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*Organization Studies* 2010 31: 1687

DOI: 10.1177/0170840610387237

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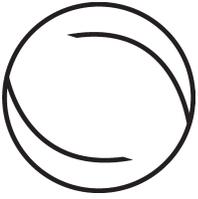
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# Temporary Derailment or the End of the Line? Managers Coping with Unemployment at 50

Yiannis Gabriel, David E. Gray and Harshita Goregaokar

## Abstract

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Based on fieldwork conducted at the outset of the 2008 economic downturn, this paper examines the experiences of a group of unemployed managers and professionals in their fifties. Following a review of existing literature, the authors use a narrative methodology to explore how these people incorporate the experience of job loss into their self-images and identities. They identify certain core similarities in the experiences of unemployed professionals and then discern three narrative strategies through which unemployed professionals tried to make sense of their dismissal and sustain their sense of selfhood. The term 'narrative coping' is proposed as a way of describing each unemployed professional's struggle to construct a story that offers both meaning and consolation. The study reveals that individuals expressing the most profound despair (those for whom job loss was the 'end of the line') were those whose stories had achieved 'closure'. By contrast, most of those who maintained more open-ended narratives were better able to contain their emotions, either by holding on to the belief that unemployment was a temporary career aberration or by abandoning the idea that life is the same as career and by moving on to a new stage of experimentation and bricolage akin to an identity moratorium.

**Keywords:** job loss, unemployment, storytelling methodology, identity, career narratives, narrative coping, psychological trauma

To paraphrase Tolstoy (2003: 17), all boom times are the same, but every recession is different — it brings its unique medley of troubles and uncertainties, as though similar misfortunes never happened before. The credit crunch of 2008/9 raised again the prospect of mass unemployment in nations that had persuaded themselves that economic slumps were a thing of the past. One thing is certain — as most western economies have reconfigured themselves into service economies, many of those currently affected by layoffs and job insecurity are managerial and professional employees. In this paper, we examine the experiences of managers and professionals who lost their jobs in their fifties. Some of them were having their first taste of unemployment whereas others had had similar experiences in the past. The paper is based on fieldwork carried out in the latter part of 2008, just as the magnitude of the economic downturn was becoming clear. The research was undertaken as part of an ongoing project which offered coaching to a group of professionals who had been laid off in mid-career, with a view to helping them return to work.

There has been a certain amount of research on the impact of unemployment on white-collar workers since Fineman's (1983, 1987a) important work, but

Organization  
Studies  
31(12): 1687–1712  
ISSN 0170–8406  
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[www.egosnet.org/os](http://www.egosnet.org/os)

DOI: 10.1177/0170840610387237

relatively little study of the effects of unemployment on highly paid professionals and managers (see, for example, Letkemann 2002; Mendenhall et al. 2008). The experiences of these people are of considerable interest — how do people whose identities revolve around their professional expertise, whose sense of self-worth is tied to their professional achievements and whose power and status are tied to their position, make sense of the experience of being laid off? What resources do they mobilize in coping with their new situation? And how is their identity construction affected by the experience?

We start with a review of some of the literature on unemployment generated mostly during earlier economic slumps. Using a narrative methodology, we then examine how today's managers and professionals incorporate the experience of job loss into their self-images and identities and how this event features in their life stories. We identify certain core similarities in the experiences of our respondents and then discern three narrative strategies through which they each tried to make sense of their dismissal and sustain their sense of selfhood — these are described as 'temporary derailment', 'end of the line' and 'moratorium'. The term 'narrative coping' is proposed as a way of describing each unemployed professional's struggle to construct a story that offers both meaning and consolation.

Coping, we argue, is not rational, purposive behaviour aimed at returning a person to equilibrium. In dealing with a painful event, such as job loss, people try to make sense of it by constructing a story that emplots the event, offers consolation and sustains their sense of selfhood. In line with authors who have studied how people make sense of serious illness by incorporating their illness into their life stories (Crossley 2000; Frank 1998; Hawkins 1999; Mattingly 1998), we expected that telling the story of a traumatic experience may have a therapeutic effect — that being able to construct a persuasive, cohesive and closed narrative of the trauma helps offer psychological closure and enables people to move on. Yet, what our study revealed was that individuals expressing the most profound despair (those for whom job loss was the 'end of the line') were those whose stories had achieved narrative closure but not psychological closure. By contrast, most of those who maintained more open-ended narratives were better able to contain their emotions, either by holding on to the belief that unemployment was a temporary career aberration or by abandoning the idea that life is the same as career and by moving on to a new stage of experimentation and bricolage akin to an identity moratorium.

The paper is intended as a contribution to two academic fields that in the past have generally stayed well clear of each other. One addresses the psychological consequences of job loss, along with coping mechanisms and the effectiveness of interventions intended to aid the unemployed (see, for example, Bennett et al. 1995; Gordus 1986; Kaufman 1982; Latack et al. 1995; Patton and Donohue 1998). The second addresses narrative constructions of identity and career among professionals, focusing specifically on the effects of job loss on the way people construct and sustain their life stories (see, for example, Brown and Humphreys 2002; Brown et al. 2005; Crossley 2000; Ezzy 1998; McAdams et al. 2006; Rhodes and Brown 2005).

## Some Lessons from Previous Economic Slumps

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

Early research into unemployment is dominated by a study carried out by Austrian researchers, which included sociologists Jahoda and Lazarsfeld (Jahoda et al. 1971 [1933]), who studied the Austrian village of Marienthal in the early 1930s, when 77% of the families had no employed member, due to the collapse of the village's single textile factory. Their work helped to bring to the public's attention the far-reaching effects of joblessness. They identified three different types of attitude among the families of the unemployed. Some families were 'unbroken', maintaining their morale while making practical allowances to manage its adverse effects and continuing actively in attempts to find work. The commonest response was 'resigned', families that had 'no plans, no relation to the future, no hopes, extreme restriction of all needs beyond the bare necessities, yet at the same time maintenance of the household, care of the children, and an overall feeling of relative well-being' (Jahoda et al. 1971: 53 [1933]). Finally, some families were 'broken', having lapsed into abject despair and given up attempts to find work; some of these families moved beyond despair to a state of total apathy in which family life begins to disintegrate, with no attempt to keep any semblance of respectability or order. What is absent is any sign of rebelliousness, militancy, anger or political mobilization among the unemployed and their families.

These themes return in the literature on unemployment that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s. Jahoda herself developed the view that the experience of unemployment brings about a collapse of meaning structures and a disintegration of the sense of time. Thus, unemployed people have trouble making a start at anything and concentrating on what they are doing, feel rusty and uncertain when doing things and take longer to complete them.

Being in a job, argued Jahoda, has numerous latent functions that only become apparent when the job is lost. Foremost among these, she argues,

'is the enforced destruction of a habitual time structure for the waking day with the sudden onset of unemployment. In modern industrialized societies the experience of time is shaped by public institutions. When this structure is removed, as it is in unemployment, its absence presents a major psychological burden.' (Jahoda 1982: 22)

Thus Jahoda came to give greater prominence to the psychological deterioration brought about by not working per se rather than by the ensuing economic deprivation. A similar approach was taken by Warr (1987), who developed his well known 'vitamin model' of the effects of unemployment on mental health. Just as vitamins are necessary for physical health and small deprivations lead

to intense adverse effects, likewise small environmental deprivations brought about by unemployment lead to serious mental health consequences.

Warr's and Jahoda's later works were criticized by Fryer (1992; see also Fryer and Payne 1984, 1986) for underestimating the importance of material deprivation and poverty. Their approaches, argued Fryer, reflect the prevailing ideologies of policy-makers, who would argue that the unemployed can be helped through better training and new skills rather than better state hand-outs. In place of Warr's and Jahoda's 'social environmental approach', Fryer (1992) advocates an 'agency restriction approach'. Instead of looking at the unemployed person as a passive, dependent and reactive being, in short as a victim,

'the agency restriction approach rests on a model of the unemployed, and indeed any other person as an active, initiating, future-oriented agent, striving to make sense of and influence events. It also rests upon an implicit model of that which is implicitly responsible for the unemployed person's plight — the social institution of unemployment — as impoverishing, restricting, baffling, discouraging and disabling.' (Fryer 1992: 114)

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

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

What we should not overlook is that in spite of sub-groups that appeared to cope well, the majority of white-collar workers suffered both physical and psychological deterioration as a result of job loss. In fact, there is some evidence that the better the job that was lost, the greater the deterioration, a view endorsed by Fineman himself and also by Kaufman (1982) and Podgursky and Swain (1987). As Latack et al. (1995) argue:

'professional workers experience what might be termed a "harder-they-fall" effect. That is, for workers who are economically better off and who may derive a larger portion of their psychological identity from work, the discrepancies are more severe than for hourly workers.' (Latack et al. 1995: 327)

Since the Marienthal study, two persistent questions have been raised by the differential impact of unemployment on different individuals. First, if losing one's job is a traumatic experience, can it be argued that the unemployed go through different stages of response to shock, similar to those who experience bereavement or other traumatic loss (Kübler-Ross 1969; Lindemann 1944)? Second, if unemployment is indeed stressful, can the literature on strategies of

coping with stress (e.g. Folkman and Lazarus 1985; Lazarus and Folkman 1984) be applied to those who lose their jobs?

'Phasic' theories of unemployment — that is, the view that the experience of unemployment follows a number of fairly distinct phases or stages — have relied extensively on Fink's (1967) four-stage model. Fink argued that in coping with crisis, people first experience a period of shock, when they deny the experience and feel a total loss of orientation. They then move to a period of defensive retreat, followed by acknowledgment and, finally, by a process of adaptation and change. Researchers who have made use of this model include Swinburne (1981), Harrison (1973) and Hill (1977). This rather optimistic account, where all troubles are eventually managed through adaptation, has been severely criticized by Fineman (1983: 8–9) as well as Fryer (1985), who find virtually no empirical evidence to support it. Fineman argues that looking closely at the experiences of different people who have lost their jobs reveals that each experience of unemployment is characterized by its own dynamics and follows its own trajectory.

Rather more resilient than phasic approaches to unemployment have been those that identify different coping strategies and then seek to assess their effectiveness in mitigating the distress and pain of unemployment and, in many cases, restoring the unemployed to work through effective job searches. Much of this literature is inspired by Lazarus and Folkman's work on stress (e.g. Folkman and Lazarus 1985; Lazarus and Folkman 1984; Lazarus and Lazarus 1994). These authors identified different coping strategies, such as problem solving, wishful thinking, detachment, seeking social support, maintaining positive thinking, self-blame, tension reduction and withdrawal. In general, the coping literature distinguishes between *problem-focused* strategies and *emotion-focused* (also referred to as '*symptom-focused* strategy') strategies, and there is overwhelming agreement that the former work better than the latter. Leana and Feldman (1992) found that the former strategies lead to quicker re-employment and better mental health. By contrast, emotion-focused coping, like all avoidance types of coping, work against long-term coping. There is a fair degree of support for this (e.g. Gowan et al. 1999; Patton and Donohue 1998: 331)

Coping literature (Gowan and Gatewood 1997; Kabbe et al. 1996) generally views unemployment as a traumatic event that requires both inner and outer resources to address. What is not so common is to find literature that examines in detail the nature of the trauma of job loss, the conflicts and contradictions experienced by the unemployed and the clash between different emotions. One study that sought to do this (Letkemann 2002) used the concept of *stigma* to explore various strategies used by the unemployed to avoid disclosure. These include subterfuge (for example, 'I am a consultant') or different forms of 'masquerades' to conceal unemployment even from members of the close family. Letkemann concluded that:

'any stigma management technique, whether masquerade, lying or withdrawing, contributes to social isolation and "introjection into the self" (Burman 1988: 200) and heightens the sense of self-blame, already so common among the unemployed.' (Letkemann 2002: 519)

The concept of stigma has also been used by other authors, notably Willott and Griffin (2004), who highlighted its adverse effect on men's identity and self-image

as chief family breadwinners, an image that seemed to continue dominating the identities of working-class men.

One interesting feature of existing research into unemployment is a split between large-scale survey research (e.g. Creed and Moore 2006; McKee-Ryan et al. 2005; Jackson and Warr 1984; Vinokur et al. 1991; Warr and Jackson 1984, 1985) that suggests long-term and pronounced emotional and physical distress and small-scale, in-depth research (e.g. Berger 2006; Fineman 1983, 1987b) that tends to suggest a wide kaleidoscope of varied experiences, coping strategies and even success in surviving unemployment.

## **Storytelling Methodology:**

### **Job Loss as Part of a Life Story**

One of the under-researched aspects of job loss is the way people incorporate it in their view of their lives, their life stories. It is well known that human beings can deal with considerable pain and distress if they can make sense of them, for example, by viewing it as personal sacrifice in the interest of a superior goal. As Weick (1979, 2001) and others have argued, people constantly strive to discover meanings for their experiences, and one of the most effective ways of creating meaning is by turning experience into narratives and stories: 'When people punctuate their own living into stories, they impose a formal coherence on what is otherwise a flowing soup' (Weick 1995: 28). By placing an event into a story and rehearsing the story to ourselves and others, we make sense of key events in our lives and we cast ourselves as a protagonist in the dramas that surround us. Through telling a compelling story, we discover our 'voice' (Gabriel 2004b) and, by sharing such stories, we construct and sustain our identities (e.g. Brown et al. 2005; Brown and Starkey 2000; Sims 2003). The concept of narrative identity (Gubrium and Holstein 1999, 2001; Holstein and Gubrium 2000; McAdams et al. 2006; Polkinghorne 1996) suggests that our sense of selfhood emerges from the different stories we tell about ourselves, the tensions between different stories, and the struggles we have as we seek to make our stories heard and respected by others.

Thus, as Ezzy (1998: 239) has argued, a narrative conception of identity 'provides a subjective sense of self-continuity as it symbolically integrates the events of lived experience in the plot of the story a person tells about his or her life' — in short, it maintains a sense of continuity out of the discontinuities experienced throughout life. Ezzy (2001) has indeed applied his approach to unemployed people in Australia, identifying three dominant narratives embraced by those losing their jobs: romantic narratives approach job loss as a positive experience of emancipation from oppressive work, leading to a better future; tragic narratives cast job loss as a negative turning point in people's life plans, leading to depression, anxiety and self-blame; complex narratives interweave job loss with other adversities such as marital breakdown or serious illness.

Narrative identity is a reflexive construct, in which the story's protagonist and the storyteller co-create each other. At every moment, the narrator creates a protagonist whose actions and predicaments redefine the narrator. In telling the story of my life, I make sense of past events and create a person living in the

present as a continuation of that story. In this way, narrative identity is both a continuous and discontinuous process. Identity is continuously created and recreated — yet there are sharp discontinuities in its construction. Some of these discontinuities are the results of life's big events or sudden events, like accidents, job losses, illness, opportunities and so forth (what Aristotle calls *peripeteia*), all of which call for opening new chapters in our life's stories. But there is another type of discontinuity too — one that comes from the 'recognition' (*anagnorisis* is Aristotle's term) of the deeper significance of an event. Thus, an event that was originally seen as a calamity comes, in the light of future developments, to be seen as a blessing. Conversely, an event that was seen as a triumph or a boon comes to be seen as a reversal or even as a disaster. According to this view, the way we create our life stories involves various blessings in disguise and poisoned chalices — moments when we reassess the significance of earlier events.

### The Field Research

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

The methodology was derived from Gabriel's (1995, 2000, 2004a) research into organizational storytelling and McAdams's (1988, 1996, 2006) work on life stories; we invited our respondents to reflect on their experience of job loss as an episode in their life's story or as part of a journey that represents their career. The words 'career' and 'life journey' were used extensively in the questioning in order to identify how participants construct these terms, how they apply them to themselves and how their current predicament fits in.<sup>1</sup> Eleven male and one female professionals (there were only three women in the entire population of 32 from which we drew our sample), aged between 49 and 62, were interviewed, with most interviews lasting around two hours. Seven of these professionals (and one additional one) also participated in two focus groups, lasting between two and three hours. Finally, informal discussions were held with several of these individuals.

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

Table 1.  
Demographic Profile  
of Participants

Categories	Participants	Dominant narrative	Occupation	Dominant outlook	Time unemployed
<b>Career in a single or very few organizations</b>	Bill		Accountant		14 months
	Mick		Golf club manager		6 months
	Stanley		Accountant		6 months
	Raymond		Construction, Advocacy		Unknown
	Michael		Advertising executive		7 months
<b>Frequent career moves</b>	Matthew		Entrepreneur, inventor, opera singer and impresario		12 months
	Heather		Horticulturalist, charity manager, care giver		8 months
	Peter		Local government, Retail, Logistics		14 months
<b>Information systems experts</b>	Robert		IT analyst for insurance		8 months
	Gerard		Marketing lecturer		11 months
	Neil		IT manager and consultant		18 months
	John		IT manager and consultant		8 months

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

The tone of the two focus groups was widely different: the first, dominated by two exuberant personalities, verged on the euphoric, whereas the second was dominated by acknowledgements of failure and expressions of grief and despair. Anger was an emotion constantly surfacing in both focus groups. The interviews too varied in tone. Some were confessional, some were carefully fronted and controlled by the interviewee and only one was friendly, relaxed and informal. At the time of writing this, no follow up interviews had yet taken place with any of the participants; however, as two of the authors were directly involved in the coaching programme, they were able to have numerous informal conversations with some of the participants and observe them over the course of several months. This contextual knowledge aided some of the inferences and interpretations offered below.

### Some Core Similarities

A central feature of the life stories we collected was their intense individualism: several participants recounted numerous episodes from their lives, hardly ever

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

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

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

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

While several of our respondents expressed hostility to change, few did so with the vehemence of Robert, who started his career as an insurance salesman but, at 24, moved into IT, ending up as a senior analyst. In the course of the interview, Robert stated no fewer than four times that he did not like change. Asked how he responded to change, he said:

'I do sense a bit of negativity [in myself] sometimes, I can't [bring myself to] do what I don't want to do. As I said earlier I don't like change; if somebody doesn't like change and becomes an expert, then he is a source of knowledge because he's been out there a long time, he's always seen as being *the rock of the institution* and he's reliable and dependable. So when things go wrong, that person can be looked upon as being the one who will sort everything out, get the job done. So you don't see it [resistance to change] as a negative thing, but, of course, things do move on and that's perhaps why I'd never seen it [the job loss] coming.'<sup>22</sup>

Robert saw himself as the rock of the institution, so wrapped up in sorting out IT problems that he did not see the warning signs when a new director introduced far-reaching changes. Robert was summarily dismissed with three months' pay. Subsequently, Robert was offered a new job that required a house move — but he refused to take it. Robert's sincere introspection reveals this deeper inflexibility, an unwillingness to accept change — any change. Nearly all our respondents seemed unable to accept changes in their environment; they could certainly not envisage 're-inventing' themselves (although some had done so successfully in the past), as a way of moving sideways to a new career. In this regard, they seemed to be exactly the opposite of the 'chameleon characters' noted by Sennett (1998: 26), those who thrive in the 'new flexible economy'. All in all, it would be fair to say that, as professionals who found themselves unemployed in their fifties, they tended to cling on to the professional skills and identities that had served them well in the past and were perplexed and unwilling to accept that old assets can turn into liabilities (McLaughlin and Webster 1998).

Almost all of our respondents reported that, following job loss, personal relationships had taken tumultuous turns, and for some had 'hit rock bottom'. At least four went through painful divorce proceedings while others struggled to keep their marriages afloat. Disrespect from a spouse for being unemployed hurt endlessly and so too did the devaluing of their time by members of their family ('you've got the time so therefore you can do everything else') too. For the outside world, some worked hard at maintaining a façade that everything was fine while others withdrew into isolation from social and family contacts. Peter, explicitly, saw himself as being denied a voice as an unemployed man by others, who believed they knew all about unemployment:

'You often feel that people don't understand what afflicts you and what's bothering you and that there's lots of things going on around you. Friends and family are responding to you and ... they've got thoughts about unemployment issues ... and often their thoughts are either misconceived or unconceived and try to put them on you as an unemployed person. So there's a lot of pressure on you and what's it all for — £59.50 a week!'

The harsh reality of a swift transition from employed to unemployed came as a shock to Gerard. Finding himself a 'social pariah', and thus excluded from the lifestyle of the employed, made him resentful of the employed. This is prevalent in Gerard's portrayal of the routine of residents in his cul-de-sac:

'Almost like a curfew — 10.30 everyone's gone to bed — so that's something I would say is the lifestyle of being unemployed is a bit strange, it's sort of almost takes you outside reality in a way, it's a bit of a strange one. This is a bit odd and it's just coming back to this point about being de-humanised. I do think we need to help unemployed people more in my view, I think this country needs to take a close look at it, it's almost like you're a social pariah sometimes.'

With finances depleting, anxieties over making ends meet, paying mortgages and bills, escalated. Some participants, like Stanley, went as far as consciously punishing themselves by adopting a meagre lifestyle, buying cheap food, walking everywhere and cutting back on all luxuries. Such actions were explained through a feeling of worthlessness resulting from unemployment and through stating that he felt that, as an unemployed person, he did not deserve things of better quality.

The Job Centre Plus (state job-finding agency) was seen by everyone as ‘a soul-destroying place’, causing much fury. Their offices were seen as places run by under-trained staff whose prime intention is ‘shifting bodies to get their fee’, and who ‘have a cultural problem in dealing with people who don’t have tattoos’. With a lack of regard for their experience, participants were forced to attend generic courses of little value to them. They found it challenging to survive in an intimidating environment, surrounded by people from lower social and economic standing. In both focus groups, anger at the Job Centre Plus acted as a strong point of agreement among participants, and the focus for intense and shared anger.

### Some Core Differences

Job loss was a major turning point, a painful disruption in the lives of all our respondents; but, as suggested by the literature (Fineman 1983; Fryer 1992; Gordus 1986; Gowan and Gatewood 1997; Kaufman 1982; Latack et al. 1995), they sought to cope with it in different ways. Nearly all of them experienced powerful negative emotions, including disappointment, anger, despair, fear, resignation, anxiety and depression. These emotions were closely linked with the ways that each professional tried to make sense of job loss as part of their life story. As a deep disruption, the experience of being fired had forced them to re-examine their past decisions and choices. What was very clear was that there were several distinct ways of incorporating this disruption into their life stories, some more successful than others. Overall, our respondents resorted to three narrative strategies — one was to view their current unemployment as a temporary disruption, a setback, but from which their career would eventually recover. A different strategy was to see their job loss as marking the end of their career and the beginning of a new phase in their life. Finally, there were some who presented themselves as being in a kind of limbo-land, not knowing what lies ahead, whether the disruption of their career is a permanent or temporary one, but seeking to make the best out of their current situation.

### Job Loss as ‘Temporary’ Career Disruption

Four of our respondents presented themselves as very actively looking for work, viewing their current status as a temporary one. Mick put it graphically:

‘I am stuck in the lay-by, while the traffic rushes past me. I can’t wait to get back on the road and resume my journey.’

Interestingly, these respondents had very different life stories to tell. Bill, an accountant, had wanted to be in control of his career, but an earlier experience of unemployment had forced him to reconsider:

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

Table 2.  
Categorical  
Classification of  
Participant Narratives

<b>Career in a single or very few organizations</b>	Bill	Temporary derailment	Need to be in control; not so choosy now; eventually successful in getting new job	
	Mick	Temporary derailment	Despair behind confident persona; desperate hope to rejoin the 'motorway'	
	Stanley	Temporary derailment	Deeply traumatized but managed to rise and eventually got new job	
	Raymond	Moratorium	Job loss as opportunity for career change; now altruistic figure, advocate for the helpless	
	Michael	Temporary derailment	Traumatized by job loss, but managing to craft new life as freelancer	
	<b>Frequent career moves</b>	Matthew	Temporary derailment	Behind verbose and confident exterior, drifted between jobs, a deeply troubled man, writing dozens of job applications daily
		Heather	End of the line	Insecure manager, deeply traumatized by job loss, turned to Sufi religion, wanders from one job to another, resigned attitude
		Peter	End of the line	Deeply cynical and rigid attitudes conceal deep regrets, anger and mental illness, strong resentment towards the system
	<b>Information systems experts</b>	Robert	End of the line	Profoundly depressed after job loss; 'no career'; deeply averse to change
		Gerard	Moratorium	Sociological understanding of job loss; confident, positive, making new life by doing 'bits and pieces'
Neil		Moratorium	Getting used to being unemployed; resorting to 'bits and pieces' and doing voluntary work but reconciled to lower standard of living	
John		Moratorium	Following several job changes in IT, resistant to change, is reconciled that IT career is over, eventually successful in finding yet another IT job	

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

'I thought, you know, this is an opportunity to think about what I really want to do and I will have a reasonable amount of money thrown at me to make me go away.'

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

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

A verbose, seemingly self-confident man, Matthew had dominated his focus group, eliciting from some of the others responses like 'What on earth are *you* doing here?' He had impressed them with his colourful tales of working as retail salesman, international operatic singer, director and impresario, entrepreneur, inventor and showman. His stories, exuding pride, combined the epic qualities

of achievement against the odds with a self-deprecatory quality and usually a sting in the tail — some achievements turning out as disappointments. Matthew met and befriended numerous famous people — royalty, celebrities, operatic stars, sporting heroes; he was honoured in the Queen's list for his services to the entertainment business. Yet, at 56, his latest venture had failed, after he had mortgaged his house for several hundred thousand pounds, as a result of the cancellation of a major government contract. At this point, his Midas touch seemed to desert him and he had been unable to find work for what he variously described as 12 or 24 months.

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

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

Regrets soon turned into feelings of failure and despair:

'Well you know, at 60, 56 years of age — I keep calling myself 60, I don't know why — it's not pleasant to be not working, it's not pleasant to have to watch every single penny, and, I mean, there's millions of people in this country that have to do that, but you know, what use is a [Queen's decoration] if you can't afford to put bread on the table? What use is it having, you know, a glorified past if you can't actually front up and do a day's work? You know, I find, you know, and these are sort of conversations I don't have with people very often you know, I find it terribly distressing to actually think of, you know, am I going to be in this situation for the next 10 years? And it's not a very pleasant thought.'

Unwilling to accept this situation, Matthew insisted that he was still working, even if not employed, filling in, on average, 20 and, at times, up to 40 applications per week (precision is not his forte):

'I've probably filled out two or three hundred applications in the last month or so and I would have said 10 or 20 of those jobs are absolutely definite ones, I could have done them very well and found satisfactory employment with and given some value-added experience and attitudes and so on to the company that ... but, you know, I haven't even got an interview.'

There is something tragic about Matthew's unwillingness to question his job-searching strategy, in spite of his constant failures and mounting despair. Of all our respondents, Matthew was the only one to conceal his unemployment even from his closest acquaintances, something that compounded his isolation and disillusionment. Matthew's story interweaves a confident, verbose and pompous persona with a deeply troubled selfhood that can only be sustained by finding a new career, a struggle sustained through frenetic and ultimately futile activity. This antagonism defines his identity, an identity that, unlike Bill's, can fairly be described as fragmented (Brown 2006; Clarke et al. 2009).

Temporary derailment narratives are stories in progress, stories without closure. Their narrators can be business-like, disappointed or occasionally lapsing into despair, but their narrative effort is all devoted to keeping the story going — as if, in this way, the show can be put back on the road and the

experience of being laid off can find its proper narrative place as a reversal but not a permanent derailment.

### **Job Loss as the End of Career**

In contrast to Bill and Matthew, who in their different ways were seeking to resume their careers, several of our respondents viewed their most recent job loss as marking the end of their careers. Like Bill and Matthew, these respondents were tainted by a sense of failure but, unlike Bill and Matthew, they had given up trying to find success in a new leaf of their career. In Jahoda's (1982; Jahoda et al. 1971 [1933]) terms, they were resigned or broken. For all, this had been a painful realization. We shall concentrate on the life stories of three individuals, all of whom had had particularly traumatic dismissals, which they described in great detail and which still caused them deep trouble. All three had closed the book called career. Heather had moved on to part-time employment as gardener, then as carer for the Alzheimer's Society, and was increasingly drawn into the mystical world of Sufi religion; Peter saw himself as struggling to survive in a system that had wronged him and against which from time to time he railed; and Robert had come to the sad realization that he had never really had a career and had internalized a profound sense of failure.

Heather had worked as a gardener and then as a teacher for disabled people, eventually becoming the training manager for a charity offering services to disabled people. After seven years in this job, she was made redundant following the arrival of a new director. This coincided with her conversion to Sufi Islam, a factor that she believed led to discrimination by others and eventually to her dismissal. A deeply introspective person, she still felt deep pain while reminiscing about her dismissal in detail. She felt an acute lack of closure, as her departure had involved no farewells, no recognition of her contribution and no final meetings. Paradoxically, while she was one of the most traumatized people we interviewed, she instantly embraced 'blessing in disguise' as a description of her dismissal, following which she had dedicated more of her life to her religious faith as well as to short-term part-time gardening jobs. She had come to view herself as unsuited to managing difficult or toxic people and had almost given up hope of resuming a management career, in part because being a manager made it hard to 'retain my authenticity'. Heather's interview displays a deep ambivalence about her predicament, combining an unresolved pain over the way she had been treated with a brave effort to reshape her life beyond the parameters of a career. In this regard, she combined features of Ezzy's (2001) tragic and romantic narratives, without being able to achieve narrative coherence or continuity.

Another individual deeply traumatized from his job loss was Peter, who had worked as a local government officer, experienced dismissal several times, and alluded to having worked in rough manual jobs and ended up in police vans on some occasions. Peter struck the researchers as a thoughtful and introspective person when he participated in the focus group, where he had talked about his pain and disillusionment with the system. Interviewed some three months later, he cut a harsher, more cynical and far angrier figure. In his earlier career, Peter

had frequently felt trapped and suffocated, using the phrases ‘I couldn’t breathe almost, without being criticized’ and ‘felt like I was being imprisoned’, and describing one incident when a superior had locked him in his office until he completed an assignment.

‘I would say the part I’ve reached now is *my career’s over*, that’s the part I feel I’ve reached now; and now, you know, it’s over so I just take whatever is around really. You know, I’ve had my chances in employment, I’ve done as well as anyone could, anyhow in what I’ve had to face.’

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

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

The premature end of Peter’s career saw him overwhelmed by anger, cynicism and recourse to endless negative stereotypes against managers, gay and lesbian people, foreigners and so forth. Like Heather’s, his narrative contained numerous contradictory elements vying for supremacy and ultimately failing to achieve coherence.

A very different response to an equally overwhelming trauma was displayed by Robert, whose hostility to change we noted earlier. His narrative frequently returned to the refrain, prompted by his brutal dismissal, that he had had *no* career.

‘If I had more of a career drive, I would have probably worked in the City on £50,000, you know, but I wasn’t, you know, but never ... that is that, I’m still in a little one bedroomed flat, rather than my three bedroomed detached house with half an acre or whatever you want. You have an idea of what you want and that’s why I found myself to be a bit stuck at the age of 50 ... the significance of that is that I got made redundant just as I turned 50. I felt that a 50 year old is not going to be living in a one bedroomed flat which he’s lived in for 20 years, you know, so ... haven’t really had a career.’

Robert referred repeatedly, both in the focus group and the interview, to his 'one-bedroomed flat', which he saw as evidence sometimes of his lack of ambition and sometimes of his failure in life. His dismissal, the second one in his career, came to re-affirm this profound sense of failure. Unlike Peter, Robert showed limited signs of anger, but the depths of his despair were unmatched by any of the other interviewees. Robert matches accurately the broken despairing category described by Jahoda (1982) with loneliness and isolation added. The powerful imagery and mixed metaphors in the following extract reveal something of his confusion, his shattered self-confidence, his sense of isolation and resignation:

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

The three individuals whose stories we have discussed in this section share a profound trauma resulting from their dismissal, a trauma that marks the end of their careers. In each case, the experience of dismissal had prompted a far-reaching re-evaluation of their earlier career, their values and their aims. Heather reached the conclusion that her move into management had been a mistake and her dismissal a blessing in disguise. While railing at the injustice done to her, she had moved on to a new phase where part-time work and dedication to religion filled a large part of her life. Peter's life story, his struggles against the system, his occasional victories and frequent failures, saw him defiant at times, broken at others. He had almost persuaded himself that career meant restriction and unfreedom and that drifting in and out of short-term jobs was preferable to commitments and disappointment. Finally, Robert's life story of failures had resulted in profound depression and isolation, disillusionment, guilt, shame and self-pity — in a curious way, he had reached a point of recognition (*anagnorisis*) which made sense of his earlier life, yet he was unwilling to let go of the notion of 'career' against which he continued to measure himself.

All three professionals in this section related narratives that involved a kind of 'refrain'. Heather had been a wanderer who reached her destination in Sufi mysticism; Peter had been the endless victim of mistreatment and betrayals and maltreatment but had now 'liberated' himself; Robert had deceived himself that he was on the career ladder only to discover that he had never had a career. Yet, behind such attempts to create plausible life stories, pain and regret constantly surfaced to disrupt the narratives and indicate the narrators experienced a deficit

of meaning at the heart of their stories — the struggle to create a meaningful post-career narrative led them to all sorts of contradictions and non-sequiturs, as they tried to make light of what was still an unbearable burden, lapsing into moments of profound despair and dejection.

The accounts in this section are strongly evocative of what Frank (1995), a medical sociologist, describes as ‘chaos narratives’. Frank has studied the ways people seek the meaning of their illnesses, which, like losing one’s job, represent life disruptions. Frank argues that ‘stories have to repair the damage that illness has done to the ill person’s sense of where she is in life, and where she may be going. Stories are ways of redrawing maps and finding new destinations’ (Frank 1995 : 53). Chaos narratives are one of the three types of narratives identified (the others being restitution and quest narratives) and are characteristic of a person who experiences a profound lack of control over their illness and, therefore, their life. Chaos narratives are chaotic; events proceed with little cohesion or purpose and the protagonist finds him- or herself victims of forces he or she cannot comprehend (Frank 1995: 97). This may well explain why the narrative closure presented by our interviewees here fails to bring consolation or psychological closure. The wound remains open, and the purpose of the suffering painfully elusive.

### **Job Loss as Prompt for Moratorium**

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

An example of this strategy is provided by Raymond, who, like Peter, had experienced dismissal and divorce in close succession. Like Peter, Raymond reported feeling free following these events. Unlike Peter, he had used this freedom to retrain as an advocate for schizophrenic patients; there was no anger or bitterness in his account. Raymond then worked in a sequence of ad hoc unpaid assignments, interspersed with further periods of training. He was determined not to accept payment for his advocacy work. Playing the part of the good Samaritan and looking for further training opportunities seemed to sum up Raymond’s post-career and post-unemployment life story.

Another person who had reached a moratorium was Gerard, a marketing executive and, later, a marketing lecturer. His was the only interview that could be described as relaxed and friendly. Gerard was very articulate and portrayed himself confidently as someone who was in control of his life, even following redundancy from his earlier job. He held a wide range of opinions, mostly gentle

disappointment with the 'modern world', a term he used 10 times in the course of the interview, always with negative connotations of harshness, greed and ceaseless work driven by fear. Gerard repeatedly described himself as 'philosophical'. He had experienced dismissal twice; once he had felt 'stabbed in the back' and briefly lapsed into anger; however, his understanding of job loss was essentially *sociological*, rather than personal. He saw it as a fact of life for which he used the term 'setback', resulting from a world that was unequal and unjust. At 59, Gerard walked a very fine line between viewing himself as having retired already, keeping busy by reading, short lecturing contracts and occasional consulting assignments, and seeing himself as actively looking for a job; but nothing in the course of a two-hour interview rattled his relaxed and confident demeanour.

While none of our other interviewees had reached as relaxed an attitude as Gerard, several indicated that their current situation, one occupying an intermediate state between work and non-work, was one they were content to occupy. Moratorium stories lacked closure, but this was not a great cause of concern or anxiety for the storyteller. None of them could be described as 'broken', though the philosophical attitude proclaimed by several could be seen as a front for resignation. These were people who, unlike Robert, had successfully stopped defining themselves in career terms. They did not feel that life without a career was meaningless or empty. Instead they tried to make the best out of the opportunities that came their way, without despair or anxious urgency. Financially, they made the best out of their resources, having no major debts and moderating their aspirations as consumers. Their attitude might be described as one of bricolage (Lévi-Strauss 1966), making the best out of the resources available, being on the lookout for opportunities, living within their means and, within these terms, feeling in control of their lives.

In contrast to 'temporary derailment' narratives, which stubbornly resisted closure, and 'end of the line' narratives, which found no solace in the closure that they reached, moratorium narratives seemed to offer a partial but psychologically effective closure whereby their authors recognized that they had entered a new chapter in their lives, one that called for radically different and more flexible responses than those called for in the chapter called 'career'.

## Conclusions

We have described three narrative strategies deployed by our respondents as they tried to make sense of their experience of job loss and envisage a future growing out of the present (see Table 2). The first approached job loss as a temporary career derailment and insisted on seeing a future as a resumption of career, no matter how implausible such a prospect appeared to others. This may be seen as consistent with 'problem-focused' coping strategies noted earlier in the literature, which (unlike emotion-focused strategies) are viewed in positive terms as non-sense and effective (Bennett et al. 1995; Gordus 1986; Kinicki et al. 2000; Latack et al. 1995; Leana and Feldman 1992; Leana and Ivancevich 1987). Equally, however, it may be seen as the product of psychological denial — denying the implications of dismissal, repressing the pain and throwing oneself

into feverish job-seeking activity with little awareness of its direction and effectiveness. The psychological attitude of people in this category could be described as precarious; defiance and hopefulness could easily lapse into despair and dejection. Their narratives had an open quality, as if they were trying to say: 'the jury is out as to the real meaning of my job loss'.

The second narrative strategy saw the job loss as the end of the line — a painful event, the product of cruelty, injustice and unfairness, from which there is no prospect of resuming or salvaging a career. Job loss here was presented and accepted as an open wound, an enduringly painful experience with few redeeming qualities. Emotions ranged from intense despair to anger, associated with a powerful mixture of personal failure and betrayal by others. Job search was erratic or spasmodic, often yielding to inertia. These narratives had reached closure on the subject of job loss, which they viewed as an unqualified catastrophe, the moment when life changed irreversibly and all illusions and hopes vanished. Yet, the deeper significance of this catastrophe was eluding their protagonists, who felt a lack of control and an inability to find solace in their story.

The third narrative strategy accepted job loss as a radical discontinuity but refused to lapse into despondency, self-blame or extreme vilification of others. Instead, it attributed it to social factors, the slings and arrows of fortune or to other uncontrollable forces, towards which it adopted a philosophical attitude. Without seeking to resume a career, our respondents in this category sought to open a new chapter in their lives, living within their means, engaging in temporary paid and unpaid work, studies and other creative activities, and preserving some control over their lives. The authors of these narratives seemed to say: 'this is a new chapter; life is continuing, not as before, but the past does not weigh me down nor does it contain unresolved tensions and unfulfilled ambitions'.

Each of these strategies can be seen as an 'emplotting' strategy, that is, a quest for the meaning of a distressing or traumatic experience by converting experience into story (Crossley 2003; Czarniawska 1999, 2008; Sims 2003). They are also coping strategies, aimed not only at creating a story that was credible or engaging for themselves and their audience, but one that brought emotional consolation and sustained selfhood (Stein 1998, 2001). Some of our respondents (Bill, Raymond) had stories that had hardened — over an entire interview a more or less coherent narrative was communicated, one with fixed meanings and stable plot. Others (Matthew, Peter, Robert) had stories that evolved in front of our eyes and ears, experimenting with different storylines or, in a few cases, coming up with what seemed like a radically new and different storyline during a turning point of the interview. Some of these stories were fragile constructions, lacking the full-bodied consistency that one associates with stories of pure achievement or victimhood — instead, they entailed numerous loose ends, both narrative and emotional. The unemployed manager or professional may create a story in which he or she constantly mutates from wronged casualty to dignified survivor to dejected victim, from angry and rebellious fighter to resigned and apathetic sufferer. In such cases, far from having a ready-made story to describe their experience, the narrator is offering narrative fragments that struggle to coagulate into a coherent story and only falteringly do so. Some of these stay firmly in

the space that Boje (2001) has described as antenarrative — the space before a true story can take shape.

Whether successful or not, our respondents' stories were sensemaking attempts through which meaning was infused into distressing experiences, but also emotional attempts to come to terms with these experiences and maintain a sense of self. The term 'narrative coping' captures well this parallel struggle for meaning and for consolation, as a concept that recalls the 'talking cure' (a term coined by Anna O, one of Freud and Breuer's earliest patients, and first found in Freud and Breuer 1895) of psychoanalytic and other treatments. But narrative coping implies that consolation requires more than just talk; it requires the ability to create a story with a protagonist who acts as the narrator's 'double' or 'alter ego', one on whom such experiences and emotions can be projected, as could not be expressed in 'straight talk'. The story's protagonist, whether angry victim, proud survivor or troubled sufferer, allows the narrator to give 'voice' to the unspoken realities within herself and allow them to become part of her self-identity.<sup>3</sup> In this way, the disruptive experience of being laid off is no longer an experience of a disrupted identity, but the prompt for an identity refashioning. This is consistent with Giddens's view that:

'a person's identity is not to be found in behaviour, nor — important though it is — in the reactions of others, but in the capacity to *keep a particular narrative going*. The individual's biography, if she is to maintain regular interaction with others in the day-to-day world, cannot be wholly fictive. It must continually integrate events which occur in the external world, and sort them into the ongoing "story" about the self.' (Giddens 1991: 54, emphasis in the original)

After we had completed the analysis of our findings, we realized the close match between the narrative strategies deployed by our respondents and those of people who are afflicted by a serious illness. In the past 20 years, a significant body of research has emerged, examining how patients, sometimes with the assistance of their physicians, develop narratives through which they cope better or less well with their conditions (Gabriel 2004b; Greenhalgh 1999; Hawkins 1999; Kleinman 1988; Mattingly 1998). Frank (1995), one of the most profound contributors to this literature, has argued that illness brings about a 'narrative wreckage', that is, a total disruption of life's normal narratives: 'The way out of this wreckage is telling stories, specifically ... "self-stories". The self-story is not told for the sake of description, though description may be its ostensible content. The self is being formed in what is told' (1995 : 55). The crucial issue is not whether the narrative has a compelling or completed plot (however distressing) but whether the narrator has managed to articulate a story which allows him or her to rediscover their voice as a person who is sick but whose identity is not defined by their sickness.

People who have been laid off may not experience constant pain or mortal anxiety about their physical survival as do people struck by a life-threatening condition; but they certainly find their world turned upside down and those props that sustained their selfhood severely weakened. It is telling, then, that the three narrative strategies identified by the analysis match fairly closely those described in Frank's (1995) analysis of patients' stories. Our 'temporary derailment' closely resembles what Frank calls 'restitution narratives', where the ordeal

is viewed as a temporary aberration that appropriate action by patient and doctor will fix, leading back to normality. What we referred to as 'end of the line' narratives correspond to Frank's 'chaos narratives', where the narrator feels overwhelmed by events over which he or she can exercise no control. These narratives are not just describing chaotic situations, but (exactly like the accounts of Peter, Robert and Heather) are chaotic narratives. Finally, our 'moratorium' narratives have strong similarities with Frank's 'quest narratives', narratives characterized by an ongoing struggle to discover the significance of the rupture and fashion a new post-rupture selfhood.

It may well be that narrative strategies identified by Frank and those noted in this article are general strategies for coping with trauma rather than specific to the tribulations of job loss or illness. Narrative coping is achieved when a person has managed to create a story that is both credible in explaining the disruption and brings consolation for the loss, enabling them to move on as someone who has experienced the trauma without being defined by it. Far from looking at coping as rational, purposive behaviour aimed at returning a person to a comfortable state of equilibrium, our study suggests that narrative coping has more to do with maintaining an unfinished narrative, rather than seeking solace in a finished one, by seeking to rediscover the meaning of earlier events in the light of subsequent ones and, maybe, never reaching a state of narrative closure. In this regard, narrative coping may be a corollary to the concept of 'negative capability', the ability to accept uncertainty and insecurity without irritation and premature closure, a term first used by the poet John Keats (Bartlett 1980: 479) and currently finding some interesting applications in the training of managers and leaders (Chia and Morgan 1996; Simpson et al. 2002). Putting up with uncertainties and contradictions of the meaning of a traumatic event, like job loss, and resisting the temptation to achieve narrative closure over its meaning may then constitute a first step towards coping with its implications, however distressing.

As a contribution to the literature on the psychological implications of job loss, our paper has focused attention on the experiences of professionals and managers, individuals whose identity had revolved around their professional success and the power, status and wealth afforded to them by their work. We noted several similarities in their responses — a great degree of individualism, a sense of perplexity about why their experience and expertise, their greatest ostensible assets, were working against them in the search for new work, a deep sense of injustice at what they perceived as an ageist attitude of employers, and a general inflexibility in altering their skill base, ways of thinking or ways of defining themselves. In coping with the disruption brought about by job loss, they adopted different narrative strategies, which have been described and analysed in the paper. Clearly, our findings, based on in-depth data from a small sample, pertain to professionals and managers in their fifties; the effects of gender, family circumstances and financial hardship would require further research to identify. As a contribution to scholarship on narrative and identity, our paper offers significant insights to the growing literature on how trauma and discontinuity are handled within life stories. Coming to terms with life's hardships, we discovered, requires more than a 'talking cure', more even than the construction of a plausible, gripping or completed story to account for trauma.

Instead, it is more likely to happen when the narrator can construct a protagonist for his or her story, which enables them to move on as a person who has experienced trauma, endured trauma, but is no longer defined by trauma.

## Notes

- 1 The questions of the focus groups and interviews are available from the authors on request.
- 2 Quotes have been lightly edited by omitting words (e.g. 'you know') or non-sequiturs. Additions to the text are indicated by square brackets.
- 3 This is based on a set of astute observations by Ishan Jalan.

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