageism during the time of transition was real for most of the co-researchers. Some of them simply acknowledged that they felt it; for others it seemed to cause frustration and even anger. Some of them tried to speculate on the "whys".

Marcia, a recruiter, when asked about ageism, said,

Yes, you're right. Age discrimination is rampant. In my opinion, in my years in the search, I've seen age discrimination ten times over race discrimination, gender, or any other kind of discrimination. So, if I were in transition, I would worry about that. It is there. So, I would not sweep that under the rug and I would shore up every single piece that I have to not perpetuate a stereotype that somebody might wrongfully have about me and my technology savvy, my pace, my willingness to work hard or whatever the case might be.

On the other hand, Marcia also expressed optimism for those over fifty given the realities of the job market:

At one point I did speak on this and told a group of employers, "If you're not looking at candidates over fifty, you are missing the best part of the pool." And I do believe that, and I think it's going to inch up. We can't ignore the fifty-year-old candidate when there is a lack of candidates who are in their forties, let's just say. And that fifty-year-old candidate intends to work twenty-five more years. So I do think that sort of we, hiring entities, need to, are going to continue to inch up what we define as senior in the workplace and it's not going to be fifty and up anymore. It's going to be fifty-seven and up or something like that. And we need to get there.

Barb, an outplacement professional, talked about how we need to "start turning age into advantage". She said, referring to Jean Erickson-Walker, the author of *The Age Advantage* (Walker, 2000),

They say we don't oversell enough of the fact that we know how to get things done.

So, for people in their fifties, they get that about owning it as a career and running it like a business. The hiring advantages are that there's depth and breadth of experience. We have good judgment, good people skills, work ethic and we should actually use that language. You know, 'Tell me something about yourself that you would say is unique to you?' 'Well, Fran, I've always gotten good feedback that I have good judgment about my decisions that I make' and then you follow up with an example. She says that what we don't sell enough is our commitment to company goals, credibility with the stake holders, when you had to be politically savvy, and we don't have any of the issues with all the kids today, so we take fewer sick days. She said because the corporate ladder's gone, stop worrying about it. When you walk in the door, where is your credibility?

Kolean said simply, "And I imagine you've heard this from other women of our particular age, people really aren't interested in hiring women our age." Sally said, "I think they're looking for younger people. They don't even respond. So you don't even get an email back that says, we got it and we don't want you....I think they don't want the older worker for a bunch of reasons. I think that there's a huge bias against us in terms that they believe we are not savvy at all, digitally." She added later, "But I think the other thing is, I think we are viewed as, when you're a younger person, they're intimidated by the level of experience. They also think, oh, they're going to come here and try to take my job. I never thought in my life I would be in this situation."

Sally talked about her part time job with the government where many of the workers were displaced, older workers.

I found it through a friend's husband and a large majority, more than half of the people I worked with are displaced people like me. They've all been laid off. I mean, I can't tell you, the most highly educated part-time workforce you've ever heard of. I mean, there are people with PhDs, law degrees, multiple master's degrees, former vice-presidents, patent holders, you wouldn't believe it. Almost all of us have been laid off or forced into early retirement. There are quite a few of them that had to take an early retirement.

Linda felt discouraged by ageism in the hiring process as well:

I thought to myself, I'm getting interviews at these positions. I mean, on paper, these positions are absolutely made for me. I should be getting this job. They would be so glad that they would hire me because I can do this. I've done this. I know exactly what they need. I will tell you that I found that once I did a face-to-face, then all of a sudden people backed away, and I'm going to make an assumption that they knew that I was not in my 30s or 40s, and I was getting really discouraged because I wasn't obviously ready to retire.

Beth talked about the job search being different now, and feelings of ageism:

This was totally, totally, totally different and the first time I really ever experienced it. So that was challenging because you think you've been working for forty years. You've had very positive experiences all along the way and suddenly you don't. It's like, why? You know what's different and that's all just part of the questioning but what was different was just my experience of being able to interview, get the opportunities to interview, once I interviewed, not having comments or questions or judgment because of my age and assumptions. Things like, one company I was interviewing for and I was interviewing with a younger individual who was the director of marketing and the feedback from our interview was, well I don't think she can sell technology. And I said, well that's interesting, what did I say, or tell me more about that. What gave her that impression? Well, not really anything. Was there something? I had met with the CEO and she came into the meeting for ten minutes, so it wasn't really that much time. Was it something on my résumé? Was it something I said? No, no, nothing really. So really there was nothing except for the fact that I was an older individual and then they make an assumption that you can't do technology.

Heather said that she had participated in an "over 40" class that taught applicants how to address the age factor in their job search:

One of the things that they suggested in a 'finding a job over forty' class is that you address your ageism because it's the elephant in the room. You talk about being energized and being eager to continue working and that you have so much to share and if this company wants to grow, they're going to need people who have experience and if they're only hiring young people who don't have experience, they're going to have some challenges when they are trying to grow.

Renewed energy

There were expressions of new work passions that were providing energy to the co-researchers. Sally reflected on adjunct teaching: "I love teaching and I got really great evaluations from the students and stuff; I was like, this is perfect, this is what I need to be doing. I love it, they like me; it's a great thing." Heather had an internship opportunity: "Well, this internship's producer excited me, because it sounded like something I could do. It would be fun. It would be interesting. It would be a challenge. It was part time, so it would kind of fit in with the other consulting that I'm doing." Heather said that she got her energy from other people. "I'm an extrovert. So, I'm energized by being around people and reading business publications, going online, connecting with what's the latest, following the trends, seeing the future."

Kolean was doing volunteer work in the design arena related to the history of graphic arts: "It kept me very busy and right now I'm working with someone who's working on translating that physical exhibit which was panels and all of these different things into a digital form. So it will be an online history. I mean; the exhibit itself was really cool, but it

was temporary. And so this will be something that will be a really meaningful resource and documentation. So, I'm very pleased and proud of that."

There was a great deal of consensus in the dialogues around the topic of volunteering and its benefits: feeling useful, making contacts, staying "in motion", building optimism and hope. Marcia, a recruiter, said, "I do at some point counsel people, maybe the worst of the worst, work for free. The thing is, call your church. Do their books. Organize the children's program. Anything. You must now work for free. Start giving away and then low and behold the next time you talk to them, they've got projects and meetings and one needs to sprinkle one's life with the types of activities that one's used to. Paid or unpaid. That's been my advice to a lot of people, too, is find a volunteer position. Find any organization that you can, and I've done that, too, when I've been in transition."

Kolean got involved in an art program for underprivileged youth: "So I do that; I just do it in the fall and it's after school one day a week. So that's not, you know, a big commitment, but I do enjoy that. That's a great volunteer activity, because I'm not in charge of anything. I just need to show up and help my little person with their costume and it's really fun. I like the people around." Sally worked at her church in their mission program for underprivileged kids.

In my own case, I worked with a small nonprofit providing housing and services for individuals and their families in recovery. They were in need of leadership on their board to take them through a merger, and I had a great deal of experience in that. It helped me to confirm some of my skills and built my confidence. I also volunteered at a nonprofit working with individuals living with HIV and AIDS, and that volunteer opportunity led to a part time, freelance grant-writing job.

Unique for women

A few of the co-researchers identified ways that the layoff over 50 and subsequent job search was different for women. One of the areas was networking; they felt women did this more naturally than men. Linda said,

I firmly believe that from talking with some of these men and from talking to some of their wives, they've said the wives are the ones that said, 'You need to get out and network.' They were the ones that said to go talk to some people and network, and the guys do not do it. They say, 'I'm just not a networking type.' But that's what you have to do to get a job. That's what you have to do. I don't care. 'I'm just going to sit here at my computer and I'm going to apply for some more jobs on the Internet.' That's mainly what they did. They had a real hard time with whole the networking thing. Yet, women do it voluntarily, even when they don't have to.

I have found this to be true in my own experience with men in work environments. They usually associate with people at work and seem to find excuses not to network outside their circles: too busy with work, not necessary in their field, don't want to bother people.

At networking events, I often notice the ratio of women to men is quite high.

Narrative Analysis of the Focus Group

During the dialogues, the co-researchers were very positive about the possibility of getting together in a focus group to build dialogue around their experiences and learn from each other. This was part of the design of the inquiry, but it was still very heartening that they were so anxious to participate. The method I chose for the focus group was based upon the Art of Focused Conversation (Stanfield, 2000), described in the Methodology section. (Format and questions are in Appendix III.) I had sent the co-researchers the narrative analysis of the dialogues, so they were able to become familiar with the themes I had uncovered. (One co-researcher, Beth, was unable to attend the focus group at the last minute.) The narrative analysis follows the flow of the conversation that moved from objective to reflective to interpretive, and finally, to decisional level.

Analysis

We began by focusing on the words or phrases we remembered from reading the analysis of the dialogues. The first word that Kolean mentioned, and everyone agreed with, was “shock.” Sally recalled that when she read the narrative analysis, “I’m surprised I said it so many times. I noticed it with others as well. Shocked was the word.” Other words and phrases identified were “devastated,” “feeling of being lost,” “disoriented,” “grief” and “being stuck.” When I asked for elaboration on “being stuck” and asked if it was being stuck in different phases or being stuck not knowing what to do next, Kolean said “both”. Everyone in the group really resonated with Linda’s metaphor of feeling like a door had been closed behind her and she was in a dark hallway. There was a lot of dialogue around the fact that people had not left their jobs voluntarily, that it was not their choice to leave.

I asked the group what themes they remembered from reading the narrative analysis, and they asked me to read them back, which I did. Some of the themes that they said they remembered identifying with were being tired. Sally commented, “I noticed that among all the descriptions... being tired... and it was hard to tell if it was just being tired of the situation or being tired after all these years working that then, this happens and that makes you even more tired.”

There was dialogue around relationships and how they changed once you were no longer working, and who stuck by you during the transition. Linda said, “Your relationship with everyone else that is still working changes. I happened to be laid off a couple of times, and I was always surprised (that) who ended up staying standing next to me wasn’t who I thought....Then once you are back on your feet.... what I did realize is how much it affected the actual relationship you had with that person. You can’t go back to the same relationship with somebody once you feel that way.” Kolean agreed and identified a feeling of “betrayal of sorts”. Linda compared this to feelings after a divorce, and this resonated with me as well; I elaborated on this with a story:

When I got divorced there was a woman across the street. Her husband had a sudden heart attack and died and just comparing how people reacted to her versus me was devastating. I mean, she had people bringing her meals, offering to rake her yard, offering to take her kids places, and people weren't even speaking to me. It was devastating. And I thought of that when you wrote about that as part of this process. It brought all that back to my mind.

Kolean brought some amusement to the dialogue when she talked about the layoff not being your fault, and feeling like you had "cooties", the term Linda had also used in her dialogue with me. Heather said a major theme to her was that the person who lost her job changed, that she was humbled; Kolean agreed, and added that she also felt humiliated.

I asked the group what was left "ringing in your ears" or lingering, and Heather shared that she felt "badly that not everyone has resolved their situation. That you haven't resolved your situation (*looking at Kolean*) and I feel like I did and I feel very fortunate, but I wish everyone could feel the way I feel. I can't put that on people, that everyone I've known could feel happy and rejuvenated." Kolean observed that "so many people have had to absorb so many losses and that part of the human condition, none of us escape it....It's the way of life, but I find it quite moving to hear people's stories and relate to how different people deal with it."

Anger was a feeling commonly observed in some of the dialogue. Sally shared,

I definitely feel that way. I mean, I'm irritated that the boss that was a total jerk got away with it all and got saved and sent to Europe so he couldn't get in trouble. It's like, it's wrong but the one thing that I took away at the end of it was how much it changed each of us. I don't know if there's a difference in resilience when you're older or you're younger or if there's a different in impact you can just shake things off easier when you're younger. I don't know what it is but it certainly changed my perception of things and it seems like it changed all of us in some way.

Heather said she was a bit surprised at the anger expressed by some of the group.

I guess I don't relate as much to the anger that everyone or most people expressed because I guess I was laid off twice in about four years and in both cases, I knew why, because the companies needed to cut expenses. I was one of the higher paid individuals at (these) companies and I could see the writing on the wall in both situations. I kind of saw it coming. And so, I don't know, I just didn't have the anger that I sense from everyone else.

Kolean said that the feelings expressed in the dialogues really didn't surprise her.

I guess I wasn't very surprised. This is all so interesting because you looked at these individual stories capitalized, but it just made me even more sad that other people, I mean this happens every day and that so many good people are just dismissed in

what seems like a very cavalier or unfair way. It's just heartbreaking to me and as far as the reflective part, when something happens in your 30s, you're 30 and you have many years ahead of you, but behind you and like, really? I have to start all over again?

We kept going with what surprised the co-researchers. Heather and Linda said they were surprised at the stories of people who had been with the same company for more than five years, which led to us all sharing our various lengths of time at different companies. We talked about how movement to a new company results in having to prove yourself again, even though you bring experience with you. Sally said, "It's very interesting how we as people just don't accept other people's backgrounds and capabilities. It's like oh, ok great. You've got to prove yourself again to me. I may know that you've done all these other things but you need to prove yourself again and I've come across some of that here, yeah, kind of irritating. Yeah. Not fun starting over every time."

The dialogue then migrated to dialogue around utilization of one's talents and skills, and observations that many people aren't totally satisfied in their jobs, possibly because they aren't using those talents and skills to their fullest potential. Of possible research on job satisfaction, Sally said, "No, it's very low. I saw some number on that before and I can't remember what it is. It is really low. It's like 80 percent of people in the United States say that they have some real unhappiness at work, like some huge number. Satisfaction is very, very low." Kolean shared, "I think that sometimes there aren't really good options....I think that there are a lot of people that their outcome is just not that great." Heather agreed, saying, "I see a lot of job security concerns and several lately that said (their) work environment is toxic, I want to get out of here."

The dialogue then moved to resilience, and the fact that multiple factors can influence your level of ability to "bounce back" when you are in transition. Sally shared,

A couple of thoughts; they didn't really come straight from the work that we all did with Fran, but first of all I noticed, and I can't remember who it is who had lost a family member during this, but one of the thoughts that I had when I read anything is when you have multiple bad things happen to you at one time, it is really hard to go on and it just sort of by the luck of the draw, if you could have one of those things to happen, you can be pretty resilient. But when you have multiple things, it really has huge effects on your health. I mean, I'm in nowhere near the physical shape I was before and I know a lot of it has to do with stress and with me with losing a job at the same time that the recession happened and being a senior level and not being able to find another job and I thought I had plenty of money. I thought I was just fine but you know what? There's only so long you can pay for a big house with no job and have to withdraw from investments at a quarter of the value you paid for to have cash that you don't just get for (what you sell) and so it's really, to me, a lot of it has to do with when you have multiple things happen at one time. Losing a job is hard but if you have it in the time of the recession when it seems like a lot of us has been in that space and a lot our contemporaries, the reason why they're underemployed or unemployed today is because they got laid off during the

recession and they're old, they're over 50, no one wants to hire them again. It's just really hard to bounce back when you have multiple things happen at one time.

The dialogue then moved to well-being during a transitional period. Observations from the dialogues included people feeling “exhausted, physically, emotionally, spiritually”; “just wiped out”. We shared the stresses we felt, and Sally noted that she didn't observe that same level of stress with keeping a job in millennials (those reaching adulthood around the year 2000):

...in comparison to me is when I see millennials who seemed to have no interest in having a long relationship with a job or with a company. They're very willing to go, “Oh, I don't like this anymore; I'm going to go do something else. If it doesn't work out, I'm just going to do something else.” They don't seem to worry about it. It's really interesting to watch them as a generation and of course we don't know how they will be when they age but their attitude is just so much different about employment and how employment relates to them personally than it is to us as baby boomers. It's totally different.

The dialogue then moved to the changing of the labor force, and the positive aspects of being over 50. Co-researchers shared having lived a lot longer and understanding how things can happen that are out of your control, having lived through various swings in employment cycles. We talked about sacrificing for the sake of job security, as well as greater challenges for women with lack of choices when we were building our careers.

This vein of dialogue moved into feminism and the relationship of job to identity. We agreed that when we started careers was a time of wanting to prove our worth, and the desire to not be, as Kolean put it, “a frivolous housewife who just went shopping”. We joked about working in a coffee shop in today's environment, needing to have a laptop open so that people would know that we were indeed working and not just spending idle time.

We revisited the question about struggling with some of the themes. I asked if there was anything in the dialogues that left them with lingering thoughts or feelings. Linda shared that some of the stories of the layoffs left her feeling like a mama bear: “How dare they do that to someone.” She felt the draw of community with those having shared experience. This led the group to sharing thoughts around the employer's perspective. Some felt that it was expected that employers would do what they had to do to keep the business running, while others felt that it was unfair to lay off dedicated employees, perhaps not having done adequate planning for volatility in the business.

Kolean said that she had great compassion and respect for the other participants and what they had been through, and how they had “come out of the other side of that.” Others agreed that it really spoke to our resilience, just “putting one foot in front of the other” until you found your way out. Heather said that she felt fortunate that her husband was going through the same thing at the same time, and they were very patient with one another. I shared the experiences of my husband and I moving from Wisconsin to Minnesota, both

unemployed, and having similar feelings. I talked about our many networking meetings, and this led to dialogue around the topic of networking.

There was great dialogue around the way introverts and extroverts approach networking. Linda shared that as an introvert, networking was exhausting for her: "I mean, for people that are introverts, that is what we talk about being exhausted from. You really should have however many meetings a day and I would have two and be like laying down on the floor!" A number of us shared networking stories, how the process worked for us, and our experiences.

Heather said she was a born networking, although not really an extrovert. (Others joined in to agree that Heather was the "queen of networking".) She said, "So it worked for me, and it works for me today in my business and part of it is I've been, since 1981, in one industry, the design industry and even though my role has changed in that time period, I got very involved in the professional association and so I met a lot of people and I continue to meet people all the time. But I get a lot of joy out of that."

The group at this point rallied around Kolean as she was sharing her challenges with networking. She was honest in her expression that she had felt like "some people might rally around me and say we'll figure something out. And maybe I still will but it doesn't, at this point in my life, I just, I honestly don't have the energy to completely start over."

Sally noted the differences between networking while in transition and networking within a company you are working for:

I have always worked for big companies. When you're in a big company there may be some other people in your industry but pretty much, your career network is within that company and if it's a big company, I mean, that's enough to keep you busy. I mean, I had to get to know people and then when you leave, you don't have a network on the outside. So when I came here, my network was in consumer products but there really were very few consumer product employers here in Kansas City. So I really had to go establish new connections and that was really different making networking appointments and things like that. I mean, I hadn't really had to do that before. It had been through meetings and lunches, things like that, inside a company but meeting and being referred to meet people on the outside; that was new.

I mentioned that Marcia, a recruiter with whom I met for this inquiry, had written a book on networking. We also talked about Tony, another person I sought out for his expertise in networking, and his approach of encouraging people to meet with people from all walks of life, and not just your own industry or field.

As we transitioned deeper into the interpretive level, I brought up the idea of a possible metaphor for the transition experience. I had done a bit of research on the metaphor of "coming of age" in literature and its possible connection to those in transition over age 50. Heather tossed around the phrase, and suggested the "age of wisdom." We expanded upon

this, that it was perhaps about the transformation, the relationships changing, the identity changing, your outlook on life changing.

Building upon the idea of change and transformation, Kolean brought up the idea of a “third act”, a new stage of life, and referred to a book about that, entitled “The Third Chapter” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2009). I also mentioned “The Portfolio Life” (Corbett & Higgins, 2009). After talking a bit about those books and the concept of a variety of roles and a portfolio style career, we circled back to the “coming of age” metaphor. Kolean said, “It might be that coming of age is so entrenched in the notion of teenage years and early adulthood that maybe it could be easily misunderstood.” The metaphor “coming of age” was not resonating with the group, and other metaphors were not coming forth, so we moved on to the other question in the interpretive level - what the value of this dialogue might have, for us or for anyone else.

Heather referred back to the idea of re-creation: “How people can come to realize that you’ve got to *recreate* ourselves; it’s a *re-creation*”. Linda reflected on that. “It’s not managing change anymore, it’s managing the RATE of change.” It just keeps coming faster and faster. “How do I make my life meaningful with these changes, these losses, and, at the same time, what do I do?”

Kolean built upon the rate of change theme, adding the idea of loss of control in life, and sometimes accepting that some things are out of our control. This led to others sharing about “control”: Is it a female thing to want to be in control? Is it more of a personality thing? Is control simply an illusion? Do we ever really have control? Several people in the group brought up that in support-type settings, such as Al-Anon or career outplacement; they were told that control was simply an illusion. It had helped them accept that there was only so much they could do in some situations, and it had helped them.

Sally brought in another line of thinking, talking about her experiences at a Fortune 500 company researching a product for women. She shared that in this research, they had found that women felt a freedom in their 50s, having completed their years of rearing children and caring for others. She mentioned maturation and a reduced competitiveness with other women, “that maybe is as much a part of this process as where we all have been. Because, we may have been entering in this stage of our life just because of our aging process, and not just because of losing jobs and that sort of thing.” This point caused everyone to pause for a moment and reflect.

Correlating this with job loss, Heather picked up on the idea of competence and freedom, and enjoying what you are doing, and then somebody saying, “you’re out,” just when you thought you were in the right time. Kolean added that it felt like “I had finally hit my stride and someone sticks their foot out and trips me.”

Sally then circled back on the idea of this maturation phase being one where “I can now help other people. When I look at my maturation, that’s what I really feel. I want to do something where I feel like I’m making a difference and it’s something that I love to do and that’s part of the life stage.” She said that she didn’t just look for “another job”, but felt that

at this stage, “it seems like we all look for something that would make us happy or that we had a lot of personal interest in doing.” Linda built on that idea and said, “no matter where we are we have an opportunity to help mentor and to kind of serve as that voice of reason, a voice of maturity, a sounding board.” She then added, “And I didn’t have anything to prove. None of us have anything to prove to anybody about our life.”

Heather said that she had been in a course called “Find a New Job Over 40”, where they suggested that you even bring up the “elephant in the room” and say that you have the wisdom that’s going to help guide your team. Linda and others began to dialogue about the shortage of workers coming up soon, and the fact that this maturity could be a differentiator.

We moved into the decisional level as we delved into opening new dialogue with others about the topic, doing further networking together and networking with others outside the group. Linda shared that for her, participating in the inquiry and knowing that others are identifying with it makes it feel more inclusive to her personally, and learning others’ stories and understanding them was “awesome.” Kolean said that “being part of the group counters the isolation” and that she was “glad to have faces for the people who have experienced that and I’m very grateful for that, very pleased that so many people have made it to the other side, one way or another, and it gives me some hope.”

We had some great dialogue around the stigma of being unemployed and how it helped us to talk more openly about it, and perhaps we could encourage others to do the same. We talked about having greater empathy for others through the experience.

Sally talked about her recent conversations with economists at a conference, and when she asked about the impact of the over 50s who have lost significant income and job security, they seemed to want to ignore the topic. Others joined in with frustration at hearing about shortages in the labor force, and feeling like “lost boys” when it came to being considered for job openings, and accepting lower wages.

As we wrapped up the dialogue, there was impetus to meet again in person and stay in touch, now that the group had a common bond and relationship built from the experience. We agreed to provide networking support for people we might refer to one another. There were warm feelings and exchanges of hugs at the end of the focus group.

Findings

The purpose of the focus group was to be together in dialogue about experiences and to move toward new understandings and ways of being together through the transition experience. According to vanLoon and vanDijk (2015),

....during a generative dialogue you arrive at something that is more/different from what each of the conversation partners brought in, and what they thought or felt at

the very start. Collectiveness is created, the result are new insights arising from the dialogical process, not from multiple separate individual thinking processes (p. 66).

By the end of the focus group analysis, common themes had arisen and taken new shape, and a real vitality emerged. While both the dialogues and focus group started with expressions of stark emotions of shock, grief and sadness, they moved through description of challenges, and eventually messages of strength and support, especially for one another. While there was acknowledgement of the value of supportive services and professionals, there was much more credence paid to the value of networking and inner resilience that aided in a re-creation of oneself that was necessary to determine next steps during work transitions. In this section I will summarize the areas that came together for the co-researchers and generated the most dialogic energy around them.

Need for comfort and connection

One of the strongest themes identified was that of the co-researchers wanting to voice their feelings and find comfort in connecting with others. This was evident in their desire to describe their feelings in words and share them with each other, using a variety of words and related contexts, such as grief or loss. They noted the words in each other's transcripts and wanted to talk about them and how those feelings connected them to one another. They used expressions that created imagery around the words, such as "having cooties," "being in a dark hallway," and "being in limbo." The desire for connection came through in their dialogue around networking with others, either those in transition or those who might be helpful to them in transition. They stressed the importance of networking in helping them meet new people, maintain connections with friends, explore new areas of interest, and secure connections to new job possibilities.

In addition, the co-researchers stressed connections with close friends and colleagues who could help them stay grounded and not lose hope. This is supported by Blustein et al. (2013), who found that, "The support provided by positive relationships emerged as one of the most influential factors on participants' experience of unemployment" (p. 260). Women are perhaps at an advantage in that their social support networks in general, and in times of job loss in particular, tend to be stronger than men's (Eby & Buch, 1995; Phelps & Mason, 1991). However, in the work environment, a woman's professional network might not be as strong in terms of being mentored or preparing to move to a new position following job loss (Eby & Buch, 1995; Phelps & Mason, 1991, 1991; Wang, 2009).

Stewart et al. (2002) stress the importance of networking as "one of the best communication strategies for women to use to overcome gender bias in the workplace" (p. 194). Gowan (2012) reinforces this, emphasizing the importance of social relationships and creation of a network as key to consistent career growth. While women have strong social networks, working to develop stronger professional networking skills could be valuable, especially in the event of an unexpected job transition. One of the professionals participating in this inquiry, recruiter Marcia Ballinger, co-authored a book designed to help professionals with this very skill (Ballinger & Perez, 2012).

This finding indicates a need to help create new ways of connecting women over 50 who are in job transition. Follow up with employees after layoffs is needed, connecting them not only to professional resources, but to one another. Many women certainly take this on themselves, but more could be done among talent management professionals and communities, helping women connect with others in their profession (Eby & Buch, 1995; Phelps & Mason, 1991; Wang, 2009). Connections could also be made through other institutions and outlets, such as book clubs, coffee shops, women's organizations, churches, and using on-line tools such as blogs. There is a need to meet women where they are so that they feel comfortable in sharing their struggles and experiences. The media could take a more active role as well, highlighting the challenges and accomplishments of job transitions in those over 50. Even though the latest job transition for most of the co-researchers had taken place one to three years ago, the co-researchers involved in this inquiry still desired to connect with one another about their experiences. This speaks to the importance of on-going dialogue in a desire to help others in similar transitions.

Increased rate of change and resilience

References to time, change and the increased rate of change were prominent in the dialogues and focus group. Co-researchers were cognizant of technology and the impact of improving their skills. They were aware of implicit biases of younger workers and employers that those over 50 couldn't "keep up." They seemed confident that they were comfortable with change, but that the increasing rate of change was a challenge for them. This connected with their dialogue around younger workers' perspectives, those who had grown up with this high rate of change in the workplace and expected to change projects and jobs more frequently.

At the same time, the co-researchers and their peers were very positive about their ability to adapt and re-create themselves. They were confident in their abilities to bring wisdom, maturity, and new perspectives to the workplace. In its "Effective Practice Guidelines Series" (Paullin, 2014), The Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) Foundation, a key player in the talent management arena, includes a manual for "Leveraging the Talents of Mature Employees," espousing the positive attributes of mature workers as "an untapped well of talent" (p. 3). They strive to dispel myths, citing research that shows mature workers "less resistant to change than younger workers, less likely to leave the organization, less likely to miss work, interested in learning new things, and able to keep up with technology" (Paullin, 2014, p. 6). Other research indicates that older adults demonstrate coping strategies around adversity and failure, being "more flexible and better able to adjust their strivings to changed circumstances than were younger adults" (Brandtstadter & Renner, 1990, as cited by Baltes, Lindenberger and Staudinger, 2007, p. 636). Interestingly, one study found that older and younger workers complement each other's productivity; if you remove the older worker the younger workers' productivity declines (Maestas, Mullen, & Powell, 2016).

More positive dialogue around these capabilities could improve individual and collective views of older workers (Jenkins, 2016; Schwartz & Kleiner, 1999; Trawinski, 2016). Reinforcing this is Nelson (2004), who cites studies highlighting the positive physical and mental effects of “positive age trait terms” (p. 151). The American Association of Retired Persons (interestingly, preferring to now be called simply ‘AARP®’) has initiated a number of programs aimed at opening new narratives around aging and breaking down age barriers in employment and education (Trawinski, 2016). Colleges are also looking for new ways to connect with mature workers, realizing that many want and need continuing education (Brody, 1457948750; Hannon, Kerry, 2015).

There is value in connecting these two: the over-50 worker is resilient and capable of re-creation, and the current workplace demands constant change and adaptation. With predicted upcoming labor shortages, combined with more experienced women in the workforce, tapping positively into the mature female worker has advantages on many levels. New dialogue stressing the adaptability and resilience of over-50 worker needs to evolve (Paullin, 2014; Schwartz & Kleiner, 1999). It would be interesting to explore further how we could co-construct an employment environment that acknowledges the strengths of this connection.

Maturation and a new way of relating

The co-researchers’ narratives included strong statements about their inner power, flexibility, resilience, freedom, empathy, and cooperation as elements of maturity. Research around personality across life span supports these characteristics, noting that self-regulation and stability in older adults actually contributes to resilience (Baltes et al., 2007). They felt empowered to “re-create as necessary” in order to thrive in the next phase of life, whatever they might decide that was for them, and to give back in the process. Few could dispute the value of these qualities in the workforce. Research reinforces these characteristics as both prevalent and key to moving through successful job transition (Paullin, 2014; Schwartz & Kleiner, 1999; Trawinski, 2016). They are also important to success in leadership and work effectiveness. Emotional maturity and resilience are becoming larger factors in all types of hiring, and behavioral interview questions attempt to determine a candidate’s proficiency in these areas.

The co-researchers had a sincere desire to offer that maturity and wisdom to the workplace and the “network” as a whole in the form of mentorships, networking relationships, and other forms of support. In an article reflecting on the research of wisdom, Baltes and Smith (2008) discuss the verbal and non-verbal behaviors associated with wisdom, including “good judgment”, “good advice”, and “empathy in interpersonal and group contexts” (p. 59). These behaviors were certainly aligned with what the co-researchers indicated they would like to be able to offer those with whom they worked and networked.

The value of this strength could be a widening of opportunities for women to share their maturity with other women, of all ages. Differences in the ways men and women approach job transition would suggest that woman-to-woman networking and mentorships would be beneficial to all (Eby & Buch, 1995; Gowan, 2012). While there is a need for same-age

relationships, there could be tremendous benefit to mentorship relationships among more diverse age groups, both in the workplace and in the community (Trawinski, 2016). Higher education institutions, nonprofits, community groups, neighborhood, and even entertainment venues could be involved in promoting these relationships.

New trends and movement

One of the topics touched upon briefly at the end of the focus group was that of the nationwide economic impact of those over 50 who have struggled with job security and underemployment and are not prepared for retirement. Some of the co-researchers felt that this is an area that has been ignored by economists. How this impacts an economy such as that of the U.S. that is largely driven by consumerism is in question.

The economic realities also speak to hope, with the impending labor shortage and recent acknowledgements of the necessity to re-engage and value the skills of older workers (Farrell, 2016). This could be helpful in alleviating some of the previous financial struggles of job transition that the co-researchers experienced. Education and training for human resource professionals and corporate recruiters could help reduce prejudice and stereotypes that have been perpetuated. This work has already been started by organizations such as the Society for Human Resource Professionals (SHRM) (Paullin, 2014).

Another positive trend is the recent focus on disruptive aging and positive aging, promoted by organizations such as the TAOS Institute's Positive Aging Newsletter ("Positive Aging Newsletter," n.d.) and AARP's JoAnn Jenkins in her recent book (Jenkins, 2016). These publications help open new and productive narrative around the language and cultural practices around aging. This trend could help reduce prejudice, stigmatism and ageism in the workplace.

Conclusions and Recommendations

McNamee notes that in relational research, "implications (otherwise known as "results") are not generalizable but are, in fact, useful to a particular community in a particular cultural, historical and situated context" (2010, p. 15). Likewise, "knowledge creation is relational, and it is fluid and changeable in its making" (Anderson, 2014, p. 64). This inquiry builds upon what has come before, contributes to what we might find useful in our discourse around transition in women over 50, and opens up the opportunity for further dialogue within communities touched by that discourse, as earlier stated, to "broaden our resources for social life" (McNamee & Hosking, 2013, p. 35). In this section, I will share how women experiencing "recreation in the age of wisdom" might provide possibilities to assist in that "broadening."

Reflections on the journey

This inquiry was intended to explore a different dialogue of support among women over 50 in “becoming” through the transition of involuntary job loss. What evolved was richer than I had imagined, full of positive and uplifting dialogue among women and professionals who wanted to be helpful to one another. It was hopeful, with generativity around building stronger relationships and connections, while also outwardly looking toward greater community awareness of the voices of women over 50 in transition. These are women who attend events, network, and constantly invest in reinvention of themselves. They are truly inspiring and, to me, reflect the richest reflections of “wisdom” and “re-creation.”

“Psychology Today” explains that “wisdom involves an integration of knowledge, experience and deep understanding that incorporates tolerance for the uncertainties of life as well as its ups and downs” (“Wisdom | Psychology Today,” n.d.). Additionally, wisdom includes an “optimism” about challenging situations and “a certain amount of calm in facing difficult decisions” (“Wisdom | Psychology Today,” n.d.). During the focus group, the co-researchers built upon the idea of calling this period of life and transition “the age of wisdom” and “re-creation”, reflecting transformation, a change in identity and outlook on life, incorporating what they had learned about life and about themselves. The wisdom and insights reflected in the co-researchers stood in stark contrast, however, to how they felt they were often treated in the workplace or by potential employers during their times of transition. If inclusive, constructive dialogue could bring together the wisdom and the workplace needs, what wonderful relational growth and change might be experienced!

This journey was very meaningful to me personally. It was a four-year deep dive into what had been a very key part of my professional and personal life and relationships. I was able to relive parts of it, for better or worse, to challenge my assumptions, but also to be uplifted by the creation of new meaning and possibility through interactions among the co-researchers. I won’t say that I still don’t have negative feelings or bitterness around some of my own experiences, but I was encouraged through the dialogue to rework and rethink my reactions and thoughts around them, and, in some cases, to reach greater peace within myself and to know that I was not alone in the on-going journey.

The inquiry led me to literature from the 1930s to the present that was very illuminating; many of the feelings and reactions to work and transition have not changed over the years. Although careers, work styles, women in the workforce, and other aspects may have changed, people are still heavily invested in their work identity and loss of it, when that occurs. Our work lives have been extended to later years and the lines between work and full retirement have blurred. The roles that people play in the workplace have been broadened to include mentoring, networking, consulting, teaming, virtual interaction, and relating in other new ways with one another. I was drawn to new literature about awareness and dynamics of what is happening in work and transition environments that will positively affect women in transition over 50...or 60 or 70!

Broadening the discourse around transition and work

Many of the previous studies regarding work identity, impact of transition, and age and gender factors reviewed here (see Background section) were reinforced by the inquiry. Previous studies, reports, workshops and transition support services have focused on deficiencies of mature women and perhaps “fixing” them, or “equipping” them for going forward. What this inquiry adds to the discourse around transition is stronger, more concise community voice around the relational needs of those in transition, the positive attributes and movement that mature workers can bring to the work environment, and the dispelling of some of the myths that people have about mature workers, especially in our now very diverse work communities. It also speaks to some of the urgency surrounding the need for changing the narrative, given the economic needs of those over 50 and the imminent labor shortage.

Supported by the theory of relational and generative inquiry, further action research around building these support systems within and outside of work environments starting at younger ages could help us move toward helping women prepare for the changes that come with transition throughout their lives, and especially when they are over 50 and experiencing the challenges brought forth in this inquiry. What we experienced in this inquiry was a sincere desire on the part of the co-researchers to help others, to support others, on the journey. I believe that calling upon more women “in the age of wisdom” would be fruitful in helping to build these support systems to better meet the needs of those for whom they are designed. I plan to work towards further dialogue around this, sharing this inquiry with a number of women’s groups in the community.

As the workforce begins to turn over the baby boomers (those born approximately between 1946 and 1964, following World War II) who don’t necessarily want to retire, an opportunity also exists for further inquiry into how we even define “work” and “the workforce.” The role of language is critical in how we construct our world and assign meaning to our relationships (K. Gergen, 2015a). There could be impetus for a *whole new language* that includes volunteerism, mentoring, networking, and other activities that contribute positively to the phenomenon we have previously called “work” or a “job.”

In publications and social media of organizations such as AARP we often see feature stories of those who have embarked on new careers or found new interests in later life, but the broadening discourse around transition and work suggested here would encompass more than just media intended for audiences over 50. The relational research network community of the TAOS Institute (<http://www.taosinstitute.net/relational-research-network>) is a place where co-researchers can engage in dialogue around the inquiry and spark interest from other communities. Other forums might include city and county government entities, human resource organizations, and faith-based groups.

Expanding inquiry around workforce diversity

Nelson (ed., 2004) highlights inquiry that has focused on the more negative stereotypes of older workers, rather than building on the positive social aspects of intergenerational environments. The ability to adapt and recreate oneself should be affirmed and cultivated as key attributes of all workers, and highlighted as a quality that many mature workers have developed. Human resource, organizational development, and change management groups are involved in the on-going narratives around workplace diversity. It would broaden the narrative to include intergenerational elements and open more dialogue around building rich, age-diverse work environments that research confirms are more stable and productive (Paullin, 2014).

Recently, I conducted a workshop entitled “Recruitment and Retention in Times of Demographic Change” at two different nonprofit conferences. The workshops were well attended and the dialogue centered around such topics as intergenerational communication, employee engagement, talent recruitment strategies (including older workers) and succession planning. I hope to hold this interactive workshop in other settings and perhaps produce an online version of it. Workshop environments, including online formats, are becoming increasingly interactive, and are held by many organizations in professional and community settings. Utilizing this format to draw more community voices around topics of stereotypes, bias, adaptability, common myths, etc. could expand the discourse around intergenerational diversity.

A sense of urgency

The lives of the co-researchers changed a great deal during the four-year span of time of this inquiry. In fact, one of the co-researchers met with me this week to share her latest challenge: another job transition. The Society for Human Resource Management Foundation report of 2016 predicted that “mature workers will be a firm’s largest source of talent in the next two decades” (Paullin, 2014, p. 3). Government policies around retirement age, health care costs, and the resulting economic implications to those over 50 are currently in play. This adds urgency to the recommendations here for community-based, collaborative work that expands the dialogue and includes more voices from diverse groups, and at all income levels.

I was discussing the inquiry with a student in one of my classes at a local university recently, and he said, “Oh, my mom would love to read about your work! A few years ago she was laid off by XYZ corporation and I saw how she changed as a result of that experience. She is now working for a consulting company and is very happy, more relaxed, and mentoring others.” Indeed, it seemed that every time I explain this inquiry to a curious person, he or she exclaims, “What a great topic! I know so many people who would be interested in talking about that.”

I believe there are more women....many more....who want to share, just as the women in this inquiry have. Ken Gergen’s quote holds promise: “The aim of research would not be to illuminate what is, but to create what is to become” (2015b, p. 6). As it relates to women over 50 re-creating themselves in the age of wisdom, we can do more. The more voices we

draw upon, the greater and faster the change they will experience toward the relation, connection, and recognition of their value in society.

Appendix I

Information and Consent Form

Information and Consent Form

Fran Lyon-Dugin, TAOS Institute Study on Involuntary Job Transition Over 50

Introduction:

You are invited to participate in a research study investigating “Involuntary Job Transition in Those Over 50”. This study is being conducted by Frances E. Lyon-Dugin, a PhD student at Tilburg University, under the supervision of Dr. Virginia Belden-Charles and Dr. Gerda van Dijk. You were selected as a possible participant in this research because of your experiences or consultation in areas related to the subject of the study. Please read this form and ask questions before you agree to be in the study.

Background Information:

The purpose of this study is to utilize personal stories to uncover patterns and themes in the experiences of those who have gone through this transition, or have been involved through a professional association with those who have.

Benefits of the Study:

The intent of this study is to provide information related to this topic that will be helpful to others in the future. Approximately eight to ten people are expected to participate in this research.

Procedures:

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to participate in one or more phone or in-person interviews or group meetings. Interviews and meetings will be arranged to fit the schedules of the participants at a mutually agreeable location.

Confidentiality:

Any information obtained in connection with this research study that can be identified with you will be disclosed only with your permission. You can refuse to answer any of the questions posed to you. You may notify me of any information that you wish to not be included. In any written reports or publications, only a first name or pseudonym, if you prefer, will be used. Any company referenced will be identified by a letter, such as A, B or C and the description will be broad, such as a “large not-for-profit.” The research is intended to be part of a published PhD dissertation, and will, as such, become a public record.

Voluntary nature of the study:

Participation in this research study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will

not affect your future relations with the Taos Institute or Tilburg University in any way. If you decide to participate, you are free to stop at any time without affecting these relationships.

Contacts and questions:

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me, Frances Lyon-Dugin, 612-670-3408, franlyondugin@gmail.com. You may ask questions now, or if you have any additional questions later, my advisor in the US, Dr. Virginia Belden-Charles, 651-698-7799, g.belden-charles@taosinstitute.net, will be happy to answer them.

You may keep a copy of this form for your records.

Statement of Consent:

You are making a decision whether or not to participate. Your signature indicates that you have read this information and your questions have been answered. Even after signing this form, please know that you may withdraw from the study at any time.

I consent to participate in the study and to be audio-taped and/or video-taped.

Signature of Participant

Date

Printed Name

Appendix II

Appreciative Inquiry: Dialogue-Initiating Questions

Appreciative Inquiry: People in transition

1. To start, I would like to learn about your experience with being involuntarily terminated. Tell me the story of how it all came about.

- after the story, ask reflective questions
2. What types of feelings do you remember experiencing during different points in the transition? Are there any that stand out in particular, and what were the circumstances around them?
3. What helped you survive or meet this difficult challenge?
4. Who were some of the people involved in your transition experience? What did they offer you?
5. As you reflect on the options that were before you, what stands out in your memory about how you viewed those options?
6. What options excited you and why?
7. Where did you get your energy? What resources did you find within yourself that helped you?
8. How do you think those options might have changed from what they might have been at a younger age?
9. How did you go about growing and learning during that time?
10. Tell me about your relationships with your family during that time. What was most helpful to you? What changed in those relationships?
11. Tell me about your relationships with your friends during that time. What was most helpful about your interactions with them? What changed in those relationships?
12. Tell me about your experiences with peers or colleagues during that time. What was most helpful to you? What changed in those relationships?
13. What were some of the support systems that you investigated to help you through your transition? Tell me about your experiences with them....

14. How do you view your career positioning or your future in general now? What steps are next for you? How do you feel about those steps?
15. How do you now define “success”? Has that definition changed as a result of your experience? How do you think that definition might be different now than it was at a younger age?
16. How have your values changed, if they have?
17. How do you feel you have grown or developed from your transition experience? What changes do you feel in yourself?
18. If you were to be in a position to help those who have been laid off, what would you share with them?
19. What could have helped you navigate this more easily?
20. What changes in our society in general might be helpful? What steps could you take to influence those changes? What might you contribute?

Appreciative Inquiry: People in support of those in transition

1. To start, how did you come to be involved with individuals over 50 who are in transition or who have been laid off

- after the story, ask reflective questions
2. What types of feelings have you observed in those who have been laid off over 50? With which ones could you empathize the most? Tell me some stories about that.....
3. What do you think you can offer those over 50 who are in transition or who have been laid off?
4. What excites you about working with people over 50 who have been laid off? What gives you energy?
5. How have you grown and developed through working with people who have been laid off or are in transition over 50?
6. Tell me about your experiences with peers or colleagues related to working with people over 50 in transition. What do you talk about when that is the subject of conversation?

7. Have you ever developed tools or workshops to help support those over 50 who are in transition? What has been most successful? What have been their reactions? (Tell me stories)
8. What were some of the support systems that you have suggested to those over 50 who are in transition? What feedback have you gotten from people after you have referred them to those support systems?
9. What have you observed about the relationships people over 50 who are in transition have with family and friends? How do they change? How are they positively affected?
10. What stories have you heard back from those with whom you have worked? Do any of them stand out as particularly hopeful or rewarding?
11. Has your definition of “success” changed as you have worked with people over 50 who have been laid off or are in transition?
12. How could your industry as a whole be more helpful to those over 50 in transition?
13. Who else could be helpful to this group and how? How about society as a whole? What do you hope to contribute?

Appendix III

Focus Group: The Art of Focused Conversation

Introduction

- participants
- process

Objective level: questions about facts and external reality

- What words or phrases from your own story or others do you remember reading in the narrative analysis?
- What themes do you remember most vividly from the narrative analysis; which ones stood out to you?
- What was left “ringing in your ears” after reading the analysis?
- What lingered in your mind after reading the analysis?

Reflective level: questions to call forth immediate personal reaction to the data, an internal response, sometimes emotions or feelings, hidden images and associations with the facts; internal responses

- What surprised you?
- What delighted you or caused positive feelings?
- Where did you struggle with the themes or what was said?
- Which of the themes, after reading, left you wanting to talk about them more with the rest of the group?

Interpretive level: questions to draw out meaning, values, significance and implications

- What does this mean for us, or people like us?
- One of the metaphors that my adviser and I have discussed around this inquiry is transition as a “coming of age” experience (struggle with identity, not knowing whether to stick with a past life or pursue a different path, growth and change in the process). From your reading of the narrative analysis, does this resonate with you?
- Is there another metaphor that fits better than a “coming of age” experience?
- What value might this inquiry have for others?

Decisional level: questions to elicit resolution, bring the conversation to a close, and enable the group to make a resolve about the future

- What can we take away from examining these narratives together?
- How is what we are taking away different from where we started as individuals?
- How might being part of this inquiry affect you in the future?
- What phrase might you use to summarize our dialogue?

Closing

- wrap up, summary
- thank you's

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