

## ABSTRACT

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                                                  PROCESS

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Involuntarily losing a major social role, such as employee, may trigger a process of decline in mental health due to changes in time use, social networks, and resources. However, the experience of role loss and associated mental health outcomes is also conditioned by one's subjective experience of salient identities. I argue that exploring the ways in which identities relate to the stress process will provide us with a better understanding of mental health outcomes that follow involuntary role loss.

The linkages among three strands of literature – mental health and identity, stress process, and work and occupations – have not been explored systematically. Using involuntary job loss as an illustrative example, I build on the concepts of identity

discrepancies and the stress process by examining participants' identity change, identity work, and distress levels.

In my research, I use data from in-depth interviews conducted at two points in time (about three months apart) from 25 unemployed or underemployed former white-collar employees. I show that involuntary job loss may trigger identity discrepancies that produce identity-based distress, but that identity work may be used to relieve this distress. I identify three types of identity discrepancies experienced by participants: verification discrepancies; temporal consistency discrepancies; and status consistency discrepancies.

I also show that unemployed or underemployed people may engage in specific types of identity work to cope with and reduce the distress produced by identity discrepancies, and I identify three paths on which people may end up after job loss: 1) shifting; 2) sustaining; and 3) identity void. My results show that not all paths are equally available to everyone. Rather, structural factors guide and shape their identity work options. Specifically, social statuses and the extent of one's involvement in social institutions (e.g., family) expand or constrain these options. One's conceptions of past and future identities are also important to this process.

This study demonstrates why we should include identity in processual models of distress and coping, shows how structural factors (i.e., statuses and social institutions) expand or constrain one's identity work options after job loss, and illustrates why we should expand our conceptions of identities to include the past and future. I also discuss ways in which my findings may be applied to involuntary role losses more broadly, as well as links to classic theories of the interrelation between self and society.

**IDENTITY AS CHRONIC STRAIN AND COPING STRATEGY IN THE JOB  
LOSS PROCESS**

By

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

Unemployment and underemployment, or the mismatch between one's education, experience, and/or skills and those needed for one's present job (Feldman 1996; Johnson 1989; Sullivan 2004), have become widespread, serious problems in the United States.<sup>1</sup> The effects of unemployment and underemployment on the country are significant, and typically include loss of tax revenue (Wisman 2010) and increased crime rates (Gould, Weinberg, and Mustard 2002; Wisman 2010).<sup>2</sup> Moreover, job loss also directly affects individuals and their families by producing economic, relational, and psychological strains (Kalleberg 2009), including mental health problems, such as depression, anxiety, and anger (Dooley 2003; Hanisch 1999; Liem and Liem 1996) and, for some, suicide (Woo and Postolache 2009).

I show that job loss not only produces identity-related distress for middle-class people, but that they also engage in "identity work" (Snow and Anderson 1987) to cope with and reduce this distress, even when their objective employment situation has not changed, and even when experiencing severe financial strain. I identify three paths on which people may end up after job loss: 1) shifting; 2) sustaining; and 3) identity void. Finally, I also show that one's identity work options are expanded or constrained by two structural factors: statuses (e.g., gender, age) and one's involvement in (and access to) other social institutions (e.g., family).

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<sup>1</sup> Underemployment has also been defined in terms of fewer work hours (Creed and Moore 2006; Feldman and Turnley 1995) or lower pay than desired or expected (Feldman, Leana, and Bolino 2002; Johnson 1989), and in terms of job strain, low marketability, and job insecurity (Broom et al. 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Although crime rates typically rise with unemployment rates (Gould et al. 2002), this has not occurred during the recent recession (Reuters 2010).

In this study, I utilize several sociological concepts to argue that identity discrepancies can be distressing after job loss, but that identity can also be used as a coping strategy to relieve the distress produced by them. The key concepts are: identity; role; salience; identity discrepancy; identity shift/change; identity work; social structure; social institution; social status; chronic strain; and coping strategy. I define *identity* as the “set of meanings one holds for oneself as an occupant of a particular role...group or category...or as a unique individual...” (Burke and Harrod 2005:360). I define *role* as a position in society to which specific expectations and obligations are attached (Merton 1957). I define *salience* as the likelihood of enacting, invoking, or using a particular role which one has internalized as an identity (Stryker 1980:60-61).

I build on Higgins’ (1987) aspiration and obligation discrepancies, as well as Stryker’s (1980:61) idea of conflicting expectations between identities, by defining *identity discrepancy* as one’s perception of a mismatch or incongruence between aspects of one’s identity or identities.<sup>3</sup> I define *identity shift/change* as an increase or decrease in subjective identification with specific roles. I expand on Snow and Anderson’s (1987) definition of identity work as the way “people construct and negotiate personal identities” (Snow and Anderson 1987:1336) to define *identity work* as the process of negotiating the meaning of “who one is,” in this case specifically to manage distress brought on by identity discrepancies.

I define *social institutions* as collections of interdependent roles “of strategic significance in the social system in question” (MacKinnon and Heise 2010:73) that structure our experiences and expectations (Stryker 1980) (e.g., family, church,

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<sup>3</sup> These aspects may involve time, roles, status, or others’ feedback. I detail each discrepancy type in Chapter Two.

workplace, community organizations), and define *social structure* as “patterned social interactions and institutions that...organize social life and provide the context for individual action” (Kimmel and Aronson 2009:66). I define *social status* as types of positions associated with greater or lesser relative prestige in mainstream society (e.g., male/female; wealthy/poor; white/African-American). I define *chronic strain* as ongoing, day-to-day problems that continue to produce stress even after a specific stress-producing event is over (Pearlin 1999, Pearlin et al. 1981) (e.g., ongoing financial strain following job loss) (Pearlin et al. 1981). Finally, I define *coping strategy* as “cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage (master, reduce, or tolerate) a troubled person-environment relationship” in order to regulate distressing emotions (Folkman and Lazarus 1985:152), as may occur when one loses a role.

I frame my study using scholarship that links identity to mental health (e.g., Thoits 1999; Simon 1997; Higgins 1987; Snow and Anderson 1987), the stress process literature (e.g., Pearlin et al. 1981), and the work and occupations literature (e.g., Kalleberg 2009; Dooley 2003; Warr 1987). I also use the concepts of “possible selves” (Markus and Nurius 1986) and literature on voluntary (Ebaugh 1988) and involuntary role loss (e.g., Drahota and Eitzen 1998; Duran-Aydintug 1995; Stier 2007) to help detail the identity work processes involved in identity change after involuntary role loss. Because I focus on identity discrepancies and their resolution through various identity-based coping strategies, my study addresses the call to better understand identity change specifically by examining identity discrepancies (Cantwell and Martiny 2010).

The three strands of literature contain empirical and/or theoretical reasons that justify connecting each strand to the other strands. However, each strand current remains

largely disconnected from the others. The sociological *mental health, identity change, and role loss* literature firmly establishes that identity relates to mental health (e.g., Burke and Stets 2009; Higgins 1987; Markus and Nurius 1986; Thoits 1999).<sup>4</sup> I build on this foundation to elaborate on the ways in which identity *change* relates to mental health. The *stress process literature* (e.g., Pearlin et al. 1981) links negative life events, such as job loss, to mental health through a process that unfolds over time and notes the importance of structural factors, such as status and social institutions, in this process. I add to this literature by exploring the role of identity in this process. I give identity systematic attention in my study, using as a basis the *work and occupations* literature that relates job loss to mental health (e.g., Dooley 2003; Warr 1987) and hints that identity may be a key factor in that relationship (e.g., Kalleberg 2009; Yang 2002).

The intellectual significance of the current study lies in three areas. First, it illustrates why we should include identity in processual models of distress and coping. This is not currently done in either the stress process literature or in the work and occupations literature. Second, my study show how structural factors, such as statuses and social institutions, expand or constrain one's identity work options after job loss. Finally, my study illustrates that notions of identity must go beyond the temporal present. Most conceptions of identity, even as a coping strategy, focus on identities rooted in the present time.

In this study, I utilize 48 in-depth interviews conducted at two points in time from 25 unemployed and underemployed people who lost their job no longer than six months

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<sup>4</sup> Although there is often widespread, shared societal meaning of the specific roles and statuses (e.g., male, white) on which identities can be based (Blumer 1962, 1969) not everyone shares that understanding; people may define the meaning of their roles and statuses uniquely. Therefore, an identity based on a specific role may hold different meanings for different people, which means each person's mental health may be affected differently by identity (Simon 1997).

before the first interview. I examine the types of identity-based distress and identity work that occur during unemployment and underemployment. My study addresses the following research questions:

- 1) How does identity relate to distress and coping after job loss?
- 2) How do structural factors expand or constrain identity work options?
- 3) How does time relate to this distress and coping?

My study is motivated by two main factors: 1) unemployment and underemployment as social problems related to mental health; and 2) the potential to build on theoretical understandings of how identity relates to mental health. Next, I will review these motivations and discuss my conceptual framework.

### **Unemployment and Underemployment as Social Problems**

This study is motivated by the trends since 2007 toward very high U.S. unemployment rates (8.3 percent, as of figures released for February 2012) (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2012) and underemployment rates (~ 25 percent) (Duffy 2009) and their links to mental health. These trends indicate that unemployment and underemployment are persistent and increasingly severe social problems affecting a considerable portion of the population, often for long stretches of time (Kalleberg 2008). A substantial body of research links unemployment and underemployment to a variety of issues that relate to well-being, including mental health problems (e.g., Dooley 2003; Kelvin and Jarrett 1985; Uchitelle 2006).

The unemployment rate has reached markedly high levels. In October 2009, the U.S. unemployment rate hit 10.1 percent (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2011). Other than the era of the Great Depression, this is only the second period in U.S. history since 1948

when the unemployment rate has been at or above 10 percent (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2011).<sup>5 6 7</sup> Although media reports are mixed as to signs of recovery, it is likely that once we do begin to recover we may experience another of the jobless economic recoveries that have characterized the new millennium (Kalleberg 2008).

The proportion of “long-term” unemployed people, defined as being unemployed for six or more months, has also increased since the start of the millennium (Kalleberg 2008). In February 2012, there were 5.4 million long-term unemployed people (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2012); thus, 42.6 percent of all currently unemployed people have been unemployed for long time periods (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2012).<sup>8</sup> This represents a recent sharp increase; in 2006, only 18 percent of all unemployed people were unemployed long-term (Kalleberg 2008).

Underemployment, defined as working part-time when preferring full-time employment, has also increased sharply since about mid-2006 (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2008) to reach its current level of approximately 25 percent (Duffy 2009). As of February 2012, in addition to the official unemployment rate (and the number of discouraged workers), 8.1 million people were underemployed, when defined as employed part-time involuntarily (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2012).

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<sup>5</sup> Although the Bureau of Labor Statistics has only tracked official unemployment rates since 1948 (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2011), unemployment at the peak of the Great Depression is estimated at about 25 percent (Dooley and Prause 2004).

<sup>6</sup> During late 1982 and early 1983, unemployment rates ranged from 10.1 percent to 10.8 percent, peaking in November and December 1982 (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2011).

<sup>7</sup> In addition to the official unemployment rate, in February 2012 there were one million “discouraged workers,” defined as people who want work and are available for work, but have stopped looking because they believe no jobs are available. This number has remained about the same for the past year (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2012).

<sup>8</sup> The Bureau of Labor Statistics’ (2012) definition of long-term unemployment - 27 or more weeks without any work - is similar to Kalleberg’s (2008) definition.

Unemployment and underemployment affect mental health in a variety of ways. Unemployment is connected to depression (Creed and Moore 2006; Kelvin and Jarrett 1985; Newman 1988), anxiety (Andersen 2009; Kelvin and Jarrett 1985; Liem and Liem 1996), anger (Hanisch 1999; Zippay 1991), and suicide (Woo and Postolache 2009). Unemployment relates to poor mental health for both blue-collar (e.g., Uchitelle 2006; Zippay 1991) and white-collar workers (e.g., Newman 1988; Yang 2002), and harms men's, more than women's, mental health (Creed and Moore 2006; Thoits 1986).<sup>9</sup> Although there is less research on underemployment, it has also been linked to distress (Feldman et al. 2002; Kalleberg 2009), including low self-esteem, depression (Dooley 2003; Dooley, Prause, and Ham-Rowbottom 2000), alcohol abuse (Dooley 2003), and anger (Borgen, Amundson, and Harder 1988).

Although the recession sparked by the events of 2007-2008 seemingly initiated these high unemployment and underemployment rates, the problem may actually stem from deeper structural factors that are unlikely to change anytime soon. Starting in the 1970s, but most notably in the new millennium, technology has made it possible to outsource jobs to other countries (Sullivan 2004). Also, companies are increasing the number of contingent, part-time, and/or temporary workers rather than hiring permanent workers (Kalleberg 2000). The work that is available is dichotomous: high-level knowledge work requiring highly specialized education or low-paid service work (Kalleberg 2009; Sorenson 2000). This potentially leaves a large part of the workforce - both blue-collar manual laborers and white-collar mid-level workers - unemployed during a time when a record proportion of U.S. youth are attending college (Kimmel and

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<sup>9</sup> This gender difference may be due to cultural expectations that equate the social status of "male" with being a breadwinner (Townsend 2002; Willott and Griffin 2004). This could lead men to associate unemployment with domesticity and femininity (McDaniel 2003).

Aronson 2009), and a record proportion (30 percent) of U.S. adults age 25 and older have a Bachelor's degree or higher (U.S. Census Bureau 2011). In essence, even if the recession passes, the structural forces creating unemployment and underemployment, and the problems caused by them, may not pass anytime soon. In the next section, I discuss the second motivator for this study - the potential to build on theoretical understandings of how identity relates to mental health.

### **Theoretical Motivators: Three Literature Strands – Identity and Mental Health, Stress Process, and Work and Occupations**

In addition to the social problems motivating this study, my research is motivated by the potential to build on theoretical understandings of how identity relates to mental health. In the current study, I propose that identity can serve as both a chronic strain and a coping strategy for people who have lost their jobs, and that this occurs through a process that unfolds over time and is conditioned by structural factors. Therefore, accounting for identity, process, and structural factors will better elucidate the process that links negative life events, identity, and mental health outcomes.

More specifically, I propose that people who have experienced an involuntary loss of the employee role (and also hold “employee” as a salient identity) experience three paths after job loss, and that they use a variety of identity-based coping strategies to cope with the potential threat to the employee identity and its accompanying distress. First, people may *shift* to more strongly emphasize another of their many different identities. Second, they may use psychological and behavioral techniques to *sustain* the feeling that they are “still an employee.” Third, they may experience an almost total loss of salient identities – an “*identity void*” - akin to Ebaugh’s (1988) “vacuum identity,” which leaves them in great distress. Finally, I identify important patterns in the identity work done by

people who have involuntarily lost a role that was also a salient identity, and propose that to better understand identity work we must consider the parts played by structural factors (social institutions and statuses) and time (past and anticipated future selves).

The sociological *identity and mental health* literature firmly establishes that identity (e.g., Burke and Stets 2009; Markus and Nurius 1986; Tausig 1999; Thoits 1999) relates to mental health. Identity discrepancies, such as the difference between who one aspires to be and who one actually is, can lead to depression and anxiety (Higgins 1987; Marcussen 2006). Role transitions, even when voluntary, may produce great distress, especially when one experiences a complete loss of identity, or “vacuum identity” in the process (Ebaugh 1988). Some literature in this vein notes the possibility of shifting emphasis to another of our many alternate identities as a coping strategy (Gecas and Seff 1990; Sieber 1974). Because Markus and Nurius (1986) show that identity may be rooted in the past or future, and that envisioning one’s “possible selves” improves one’s mood, I build on this literature by offering empirical support that extends the idea of shifting identity emphases toward past and future identities (not just present identities). These literature strands establish a link between temporal identities, the possibility of identity change (or changes in the salience of multiple identities), and mental health.

The literature linking identity to mental health provides good justification for exploring role loss and identity-based distress that may follow a stressful event, as well as the ways in which time may factor into identity-based distress and identity work. In my study, I heed the calls to connect *identity change* and mental health (Thoits 1999), including how identity change (particularly after role loss or gain) fits within identity-based models (Burke and Stets 2009). I expand on the small amount of literature that

explores identity change by examining involuntary role transitions, rather than voluntary ones (e.g., Ebaugh 1988) and in build on existing literature on involuntary role transitions (e.g., Duran-Aydintug 1995; Stier 2007) by examining the longitudinal process of role loss and identity change, while making explicit links to status, social institutions, and mental health, and while considering the temporal nature of identities, such as possible selves, as suggested by Markus and Nurius (1986).

Existing research shows that people who involuntarily lose roles - widows and widowers (e.g., Bennett 2010; van den Hoonaard 1997); the non-initiating partner in a divorce (e.g., Duran-Aydintug 1995); and involuntary retirees (e.g., Drahota and Eitzen 1998) - often experience a sudden shock to their identity, necessitating quick efforts to resolve the “who am I now?” question. Because the transition is undesired (and often unforeseen), people who involuntarily lose roles are unlikely to experience anticipatory socialization (Blau 1973; Duran-Aydintug 1995) into a new role (as typically occurs in a voluntary and desired role transition (Ebaugh 1988), such as college graduation). My work extends the existing research on involuntary role loss by identifying specific types of challenges to identity (“identity discrepancies”) that people may experience after losing a role that was also a salient identity.

Research on involuntary role loss (e.g., Hahn et al. 2011; Riach and Loretto 2009; Steiner et al. 2011) also shows that people may be resilient in the face of these challenges, actively using identity work to help relieve identity-based distress. One may deny the role loss (e.g., Buehler 1987), try to maintain the idea that he or she is “still the same person” (e.g., Bennett 2010; Duran-Aydintug 1995), or perform identity work to help resolve challenges to identity (e.g., Baird 2010; Riach and Loretto 2009). Many of

these thoughts and actions are embedded in the interactions and routines of daily life (Bennett 2010; Garrett-Peters 2009), as posited by Berger and Luckmann (1966). People who have involuntarily lost their jobs are a similar group; the identity challenges they face may be addressed by using identity work in their day-to-day interactions to try to cope with challenges to identity. Therefore, examining this group can enlighten our understanding of the process involving identity-based distress and its relief through identity work.

Regaining a sense of control is key to mental health after role loss (van Solinge 2007). My research explores how people who have involuntarily lost the employee role use identity work in ways that help them regain that control – by maintaining a sense of identity consistency across time, or by more strongly emphasizing another alternate role as a more important identity. Building on existing research (e.g., Bennett 2010) that suggests others' reactions to our changing identities bolster identity work efforts, I help spell out specific ways that people's daily routines and interactions with others elicit feedback to help them solidify and regain control over their identities.

The *stress process literature* (e.g., Pearlin et al. 1981) shows that the negative mental health effects that may follow a life event (e.g., job loss), evolve partially through a process that unfolds across time. Factors involved in one's mental health outcome include statuses (e.g., gender) that shape access to coping resources, including social networks and social institutions (Pearlin et al. 1981). People may integrate their statuses into their identities (e.g., Bettie 2003), so it is possible that one's subjective identification with a status may expand or constrain one's coping resources as well, thus affecting mental health.

The stress process literature shows the connection between a temporal process, statuses, social networks, and mental health. I add to this literature by exploring the role of identity in the stress process. Identity is important to the stress process because it is another element of the self-concept that is connected to mental health (Burke 1996; Higgins 1987; Pearlin 1989; Thoits 1983, 1986, 1999), is connected to the way in which we experience stressors (Pearlin 1989), and can partially stem from identification with our statuses (Bettie 2003). The effect of negative life events on mental health depends on one's subjective understanding of roles (Simon 1997; Thoits 1986, 1995, 1999), and social status affects this subjective understanding (Simon 1997; Thoits 1985, 1986).<sup>10</sup> Incorporating identity into our knowledge of the stress process may help us further flesh out the temporal process that exacerbates or alleviates distress. A focus on identity will help us elaborate on the ways in which statuses and social institutions (as they relate to identity) expand or constrain our coping options after a negative life event.

It is important to begin to grasp aspects of the identity change process, so that we can more fully understand the factors that relate to variance in mental health outcomes after a negative life event, as noted by Pearlin et al. (1981). Additionally, focusing on involuntary role loss as it relates to identity change may help us identify specific aspects of transitions that may challenge one's many identities, and will help us identify the coping strategies used under those circumstances.

The *work and occupations* literature relates job loss to mental health (e.g., Dooley 2003; Warr 1987), and hints that identity discrepancies may be a basis of distress after

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<sup>10</sup> A careful reading of the unemployment and underemployment literature supports the idea that perceived discrepancies between one's past and current occupational identities (Lane 2009; Garrett-Peters 2009; Mendenhall et al. 2008), as well as between one's occupation and gender (Nixon 2006; Willott and Griffin 2004) or social class (Dunn 2010; Lane 2009), relate to mental health.

job loss (e.g., Kalleberg 2009; Tausig 1999; Yang 2002). Empirical studies show that unemployment relates to higher levels of depression, anger, anxiety (Dooley 2003; Hanisch 1999; Liem and Liem 1996), and suicide (Woo and Postolache 2009). Theoretical models of work and mental health suggest that work enhances our mental health because it provides us with an unambiguous and valued identity (Jahoda 1981, 1982; Warr 1987). Empirical work and occupations research, specifically that on unemployment, hints that identity is important to mental health after job loss (e.g., Tausig 1999; Yang 2002). These theoretical and empirical findings suggest that it would be fruitful to explore systematically how identity relates to mental health after job loss. Kalleberg (2009), Ezzy (1993), and Feldman (1996) have also explicitly suggested that researchers do so.

The work and occupations literature provides solid reasons to explore how identity relates to mental health after job loss. I make this focus explicit by giving identity systematic attention in my study of unemployment and mental health. Identity is important to mental health after job loss because the worker role may be one of our many identities (Jahoda 1981, 1982; Tausig 1999; Warr 1987), or may relate to other statuses or identities, such as male or breadwinner (Tausig 1999; Townsend 2002). In essence, losing a job may equate with some degree of identity loss, which is highly distressing (Ebaugh 1988). Accounting for identity in models of mental health after job loss will help us to better understand why some people who experience discrete negative life events, such as job loss, do not experience mental health declines, whereas others suffer greatly (Pearlin et al. 1981).

In sum, the sociological *identity and mental health* literature firmly establishes that identity (e.g., Burke and Stets 2009; Markus and Nurius 1986; Thoits 1999) relates to mental health. I expand on this literature by exploring systematically the connection between involuntary role loss, identity change, and mental health. The *stress process literature* (e.g., Pearlin et al. 1981) links negative life events, such as job loss, to mental health through a process that unfolds over time and notes the importance of structural factors, such as status and social institutions, in this process. I add to this literature by exploring the role of identity in this process. The *work and occupations* literature relates job loss to mental health (e.g., Dooley 2003; Warr 1987) and hints that identity may be important to mental health after job loss (e.g., Kalleberg 2009; Tausig 1999; Yang 2002). I make this focus explicit by giving identity systematic attention in my study of unemployment and mental health. All told, in my study I integrate these three literature strands.

My study makes three sociological contributions. First, it illustrates why we should include identity in processual models of distress and coping, as suggested by a careful reading of the work and occupations literature. Second, my study shows how structural factors, such as statuses and social institutions, expand or constrain one's identity work options after job loss. Finally, as suggested by Burke (1996) and Markus and Nurius (1986), my study illustrates that notions of identity must go beyond the temporal present.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Sieber (1974) does propose that, in theory, one might emphasize a past or anticipated future identity, but offers no empirical evidence to show this occurring.

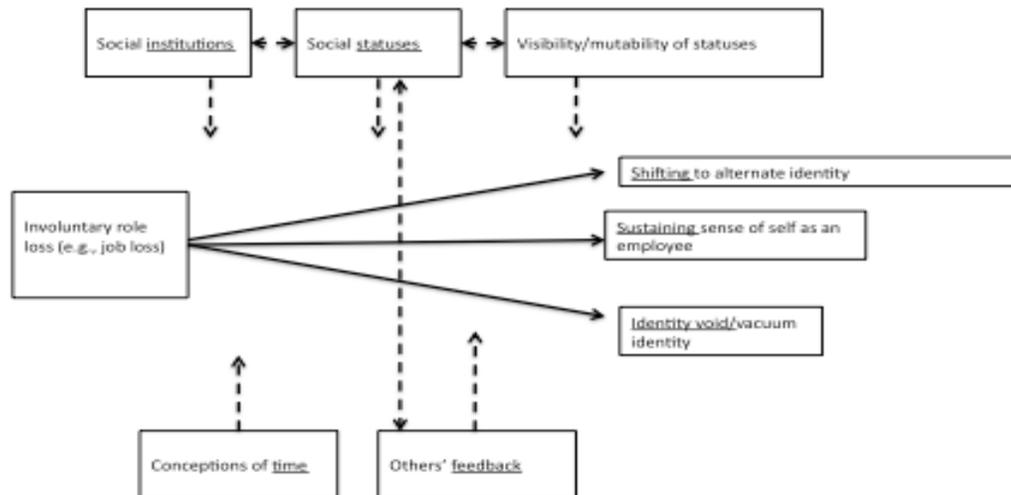
## **A Proposal: Identifying Links between Identity Change and Mental Health**

In this study, I propose that identities can operate as both a chronic strain and a coping strategy after job loss by producing or decreasing one's experience of identity discrepancies. As Cantwell and Martiny (2010) suggest, studying identity discrepancies can also help us understand identity change. By identifying types of identity discrepancies, identity-based distress, and identity-based coping strategies, and by exploring the experiential paths that follow job loss over time, I help to conceptualize the process of identity work in cases where a role that was also a salient identity was lost involuntarily. In essence, I detail how identity work (Snow and Anderson 1987) can help alleviate the distress caused by identity discrepancies (Higgins 1987; Marcussen 2006). I also detail the factors that constrain or facilitate one's choice of identity-based coping strategies during identity work. These factors include social institutions, statuses, and temporal identities (past selves and anticipated future selves). As a framework for this study, I integrate three related, yet currently disconnected, strands of literature - work and occupations, stress process, and mental health and identity – to help identify the links between identity change and involuntary role loss as they relate to mental health. By doing so, I move us toward a better theoretical understanding of how negative life events involving involuntary role loss (e.g., unemployment, divorce, death of one's spouse) ultimately harm mental health, as well as the ways in which people may successfully cope with this distress.

I present Figure 1 to illustrate my findings regarding three identity paths that follow involuntary role loss, as well as the concepts that are especially important to these paths (e.g., social institutions, social statuses, time). In my study, I address the following

research questions: 1) How does identity relate to distress and coping after job loss?; 2) How do structural factors expand or constrain identity work options?; and 3) How does time relate to this distress and coping?

FIGURE 1: THREE IDENTITY PATHS FOLLOWING INVOLUNTARY ROLE LOSS



My data come from 48 in-depth interviews from 25 people who lost their jobs no more than six months before the first interview, and were unemployed or underemployed at the time of the first interview, along with a follow-up interview approximately three months after the first interview. Using this data, I identify three paths on which people may end up after job loss: 1) shifting to an alternate identity; 2) sustaining the sense of oneself as an employee; and 3) identity void. I also detail the ways in which social institutions, statuses, and the temporal nature of identities relate to one's experience of identity-based distress and identity-based coping strategies.

I use participants' subjective definitions of the concepts of "who one is" (globally, across roles), "who one would like to be" and "who one should be" (occupationally and/or globally, across roles), as well as their subjective understandings

of gender, social class, occupational roles, and others' feedback. For example, some men may equate "man" with "breadwinner" (Townsend 2002), while other men may believe that having the emotional strength to rely on their wives' incomes illustrates their masculinity (Lane 2009). Occupationally, some people may define the meaning of their former job as "doctor" as being about patient care, whereas others may define it in terms of financial gain.

One reason identity is important to mental health is because it may directly influence self-esteem (Cast and Burke 2002; Sheeran and McCarthy 1990, 1992; Stets and Harrod 2004), mastery (Stets and Burke 2005), and distress levels, including levels of depression and anxiety (Cast and Burke 2002; Feldman et al. 2002; Higgins 1987; Marcussen 2006; Sheeran and McCarthy 1992; Thoits 1999). Because one's *subjective* sense of who one is (i.e., identities), and not just one's objective roles or statuses, relates to mental health (Simon 1997) it is important to examine identity. Also because people may see themselves in terms of who they were in the past or who they may become in the future, and this self-view affects mood (Markus and Nurius 1986), it is important to examine the temporal dimensions of identity, and look for changes in identities, the meanings of roles and statuses, and mood across time. Therefore, my initial interviews focused on: participants' subjective ideas of who they are (i.e., identities), meanings of statuses (particularly gender, social class/education, and age) and roles to participants; subjective changes in the importance of, or meanings of, these roles and statuses over time (i.e., identity changes); and how identities, roles, and statuses related to distress. In my follow-up interviews, I honed in more tightly on change or stability in identity and

distress, the meanings of statuses in relation to identity and distress, and participants' current views on quotes from their initial interviews.

This dissertation contains the theoretical framework, review of relevant literature, and specific methods and analytic strategies used, along with four chapters in which I describe my results, and a final chapter detailing my conclusions. Chapter Two details the three relevant literature strands - identity and mental health (e.g., Ebaugh 1988; Higgins 1987; Thoits 1999), stress process (e.g., Pearlin et al. 1981), and work and occupations (e.g., Dooley 2003; Kalleberg 2009; Warr 1987) - and establishes conceptual linkages between those strands. Chapter Three details the study's methodology. Chapter Four illustrates how identity discrepancies can operate as a strain and highlights the identity-based distress participants experienced after job loss. Chapter Five describes findings that relate to one path some participants experienced after job loss: shifting. Chapters Six and Seven focus on findings that relate to the other two paths: sustaining and identity void, respectively. Chapter Eight presents my conclusions by tying results back to existing literature, explicating the study's sociological contributions, and offering suggestions for implementing these findings in applied settings.

## CHAPTER TWO: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, I discuss the theoretical frameworks and empirical findings from three literature strands (identity and mental health, stress process, and work and occupations) that I use for this study. I also establish conceptual linkages between those strands and review the substantive literature on work and occupations, with a focus on unemployment and underemployment. Finally, I specify how this study contributes to the literature.

First, I review literature that connects identity to mental health (e.g., Burke 1991, 1996; Thoits 1999), including literature on role loss (e.g., Blau 1973; Thoits 2006; Wheaton 1990), multiple roles (e.g., Thoits 1992, 1995; Townsend 2002), identity discrepancies (Higgins 1987; Marcussen 2006), identity work (e.g., Snow and Anderson 1987), and identity change and role transitions (e.g., Ebaugh 1988; Drahota and Eitzen 1998). Second, I describe the Stress Process Model (Pearlin et al. 1981) as a conceptual framework for thinking about negative life events and mental health. Third, I review the work and occupations literature (with a special focus on unemployment and underemployment) as it relates to mental health and identity. Finally, I summarize gaps in the literature, describe how this study fills those gaps, and specify my research questions.

### **Identity and Mental Health**

In this section, I describe theories and empirical research that establish the relationship between identity, mental health, and role transitions. The literature confirms that the subjective meaning of who one is (i.e., identity) relates to mental health (Simon 1997). Some literature in this vein notes the possibility of shifting to more strongly

emphasize another of their many different identities as a coping strategy (Gecas and Seff 1990; Sieber 1974). Because Markus and Nurius (1986) show that identity may be rooted in the past or future, and that envisioning one's "possible selves" improves one's mood, I build on the identity and mental health literature by offering empirical support that extends the idea of shifting identity emphases toward past and future identities (not just present identities). This establishes a link between temporal identities, the possibility of identity change, and mental health.

My study addresses the idea of connecting *identity change* and mental health (Thoits 1999) as they connect to role transitions. Identity and mental health literature shows that voluntary role transitions may produce great distress, especially when one experiences a complete loss of identity, or "vacuum identity" (Ebaugh 1988). I expand on the small amount of literature that explores identity change by examining involuntary role transitions, rather than voluntary ones (e.g., Ebaugh 1988) and build on existing literature on involuntary role transitions (e.g., Duran-Aydintug 1995; Stier 2007) by examining underemphasized issues such as the longitudinal process of role loss and identity change, while making explicit links to status, social institutions, and mental health. I also consider the temporal nature of identities, such as possible selves, as suggested by Markus and Nurius (1986). Overall, there is a need to link identity and mental health literature to involuntary role loss and identity change, and to explicitly examine how identity relates to mental health after job loss.

In this section, I begin by discussing research on the relationship between multiple roles, role loss, and mental health (Thoits 1983, 1985, 1986, 1992, 1995; Simon 1997), including the importance of structural factors to these topics. Next, I review the

literature on role loss and role transitions (Ebaugh 1988; Van Gennep 1960), with an emphasis on involuntary role loss (e.g., Drahota and Eitzen 1998; Duran-Aydintug 1995; Riach and Loretto 2009) and statuses. Using Markus and Nurius' (1986) work on possible selves as a base, I then move to establish the importance of temporal factors in shifting to more strongly emphasize another of one's many identities (i.e., identity change.)

### *Multiple Roles, Role Loss, and Mental Health*

Research on multiple (concurrently-held) roles and role loss proposes that the effect of negative life events on mental health depends on one's subjective understanding of roles (Simon 1997; Thoits 1986, 1995), and that social status affects this subjective understanding (Simon 1997; Thoits 1985, 1986).<sup>12</sup> Some of this research (Thoits 1985, 2006) also indirectly hints at the importance of identity discrepancies to mental health.

The concept of identity may help explain why negative life events do not always harm mental health (Pearlin et al. 1981; Wheaton 1990). Stress and stressors may be defined in terms of identity, such as a threat or loss to the *self*, a perceived danger or damage to oneself *personally* (Lazarus and Folkman 1984), or a poor fit between the person and the environment (French, Rodgers, and Cobb 1974). When one of our salient identities is *disconfirmed* (i.e., not verified) (Burke 1991; Burke and Stets 2009; Thoits 1999) or when one experiences an identity *threat or loss*, it may harm mental health (Thoits 1999).

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<sup>12</sup> Although social status is known to influence the meaning of the roles one holds (Simon 1997; Thoits 1985, 1986), there is a dearth of research that explicitly examines how the meaning of social status relates to coping strategies.

People do not have just one role or identity; they hold many at once. Roles are often internalized as identities (Stryker 1980) so in theory, multiple roles should increase our options for adopting a new identity or more strongly emphasizing an existing identity if another identity is threatened (Gecas and Seff 1990; Sieber 1974; Simon 1997; Thoits 1995) (for example, after role loss).

We rank our identities hierarchically, with some seeming more relevant or central to who one is, or more likely to be enacted, than are others (Stryker 1980). Therefore, the specific hierarchical ranking of our identities (their “salience”) could change (Stryker 1980) if an identity is threatened. For example, existing identities that were less salient could suddenly become more salient as the threatened identity becomes less salient and cannot be sustained easily in interaction.

Threats to a salient identity generally produce greater distress than when the threatened identity is not salient (Brown, Bifulco, and Harris 1987; Hammen and Goodman-Brown 1990; Krause 2004; Thoits 1999), perhaps because they diminish one’s sense of meaning in life (Krause 2004; Thoits 1991).<sup>13</sup> When stressors involving roles that are also salient identities occur, one’s meaning in life becomes diminished because these stressors: 1) make it hard to enact role expectations; and 2) make it seem impossible to fulfill one’s aspirations for the future (Krause 2004).

Evidence for the idea of shifting identity salience and its relation to mental health is clear in the literature. When a role that was previously very significant to someone (i.e., a highly salient identity) is threatened or lost, multiple roles may benefit mental health. Holding a greater number of roles reduces depression and anxiety (Thoits 1983, 1986), perhaps by allowing one to compensate for role loss by “cultivat[ing] alternate

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<sup>13</sup> Some of Thoits’ (1992, 1995) work disputes this claim.

sources of gratification” (Thoits 2006:315), having “numerous buffers against failure” (Sieber 1974:573), and by helping one maintain consistency in his or her identity (Thoits 1999). Multiple roles allow one to emphasize alternate roles if any specific role is threatened (Blau 1973; Sieber 1974; Simon 1997; Thoits 1995, 1999; Thompson and Bunderson 2001). One may also deemphasize the threatened role (Thoits 1995, 1999) or emphasize or spend more time in another (non-threatened) role (Simon 1997; Thompson and Bunderson 2001). For example, first-time unemployed people who identified either with their former occupations or with roles completely unrelated to work were less distressed than those who simply identified with their (new) “unemployed” role (Cassidy 2001) (which was inconsistent with their past “employee” identities). Shifting to an alternate role (and potential identity) may serve as a coping strategy (Gecas and Seff 1990; Sieber 1974) that buffers self-esteem (Simon 1997) and protects one from the potential negative mental health effects of role loss (Thoits 1995).<sup>14</sup>

The subjective meaning of a role affects mental health after a life event, including life events involving role loss (Simon 1997; Thoits 1986, 1995; Wheaton 1990). First, we interpret life events within the specific context in which they occur, such as their location in time relative to other life events (Thoits 1995). For example, one may be more anxious about job loss when it directly follows the birth of a child. Second, our multiple roles interrelate. Chronic strains in one role (e.g., marital problems) can influence how one interprets a life event related to another role (e.g., losing a job) (Thoits

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<sup>14</sup> Gecas and Seff (1990) and Sieber (1974) focus only on voluntary role change. Gecas and Seff (1990) only focus on identities based in the present. Sieber (1974) notes the theoretical possibility of shifting to identities rooted in the past or future, but does not empirically investigate this idea. My current study empirically investigates how identity shifts are used after involuntary role loss, and extends the idea of identity shifts to explore participants’ uses of past and future identities *as an explicit coping strategy*.

1995). This is foundational to the idea that the number of multiple roles one holds may either increase or decrease distress after job loss. Finally, when a role produces stress (e.g., spouse in a bad marriage), losing the role may serve as a “relief event” that improves rather than harms mental health (Thoits 1995; Wheaton 1990). To summarize, when a negative life event occurs, mental health may improve or worsen depending on our subjective understanding of our many roles (Thoits 1995; Wheaton 1990).<sup>15</sup> I build on these authors’ foundations to elaborate on the ways in which we cope with the involuntary loss of a role that was also a salient identity and accompanying identity-based distress.

Because life events do not always harm mental health (Pearlin et al. 1981; Wheaton 1990), it is important to examine the subjective meaning of the life event when tracing the path from life event to mental health. Challenges to our identities may be critical elements in this path. Role loss may constitute a life event that could potentially affect one’s sense of meaning (if it occurs in a role that was also one of our salient identities) and thus potentially create identity discrepancies. Because role loss can relate to mental health in a variety of ways, the Stress Process Model could be strengthened by examining challenges to identity when examining life events involving role loss.

The way in which we subjectively understand specific role combinations affects mental health (Thoits 1992, 1995). When people believe they have not lived up to their role meanings and role expectations, they experience distress (Burke 1991; Burke and Stets 2009; Simon 1997). When expectations for two roles are incompatible, we may experience role conflict, which means we feel torn between two roles (Thoits 1985).

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<sup>15</sup> Subjective differences in role meaning may explain why, on their own, neither identity salience (Thoits 1995, 1992), nor the total number of roles one holds (Thoits 1992), relate to mental health after a life event.

Role conflict can lead to identity discrepancies, because it can make us feel like we are not living up to the meanings of one or both roles. For example, for women, the conflicting meanings of “mother” and “worker” led many working mothers to believe they had not fulfilled the meaning of both roles. This left the mothers more anxious than their male counterparts (Simon 1997), for whom the meanings of “father” and “worker” likely overlapped (Townsend 2002).

I now expand on the importance of several concepts that relate to multiple roles, role loss, and mental health. Those concepts are: structural factors (specifically, social institutions and social statuses); shifts in the salience of our identities and dimensions that affect these shifts (e.g., voluntariness); and the temporal nature of identities.

#### *Social Structural Factors and Availability of Multiple Roles: Social Institutions and Statuses*

Social structural factors, such as social institutions, social networks, and social statuses, may relate to mental health after a negative life event by expanding or constraining one’s options for coping with identity challenges.

*Social Institutions.* Social networks and institutions may expand or constrain one’s identity work options after job loss. One’s sense of identity depends strongly on the extent and intensity of our connections to *social networks and institutions* (Stryker 1980; Stryker and Burke 2000) as represented by our roles (Stryker 1980). If one is not highly involved in social institutions or networks from which new roles might be available (or more strongly emphasized), one may have fewer total roles from which to choose, making it harder to adopt or increase emphasis on an alternate role as one of our identities when one role is lost. This could leave one facing the emotional impact of role

loss head-on and could increase distress. For example, if Bob has children, is a volunteer at church, and coaches a Little League team, he may have three easily available roles on which to base a new or more strongly-emphasized identity after job loss – parent, parishioner, or coach. But if Bob’s only strong involvement was at work, he may have few available roles from which to choose to emphasize more strongly as an identity after job loss. Having few total roles could also make it hard to maintain a feeling of consistency in one’s overall identity across time. Maintaining a consistent sense of overall identity is important to mental health (Burke 1996). For example, after job loss, Bob may be able to claim “I’m no longer an employee, but I’m *still* a parent, a parishioner, and a coach,” and by doing so bolster his mental health.

*Social Status.* Social status can affect the level of distress we experience after job loss (Tausig 1999). In addition, having many alternate roles available that are consistent with one’s *social statuses* may expand the possibility of shifting to more strongly emphasize an alternate identity after a life event. Social statuses can “become important elements of the persona and self-identification” (Pearlin 1999:398). We interpret the meaning of our roles through the lens of our social statuses.<sup>16</sup> In turn, this interpretation influences how the role (and its loss or gain) affects mental health (Tausig 1999). For example, the meaning of the “employee” role and its effect on mental health varies by gender. Because women have less access to high-status jobs than do men, women may downplay their worker roles (McFadyen 1995; Thoits 1986), perhaps in an effort to

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<sup>16</sup> Because we are socialized to take into account the “generalized other” (Mead 1934), there is typically widespread agreement throughout society about the meaning of each role. Therefore, an individual’s subjective understanding of a role usually mirrors how society defines it, at least to some degree (Blumer 1962, 1969).

(unconsciously) protect them from feeling like they have failed as workers. This may partially explain findings that unemployment harms men's, more than women's, mental health (Thoits 1986).

Although we may reorder the salience hierarchy of our identities when one identity is threatened, we do not necessarily perceive all of our many identities as congruent with one another (Stryker 1980; Thoits 1985), so some identities may be more "usable" than others as a coping option. Perhaps we are likely to try to adopt or sustain those salient identities that are congruent with other highly ranked, salient identities when coping with identity threats. For example, continuing with the case of Bob (noted above), he may suffer depression by losing the "masculine" breadwinner role. He may then increase his emphasis on the coach role as an identity because it is congruent with masculinity expectations. He would perhaps be less likely to emphasize the parent identity because many men see breadwinning as an essential part of being a good father (Townsend 2002).

After life events involving role change (e.g., marriage, job loss), social status can affect identity by influencing others' feedback about one's role performance. In other words, social status matters for who we believe we can "become" (Lee 1998) and how well we believe we are playing our roles. For example, the partner who has more structural power (e.g., men) can more often influence his or her spouse to verify that they are "properly" enacting the "spouse" role than vice versa (Cast 2003; Cast, Stets, and Burke 1999). Additionally, Burke and Cast (1997) show that certain life events – in this case having a child – punctuate the social meaning of certain social statuses. For example, once a child is born, men generally shift their self-concept in a more masculine

direction, while women's self-view becomes more focused on their femininity (Burke and Cast 1997).

Social status influences mental health by affecting one's subjective understanding of a role and through feedback processes. Researchers should examine social status to understand how people interpret life events and how identity discrepancies may be produced by those events, as well as to understand the events' ultimate effects on mental health.

*Identity Discrepancies.* Identity discrepancies, or mismatches between several aspects of one of our many identities (such as role and status, or who one wishes to be and who one actually is) can help us more fully understand identity change (Cantwell and Martiny 2010). Identity discrepancies may also help to explain mental health outcomes (Burke 1991, 1996; Higgins 1987; Large and Marcussen 2000; Marcussen 2006). A careful reading of the literature implies that they may directly influence self-esteem (Cast and Burke 2002; Sheeran and McCarthy 1990, 1992; Stets and Harrod 2004), mastery (Stets and Burke 2005), and mental health overall (Cast and Burke 2002; Feldman et al. 2002; Higgins 1987; Marcussen 2006; Sheeran and McCarthy 1992; Thoits 1999).

Self-Discrepancy Theory (Higgins 1987) relates specific types of identity discrepancies to specific types of mental health problems (e.g., Alexander and Higgins 1993). Higgins (1987) identifies two broad categories of discrepancies – “actual/ideal” and “actual/ought.” An actual/ideal discrepancy means there is incongruence between who one actually is and who one would ideally *like* to be. With an actual/ought discrepancy, there is incongruence between who one actually is and who one believes he

or she *should* be (Higgins 1987).<sup>17</sup> To summarize, the locus of an actual/ideal discrepancy is one's aspirations ("aspiration discrepancy"), whereas the locus of an actual/ought discrepancy is obligation ("obligation discrepancy") (Large and Marcussen 2000). An aspiration discrepancy produces feelings of dejection (e.g., depression) (Higgins 1987; Large and Marcussen 2000; Marcussen 2006), whereas an obligation discrepancy leads to feelings of agitation (e.g., anxiety) (Higgins 1987; Large and Marcussen 2000).<sup>18</sup> Self-Discrepancy Theory shows that, across a variety of roles, perceived identity discrepancies should systematically relate to specific types of mental health problems, and that other people and societal standards are important to this relationship.

Identity Discrepancy Theory (Large and Marcussen 2000) builds on Self-Discrepancy Theory, and predicts that when one of our salient identities is not verified (either by others or when one monitors his or her own behavior), an identity discrepancy will occur. An aspiration discrepancy will produce depression (Large and Marcussen 2000; Marcussen and Large 2003; Marcussen 2006), while an obligation discrepancy will produce anxiety (Large and Marcussen 2000).

Empirical support for Identity Discrepancy Theory and its elements is mixed. There is ample evidence linking identity discrepancies to mental health problems (Burke and Stets 1999; Cast and Burke 2002; Marcussen 2006; Sheeran and McCarthy 1992).

Some research also shows a relationship between aspiration discrepancies and depression

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<sup>17</sup> Higgins (1987) distinguishes between desires and obligations (i.e., ideals and oughts) based on one's own standards versus the standards of significant others. Further, in Higgins' (1987) model, when he refers to others, he focuses on significant others, not the generalized other. However, the generalized other may affect adults' self-concept more so than do significant others (Mead 1934; Norris 2011).

<sup>18</sup> The specific experience of anxiety is closer to the emotions Higgins (1987) identifies as being associated with discrepancies involving specific others' beliefs about one's obligations (as opposed to one's own feelings about obligation).

(Higgins 1987) and obligation discrepancies and anxiety (Higgins 1987; Marcussen and Large 2003). However, one study (Marcussen 2006) only found that aspiration discrepancies related to both depression and anxiety, but that obligation discrepancies related to neither.

Identity Discrepancy Theory also connects one element of Pearlin et al.'s (1981) Stress Process Model - self-esteem – to identity discrepancies. Aspiration (but not obligation) discrepancies lowered self-esteem (Marcussen 2006; Moretti and Higgins 1990). Supporting Pearlin et al.'s (1981) proposition that self-esteem mediates between chronic strains and depression, Marcussen (2006) found that self-esteem mediated between aspiration and obligation discrepancies, and anxiety and depression, respectively. This established link between identity discrepancies, self-esteem, and mental health suggests that identity discrepancies act as an identity-based chronic strain, and that it would be fruitful to incorporate them into the Stress Process Model (particularly when examining life events involving role loss), as implied by Marcussen's (2006) research.

*Role-Status Consistency versus Role-Status Mismatch.* Both roles and statuses can serve as bases of our many identities (Burke and Stets 2009), so incongruence between them can be conceptualized as an identity discrepancy. In particular, cultural expectations about which roles and statuses “go together” can cause identity discrepancies.<sup>19</sup> For example, a black doctor (Thoits 1985) or a cashier with a Ph.D. may defy cultural expectations because of these “mismatches.” Mismatches between status and role may lead to interactions that threaten the “validity” of one's identity based on a

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<sup>19</sup> Thoits (1985) calls these discrepancies between role and status “status inconsistency.”

role (i.e., role identity) and result in poorer mental health (Thoits 1991). Role identities may be threatened during interaction when others focus on one's status and its "mismatch" with one's role, causing one to experience emotions "inappropriate" to the role (Thoits 1985). For example, if patients keep referring to a black doctor as a nurse, she may feel angry rather than compassionate (the expectation for a doctor). In other words, identity discrepancies can be produced when one of our role identities is not verified during interaction with others (Burke 1996).

For the several reasons noted above, perceived role-status mismatch may produce distress (Burke 1996; Thoits 1985; 1991), whereas identifying with roles that are consistent with cultural expectations for one's social status may help one maintain a sense of identity consistency and gain identity verification from others. Role-status consistency can thereby help us avoid identity discrepancies. For example, self-identification as "unemployed" varies by social status (McFadyen 1995). This may be because some social statuses (e.g., female, older age) are consistent with roles other than "employee," making it easier to identify with an alternate role. Women who lose their jobs are less likely to identify as "unemployed," and may instead identify with roles that are consistent with female, but not male, gender expectations, such as "housewives" (McFadyen 1995) or "stay-at-home moms." In contrast, men who identify as "homemakers" would likely experience identity challenges because the domestic role does not "match up" with cultural expectations for men (McDaniel 2003). Maintaining consistency is important to mental health (Thoits 1999) because it helps us gain identity verification (Burke 1991, 1996) and therefore avoid identity discrepancies.

Because some roles are consistent with our statuses while others are not, social status affects which roles we believe are available to us, with which we may willingly identify, and for which we will receive positive or verifying feedback. For example, steelworkers who identified as “retirees” had greater mastery levels (which relate to lower depression levels (Ross and Sastry 1999)) than those who identified as “unemployed” (Legerski, Cornwall, and O’Neil 2006). However, the very option of identifying as a retiree often depends upon two social statuses – age (McFadyen 1995) and socioeconomic status. The bulk of the steelworkers studied by Legerski et al. (2006) were over age 45 and more than a quarter of them were older than 55, making it somewhat easier for them to see themselves as “retired” (and to gain social acceptance for that identity) than if they had been younger.<sup>20</sup> Age helped pave the way for identification as a “retiree” rather than “unemployed.” Thus, social status can provide structural conditions that help or hinder identification with a role that could benefit mental health after a negative life event.

One may try to reduce the discomfort caused by status-role mismatches by: 1) attempting to bring one’s actual emotions in line with society’s expectations; 2) reinterpreting the situation; or 3) changing one’s behaviors (Thoits 1985). For example, a man who considers taking a “feminine” job, such as receptionist, may anticipate difficulty adapting his actual emotions (e.g., anger at a client) to the emotions and behaviors expected in the job (e.g., happy and polite). He may then decide not to take such a job, even if it is available and he is unemployed (Nixon 2006). Attempts to control our emotions are likely to fail in situations that *repeatedly* produce discrepancies

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<sup>20</sup> These steelworkers had also learned that 60 percent of their pension value was guaranteed, leaving them in a relatively secure economic position (Legerski et al. 2006).

(Thoits 1985), such as being in a job inconsistent with one's gender or social class. If those attempts fail (or if one remains in a discrepancy-producing situation), depression and anxiety are likely to occur (Thoits 1985). Basing one of our identities on a role consistent with one's status, along with the identity verification that often results from this consistency, may buffer potential damage to mental health when one loses a role. On the other hand, discrepancies between roles and statuses, and the corresponding lack of identity verification, can harm mental health (Thoits 1985).

Social statuses and social institutions can expand or constrain our options for shifting to more strongly emphasize another of our many identities and for maintaining a consistent sense of self across time because they relate to: the sheer number of alternate roles available; our subjective understanding of a role's meaning; and the way in which others treat us (e.g., verification). Additionally, our statuses may lead us to experience a sense of congruence or mismatch with roles, which constrains or expands our identity-based coping options, and increases or decreases distress. Thus, social status and social institutions are critical elements to consider when examining the link between identity and mental health following a life event.

*Identity Work.* The distress caused by identity discrepancies could, in theory, be alleviated by "identity work" that reduces identity discrepancies, or produces conditions that help increase the salience of an identity that will offer a sense of congruence. In my study, I use identity work to describe the process of negotiating the meaning of "who one is," in this case specifically to manage distress brought on by identity discrepancies.

Discomfort caused by challenges to identity may be dealt with using identity work, or the way "people construct and negotiate personal identities" (Snow and

Anderson 1987:1336) in order to salvage self-esteem and to maintain an overall sense of congruence between one's objective circumstances and subjective self-concept (Snow and Anderson 1987). For example, homeless people performed three types of identity work by talking in ways that: distanced them from being homeless; helped them embrace the homeless identity by redefining it positively; and embellished their past. All of these types of identity work could make one feel better about one's stigmatized homeless role.

Identity work has also been used to examine negotiating and constructing the meaning of social statuses, such as race (Khanna and Johnson 2010) and gender (Vaccaro, Schrock, and McCabe 2011). In order to accomplish this work people conceal some aspects of their lives while emphasizing others. Structural factors, such as social class and phenotype, may expand some identity work strategies while constraining access to other strategies (Khanna and Johnson 2010). Negotiating the meaning of gender, in this case within a martial arts setting, primarily occurred through self-presentation and framing of both game losses and of opponents (Vaccaro et al. 2011), but can be broadly conceived of as reducing discrepancies between “non-manly” behaviors (e.g., showing fear) and the male status.<sup>21</sup>

Identity work has also been used within the work and occupations literature to understand how specific occupational identities are constructed (Pritchard and Symon 2011; Wrench and Garrett 2012) and how people manage involuntary loss of the athlete role (Hockey 2005). Identity work has been used to examine how older and disabled people manage unemployment stigma by making downward social comparisons, trying to

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<sup>21</sup> Although Khanna and Johnson (2010) examine to some degree how structural factors expand or constrain identity work, their research does not center on identity work done after an involuntary transition (which mine addresses).

remain in one's past social class, and redefining unpaid work so as to potentially still call oneself a "worker" (Riach and Loretto 2009).<sup>22</sup> However, none of these studies explicitly sets out to examine identity work that manifests in the form of making congruent once again those identities that have become discrepant after involuntary role loss (i.e., job loss). Because identity discrepancies may be triggered by role loss, including job loss, it is worth examining whether identity work can be used to reduce these discrepancies, produce a new identity, or produce conditions that help increase the salience of an existing identity, all of which could offer a sense of identity congruence.

### Literature on Identity Change

Exiting and entering roles are important to identity and distress. The landmark work (Ebaugh 1988) on the process of identity change (as it relates to "role exit") focused on voluntary role change, and identified four stages involved in role exit – first doubts, seeking alternatives, turning point, and creating the ex-role. Three stages in the process of transitioning into a new life stage during "life crises," often accompanied by "rites of passage," are separation, transition, and incorporation (Van Gennep 1960). Another model emphasizes that role change raises or lowers status, leads to changes in one's identity and behavior, and positions one in a new location in the social structure (Glaser and Strauss 1971). Blau (1973) shows that role exit impacts with whom you choose to associate, changes the self-concept, and changes one's mood. These works all clearly link role change to identity change and/or distress.

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<sup>22</sup> The act of redefining work is similar to (and one manifestation of) my study's "sustainers." However, my group goes beyond redefining unpaid work (and toward a variety of objective and subjective experiences) in their efforts to sustain. I also present evidence to show that some participants are doing so consciously.

Existing work on voluntary role transitions and identity change (Ebaugh 1988; Van Gennep 1960) posits processual models of transition. However, there are potential gaps in these models. Van Gennep's (1960) model primarily focus on *objective* role changes, or the process of actual movement from one role into another, rather than the more subjective process of embracing or rejecting the role as an identity, and although Ebaugh (1988) examines some of the subjective aspects of role transitions, she is primarily concerned with the stages of *objective* role change. Although Ebaugh (1988) explores both objective and subjective processes, she conducted her interviews only at one point in time, *after* the objective role transition had taken place. Conducting a longitudinal study *during* the process that occurs starting just after role loss might illuminate our understanding of role and/or identity change and minimize retrospective bias.

Additionally, other literature on roles and transitions (e.g., Drahota and Eitzen 1998; Duran-Aydintug 1995; Stier 2007) reveals additional critical gaps in these models by suggesting that not all transition processes are the same. Specifically, *involuntary* transitions remain relatively unexplored, and their very nature may nullify or modify some of Ebaugh's (1988) stages (e.g., seeking alternatives) (Drahota and Eitzen 1998; Duran-Aydintug 1995; Stier 2007). I now review what we currently know about involuntary role transitions, identity change, and distress.

### *Involuntary Role Loss, Identity Change, and Distress*

Several pieces of descriptive and theoretical literature (Baird 2010; Drahota and Eitzen 1998; Duran-Aydintug 1995; Hockey 2005; Manzi, Vignoles, and Regalia 2010;

Riach and Loretto 2009; Stier 2007; Tosti-Kharas 2010; Turner 2007) offer insight into the ways in which involuntary and voluntary role losses differ. These studies take a step toward exploring involuntary transitions, but most of them (Baird 2010; Hockey 2005; Manzi et al. 2010; Riach and Loretto 2009; Stier 2007; Tosti-Kharas 2010; Turner 2007) are purely descriptive and do not identify factors involved in the connections between identity change and mental health, nor do they make explicit comparisons between voluntary and involuntary transitions.

*Processual Models of Involuntary Role Loss.* A few pieces of literature do build on or modify Ebaugh's (1988) role exit processual model, illustrating the ways in which involuntary transition processes (Drahota and Eitzen 1998; Duran-Aydintug 1995) and effects (Tosti-Kharas 2010; Turner 2007) differ from those of voluntary transitions. Because involuntary transitions occur against one's will and do not usually offer us time to pre-emptively look for other roles with which to identify, the "first doubts" and "seeking alternatives" stages do not occur when the transition is involuntary (Drahota and Eitzen 1998; Duran-Aydintug 1995).<sup>23</sup>

Additionally, a person experiencing an involuntary role loss may make actual attempts to objectively stay in the role. For example, separated or divorced people who did not initiate the separation may offer to go to marriage counseling rather than leave the marriage, and may try to hold on to the lost spousal role by keeping symbols of the marriage (Duran-Aydintug 1995). Ultimately, during involuntary transitions it is likely for people to lose the identity attached to the lost role. For example, they may end up "on the bridge" (Duran-Aydintug 1995:34), have a "vacuum identity" (Ebaugh 1988:143),

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<sup>23</sup> These aspects of a transition also reflect, co-occur with, and are perhaps confounded by, a transition's foreseeability.

lose their “employee” identity entirely (Baird 2010), or accept the “in transition” role as a (temporarily) legitimate role (Baird 2010) during their transition process.<sup>24</sup> This “identity void” experience appears to be more likely for people experiencing involuntary, rather than voluntary, transitions.

The effects of involuntary transitions may also differ from those of voluntary transitions. Involuntary transitions likely lead to higher levels of distress than do voluntary transitions (Turner 2007), possibly because it is hard to get others to verify the “in transition” role as legitimate (Baird 2010). But this distress can be partially alleviated. For example, people who involuntarily (but not voluntarily) lost their jobs but still identified with their old employers had higher levels of well-being than those who did not still identify with their old employers (Tosti-Kharas 2010).<sup>25</sup>

*Other Contributions from the Involuntary Role Loss Literature.* Literature on involuntary transitions literature makes several major contributions to understanding the connections between involuntary role loss, identity change, and mental health. First, it shows that people who lose roles involuntarily often make *behavioral* attempts to remain temporally consistent with who they once were (i.e., aspects of one of their salient identities). For example, ex-professional football players often tried to engage in roles that would offer them similar intensity to that of an athlete (Drahota and Eitzen 1998), ex-professional tennis players remained temporally consistent by becoming coaches (Stier 2007), and injured runners stuck to their (modified) exercise routines to maintain

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<sup>24</sup> This is not to imply that people literally have no identity, but that one of their most salient identities has ceased to exist, leaving them feeling lost as to who they are.

<sup>25</sup> The effects on well-being held only for organizational identification, but not for occupational identification. By the author’s own admission (Tosti-Kharas 2010:62; 178), this is very possibly an artifact of a methodological flaw that negatively affected participants’ understandings of her definition of what constitutes an occupation, and questions about identifying with said occupation.

temporal consistency in sense of self (Hockey 2005). Interestingly, the behavioral attempts of both the ex-tennis players (Stier 2007) and injured runners (Hockey 2005) lessened their distress (Hockey 2005), or they experienced lower levels of distress than researchers typically assume regarding involuntary role loss (Stier 2007) (or as shown in other studies (e.g., Duran-Aydintug 1995)).

Second, the literature also shows that people who lose roles involuntarily often make *subjective* attempts to remain temporally consistent with who they once were. For example, ex-football players (Drahota and Eitzen 1998) and ex-tennis players (Stier 2007) often still thought of themselves as professional football players and tennis players. Disabled unemployed people tried to sustain a sense of being an “employee” by making downward social comparisons and redefining what was considered “work” (Riach and Loretto 2009).

Third, others’ feedback is important after role loss. Feedback that confirms that one is the person they claim to be (Burke’s (1991) “identity verification”) is important for maintaining or establishing an identity after role loss. For example, when others do not verify the “in transition” role as legitimate, unemployed people’s distress increased (Baird 2010), and others’ feedback was essential for ex-tennis players to establish the “retired” identity (Stier 2007) and for injured runners to sustain the “runner” identity (Hockey 2005).

Fourth, time is important to how identity is conceptualized after involuntary role loss. As previously noted, many people who involuntarily lose roles attempt to maintain consistency with *who they once were* in the past (e.g., Drahota and Eitzen 1998; Duran-Aydintug 1995; Hockey 2005; Riach and Loretto 2009; Stier 2007; Tosti-Kharas 2010).

Additionally, Riach and Loretto (2009) emphasize that one's past biography is important to consider in order to understand identities after job loss. Along with other literature (discussed several later in this chapter), the involuntary role loss literature suggests that we must go beyond the present to fully understand identity change processes. Even though each particular identity was not their only identity, each was highly salient and so it was important to maintain it when the role was lost and identity was threatened.

Finally, social status may play a part in the involuntary transition process, although its exact role is unclear. For example, Riach and Loretto (2009) found that the identity discrepancy between one's former managerial job (based on a high educational social status, such as college graduate) and the lower-level jobs offered (e.g., janitor) may influence disabled unemployed people to remain unemployed rather than take the lower-level work. However, they also found that mainstream societal meanings of older age and disability were not accepted nor integrated into these workers' identities (Riach and Loretto 2009). Similarly, Baird (2010) found that older unemployed people rejected mainstream societal meanings of age. Although people may not always accept and integrate mainstream meanings of a status, it is clear that status is an aspect of identity that one typically confronts in some way after role loss (and possibly during identity change), whether by accepting or rejecting societal meanings of that status.

*Gaps in the Involuntary Role Loss Literature.* Although the literature on involuntary role loss moves us toward a better understanding of identity change and how it relates to mental health, there are several ways we can increase our knowledge of this process. First, the bulk of the research on involuntary role loss and identity change (Baird 2010; Drahotka and Eitzen 1998; Duran-Aydintug 1995; Riach and Loretto 2009;

Stier 2007; Turner 2007) was conducted at only one point in time. A longitudinal approach would better allow for a full examination of the identity change process (Thoits 1999:360) and of accurate estimates of the amount of change experienced (Tourangeau, Rips, and Rasinski 2000:125). Further, much of this research (Drahota and Eitzen 1998; Stier 2007; Duran-Aydintug 1995; Riach and Loretto 2009) relied on participants' retrospective reports of their process. Conducting a study *during* the transition process would lessen retrospective bias (Scott and Alwin 1998; Tourangeau et al. 2000:125).<sup>26</sup>

Second, it would be fruitful to build on the foundation of existing involuntary role loss literature (Baird 2010; Drahota and Eitzen 1998; Riach and Loretto 2009; Stier 2007; Turner 2007) so as to explicitly and systematically examine the link between involuntary role loss and distress or mental health.

Third, it would be useful to expand on literature that focuses on identities that people currently hold (Baird 2010; Drahota and Eitzen 1998; Duran-Aydintug 1995; Hockey 2005; Riach and Loretto 2009; Stier 2007; Tosti-Kharas 2010; Turner 2007) by exploring participants' strategic use of identities based in the future or the past, as suggested by Markus and Nurius (1986).

Finally, the extent of one's involvement in social institutions and one's specific statuses may be especially important when role loss is involuntary, as one often does not have time to preemptively look for other roles with which to identify (Ebaugh 1988). For this reason it is important to examine explicitly and systematically the ways in which statuses or extent of involvement in social institutions relates to identity change. The

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<sup>26</sup> Duran-Aydintug (1995) interviewed people at different stages of separation or divorce (e.g., recently filed for divorce, recently granted divorce, already divorced). However, all participants in this study were interviewed after action had already been taken to start the divorce process. The bulk of Riach and Loretto's (2009) sample were interviewed more than one year after job loss.

literature to date has not done so (Baird 2010; Drahotka and Eitzen 1998; Duran-Aydintug 1995; Hockey 2005; Stier 2007; Tosti-Kharas 2010; Turner 2007).<sup>27</sup> Examining institutions becomes especially important to identity change because people whose work-related transitions do not have institutional support (e.g., from employed to unemployed) are more likely to use identity narratives to frame and understand their experiences and these narratives increase the likelihood of others verifying their new or increasingly salient identities (Ibarra and Barbulescu 2010).

In my current study, I examine how involuntary role losses relate to identity change, and mental health, keeping in mind the importance of institutions, social statuses, and the temporal nature of identities. Further, I do so with data collected at two points in time during the transition process. By using these concepts and methodological techniques together, I expect to gain a more comprehensive picture of the link between involuntary role loss, identity change, and mental health.

### *The Importance of the Temporal Nature of Identities for Transition Models*

Time is important to the relationship between identities, transitions, and distress for two reasons. First, identities need not be confined to the present point in time; we can conceive of past and possible future identities, such as “former coach” or “future teacher.” Therefore if one shifts to more strongly emphasize another of their many identities as a coping strategy after role loss (Gecas and Seff 1990; Sieber 1974), it may

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<sup>27</sup> Riach and Loretto (2009) note that educational status relates to decisions to not move back into the “employee” role when the only available job is one below expectations for his or her education level. They also note that their participants personally rejected and did not internalize the meaning of age and disability status stereotypes, but worried that other people would see them in terms of these stereotypes. Baird (2010) also found a similar rejection of age stereotypes, but his study mostly focused on the importance of personal (not structural) resources for making a successful transition.

not need to be an identity based on a role one currently holds (Sieber 1974). Second, we generally prefer to see ourselves as the same person across time, and feeling like one's self is not temporally consistent leads to distress (Burke 1996).

*Roles and Identities Based in the Past and Future.* Identities based in the past or future (especially based on past roles or possible future roles) may be relevant to identity change after involuntary job loss because of their connection to distress levels, social institutions, and verification.

Possible selves relate to distress levels. Envisioning desired possible selves puts us in a more positive mood (Iyer et al. 2009; Manzi et al. 2010; Markus and Nurius 1986). Possible selves also help motivate us toward achieving those selves, and relate to change, self-evaluation, and decision-making through comparisons to others, one's own past, and envisioned futures (Markus and Nurius 1986). When people believe it is possible to become the person they want to become (Markus and Nurius 1986) or when people identify with possible future roles (Iyer et al. 2009), they have higher levels of self-esteem (Iyer et al. 2009; Markus and Nurius 1986) and experience more positive affect (Markus and Nurius 1986). If, as Ibarra and Barbulescu (2009) suggest, people use narratives that contain possible future selves after role loss in order to do identity work during work-related transitions, then it may be that people use these possible future selves as a coping strategy to deal with involuntary role loss.

Additionally, if some of our potential identities are based in the future, it is conceivable that we can revert to identities based in the past when we need them to maintain our emotional balance. After involuntary role loss, some people try to continue to subjectively identify with the lost role (from the past) (Drahota and Eitzen 1998;

Duran-Aydintug 1995; Hockey 2005; Stier 2007; Tosti-Kharas 2010), and this improves mental health (Tosti-Kharas 2010). However, the conditions under which people choose to do so or not do so, as well as the characteristics of the new (or more strongly emphasized) identities they select, have not yet been clarified. There is also limited research on whether people shift to emphasize past roles and/or identities that are different from the role that was most recently lost. For example, I argue that it may be possible for someone to increase one's self-identification with a role one desired to have years ago, such as teacher, after losing the CEO role. Although literature on possible selves has contributed to our understanding of the connections between identity change, mental health, and possible selves, none of them explore the potential conscious agentic *use* of possible future selves as a coping strategy after role loss.

Possible selves also relate to social institutions and identity verification. The greater the number of social institutions in which we are involved, the more likely we may be to take on a new identity, which reduces stress during role transitions (Iyer et al. 2009). However, possible selves can give meaning, incentive, and direction to our goals, *without necessarily being confirmed socially* (Markus and Nurius 1986). In other words, we need not receive feedback or verification from others in order to initially identify with an anticipated *future* self. Therefore, possible selves may be especially important when we lose a role that was also a salient identity unexpectedly and involuntarily, and when there is no alternate role easily available (in a social institution) in which verifying feedback is easy to get. For example, if Joe loses his job and is not highly involved in many other social institutions, he may shift his identity emphasis to who he once was or who he will someday become, rather than trying to emphasize an existing role. He will

not necessarily need feedback to begin the shifting process.<sup>28</sup> In other words, when a role that was also a salient identity disappears, we may need to cope by quickly selecting an alternate identity to emphasize, without searching for others' feedback in advance.

Moving towards future anticipated identities could help us cope in this way.

*Temporal Consistency of Identities.* We generally prefer to see our identities as the same across time (e.g., Swann 1983; Burke 1991, 1996). For example, we desire consistency between who we once were and who we will become (Ibarra and Barbulescu 2010).

Many people who involuntarily lose roles see their subjective identities as essentially unchanged even when their roles have objectively changed (Drahota and Eitzen 1998; Duran-Aydintug 1995; Hockey 2005; Riach and Loretto 2009; Stier 2007). One reason for this is that feeling like one's self is not temporally consistent leads to distress (Burke 1996), whereas seeing oneself as the same across time appears to reduce distress (Hockey 2005; Iyer et al. 2009; Manzi et al. 2010). For example, during voluntary role transitions, a closer match between one of our current identities and the person we had always wanted to become relates to lower anxiety levels (Manzi et al. 2010), and people who see their old identities as compatible with their new identities are less depressed than those who see their old and new identities as incompatible (Iyer et al. 2009).

Literature on involuntary role loss makes clear links between identity change, mental health, and the temporal nature of identities. However, to date, these links have not been explored systematically.

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<sup>28</sup> Although direct feedback is not necessary for one to initially imagine a possible future self, possible selves are very sensitive to inconsistent feedback (Markus and Nurius 1986). Therefore, feedback may be important to continuing to maintain an identity based on a future self.

*Summary of Identity and Mental Health Literature: Contributions and Gaps*

Research on identity and mental health makes valuable contributions to our understanding of how life events affect mental health, but it also contains some significant gaps. The literature emphasizes the importance of roles' subjective meanings (Simon 1997; Thoits 1999) and the importance of statuses (Tausig 1999; Thoits 1985) for mental health outcomes after role loss. It also suggests the importance of interactional (Burke and Stets 2009), temporal (Markus and Nurius 1986; Sieber 1974; Thoits 1999) and structural factors (e.g., social institutions) (Stryker 1980) for mental health outcomes after role loss.

Using existing literature on multiple roles that notes that one may more strongly emphasize an existing or new role as a more salient identity after role loss (Gecas and Seff 1990; Sieber 1974), we can elaborate on the process through which one goes about selecting an alternate identity. We can also then examine the factors that may constrain or facilitate the use of any of our many identities for coping purposes - social institutions, social statuses, and time (Markus and Nurius 1986; Sieber 1974).

The literature on identity change shows that role transitions relate to mental health (Duran-Aydintug 1995; Hockey 2005; Manzi et al. 2010), and suggests that the process (Drahota and Eitzen 1998; Duran-Aydintug 1995) and sometimes the effects (Baird 2010; Tosti-Kharas 2010; Turner 2007) of involuntary role change differ from those of a voluntary one. This literature also shows that temporal consistency (Drahota and Eitzen 1998; Hockey 2005; Riach and Loretto 2009; Stier 2007), feedback from others (Hockey 2005; Stier 2007), and the objective existence and subjective meaning of social statuses

such as age and gender (Baird 2010; Riach and Loretto 2009) are important to the identity processes of people who lose roles involuntarily.

The literature on involuntary role loss also contains gaps that prevent us from gaining a fuller understanding of how it relates to identity change and distress. Much of the research on involuntary role loss was conducted at only one point in time, constraining our understanding of temporal processes. Additionally, distress has not always been explored systematically, and temporal understandings of identity, as well as structural factors (e.g., statuses, involvement in social institutions), have not been explicitly used as analytic dimensions in identity change research. To fully understand the link between involuntary role loss, identity processes, and distress, we must use a longitudinal research design, explore time-based conceptions of identity (e.g., identities rooted in the past or future), and use involvement in social institutions and meanings of social statuses as analytic dimensions.

The current study addresses these relatively unexplored factors so as to enhance our understanding of identity and distress following involuntary role loss. Specifically, using longitudinal data, I show how identity discrepancies cause distress after involuntary role loss, but that identity work may be used to repair identity-based distress. I also show how this process is conditioned by one's social statuses and involvement in social institutions, and how rooting one's identity in roles that occurred in the distant past or are anticipated in the future (or producing conditions that help increase their salience) may help to facilitate the coping process and reduce distress.

## **The Stress Process Model**

The stress process literature (e.g., Pearlin et al. 1981) shows that the negative mental health effects that may follow a life event (e.g., job loss), evolve partially through a process that unfolds across time. Factors involved in mental health outcomes include statuses (e.g., gender) that shape access to coping resources, including social networks and social institutions (Pearlin et al. 1981). The stress process literature emphasizes the more *objective* aspects of statuses (e.g., access to opportunities, etc.) (e.g., Pearlin et al. 1981). However, because people may integrate their statuses into their identities (e.g., Bettie 2003), and one's sense of identity partially depends on the extent and depth of our connections to social networks and institutions (Stryker 1980), I propose that *subjective* identification with a status and/or available social institutions may expand or constrain one's coping resources as well, and thus affect mental health. The stress process literature clearly connects temporal processes, status, social networks, and mental health, and could be further strengthened by exploring identity's role in the process explicitly.

### *Understanding the Stress Process Model*

The Stress Process Model (Pearlin et al. 1981) emphasizes the social, rather than individual, causes of mental health outcomes (Pearlin 1989, 1999; Pearlin et al. 1981). Specifically, it relates social status to the kinds of stressors to which we are exposed (Pearlin 1989, 1999), the resources available to cope with those stressors (Pearlin 1989; Pearlin et al. 1981), and the variety of ways in which our stress manifests (Pearlin 1999; Pearlin et al. 1981).

Although much research assumes that stressors directly cause the experience of stress (Pearlin et al. 1981), in reality they can result in better or worse mental health, or no change in mental health. This is because stress actually results from a *process* triggered by stressors (Pearlin et al. 1981) and this process may take time. The Stress Process Model maps out this process, including the many intervening variables that can mediate or moderate the relationship between stressors and mental health (Pearlin 1989, 1999; Pearlin et al. 1981). “Life events,” or major discrete negative events (e.g., job loss), are often the first step in this process. They serve as the primary stressors that trigger “chronic strains,” or ongoing, day-to-day problems that continue to produce stress even after the discrete life event is over (Pearlin 1999, Pearlin et al. 1981) (e.g., ongoing financial strain following job loss) (Pearlin et al. 1981).<sup>29</sup> Chronic strains are connected to social roles (e.g., worker; spouse) and relationships based on these roles (Pearlin et al. 1981), so role loss may affect our interactions with others and the ways in which we experience distress (or not) after a life event.

The availability of social and personal resources, along with material and other resources, also contributes to the effects of life events and chronic strains on mental health (Pearlin et al. 1981). Social resources include access to other people, and perceived emotional, material, or practical support from others (Pearlin et al. 1981). Personal resources include self-esteem, or how positively or negatively we evaluate ourselves (Rosenberg 1986 [1979]), and mastery, or our sense of our ability to manage our own lives (Pearlin et al. 2007; Pearlin and Schooler 1978). Pre-existing levels of

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<sup>29</sup> In addition to producing new chronic strains, life events may change the meaning of existing chronic strains (Pearlin et al. 1981). For example, if Sue has ongoing health problems (a chronic strain), losing her job (a life event) could lead her health problems to take on new meaning. For example, Sue may worry that her health problems will become more of a financial burden now that she no longer has health insurance.

self-esteem, mastery, and social support may serve as resources that moderate the relationship between life events and mental health (Pearlin et al. 1981). But life events and chronic strains may change these levels, thereby mediating, or explaining the relationship between, stressors and mental health (Pearlin et al. 1981). Generally, having greater resources protects one from the negative mental health effects of stressors (Pearlin 1999; Pearlin et al., 1981, 2007).

Although we know that social support helps buffer the negative effects of stressors (Pearlin et al. 1981), it is important to discover the mechanisms through which this occurs (Thoits 2011). The process of social support differs by status and culture (Kawachi and Berkman 2011; Taylor 2007). As noted in a previous section, I argue that it is possible that one social support mechanism that reduces distress is verification of an identity that has increased in salience after job loss. New role identities that are congruent with one's social status should elicit positive, confirming feedback from others (Thoits 1985), achieving identity verification, and thus reducing distress (Burke 1991, 1996).

Resources help us maintain mental health in the face of stressors, but not everyone has an equal amount of resources. Social status affects one's ability to cope with chronic strains by shaping access to resources (Pearlin 1989, 1999). For example, unlike a lawyer who loses her job, a waitress who loses her job will probably not have savings to help cope with ongoing financial strains brought on by several months of unemployment. Lack of available coping resources, not the job loss itself, may be a primary cause of mental health problems of an unemployed person.

Social status also shapes values (Pearlin 1989), which affect the ways in which one understands and experiences a stressor (Pearlin 1989, 1999). Ultimately the way in which the stressor is understood and experienced influences its effect on mental health (Pearlin 1989). A life event or chronic strain becomes stressful when it is viewed as a threat, and perceived threats “depend to some degree on the values [people] hold...on what they define as important, desirable, or to be cherished” (Pearlin 1989:249). One potential threat is a “violation of self-image” (Pearlin 1989:249) - something that threatens one’s sense of identity. When one’s values lead one to interpret an event as a threat to identity, the event is experienced as a stressor, and is more likely to harm mental health. In fact, some types of chronic strains may be viewed as “disparities between one’s goals and hopes, and their achievement” (Pearlin 1999:401). In other words, some chronic strains involve discrepancies between what one wants and what is objectively true. If these discrepancies in turn threaten one of our identities, then this challenge could serve as a chronic strain.

The interplay between social status, values, and one’s understanding of stressors suggests that identity threats – particularly identity discrepancies - may serve as “identity-based chronic strains” that mediate between a life event and mental health.<sup>30 31</sup> This

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<sup>30</sup> Chronic strains are similar to, but conceptually separate from, secondary stressors, which typically only arise after a life event, occur in a different domain than the life event (e.g., job vs. marriage), and ultimately lead to stress proliferation (Pearlin 1999). Based on a careful reading of the original Stress Process Model literature (Pearlin 1989, 1999; Pearlin et al. 1981) and personal communication with Dr. Pearlin (2010), I conceptualize challenges to identity as a chronic strain because they may be: 1) long-lasting/repeated (Pearlin 1989, 1999, 2010; Pearlin et al. 1981); 2) likely triggered by a primary stressor (e.g., the life event of job loss), but may exist prior to the life event (Pearlin et al. 1981) (i.e., not always preceded by a life event); 3) likely to cause problems in both the domain in which the role was lost, as well as other domains (Pearlin 1989, 1999, 2010); and 4) more psychological and experiential in nature (whereas secondary stressors are typically more tangible or material in nature) (as suggested by Pearlin 1989).

<sup>31</sup> I base my idea of a chronic strain being “identity-based” on Netermeyer, Boles, and McMurrian’s (1996) concept of work-family domains of conflict (e.g., time-based, behavior-based, and strain-based). In my study, the domain of conflict occurs primarily within one’s identity – an internal and psychological

suggests that we could better understand the link between life events and mental health by examining identity-based chronic strains within the Stress Process Model when considering life events that involve the loss of a role that was also a salient identity.

### *The Stress Process Model: Contributions and Gaps*

The Stress Process Model is well-supported by extensive empirical research in a wide variety of areas, including mental health and marital status (Bierman, Fazio, and Milkie 2006), adult children and their elderly parents' mental health (Milkie, Bierman, and Schieman 2008), young adults' mental health (Van Gundy 2002), family caregiving (Santo et al. 2007), substance abuse (Mossakowski 2008; Rose and Bond 2008), cumulative stress effects (Kahn and Pearlin 2006), and financial strain and unemployment (Creed and Bartrum 2008; Kahn and Pearlin 2006; Mossakowski 2008).<sup>32</sup> Overall, empirical research framed with the Stress Process Model shows that chronic strains, time, aspects of the self-concept, and social status affect the ways in which life events ultimately affect mental health, and that chronic strains may be more strongly related to mental health outcomes than life events (Pearlin and Schooler 1978; Wheaton 1983).

Despite the major contributions made by the Stress Process Model, it contains a gap; it does not fully explore identity, another element of the self-concept that is connected to mental health (Burke 1996; Higgins 1987; Pearlin 1989; Thoits 1983, 1986,

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experience. However, it is not limited to individualistic, internal experiences. Social structural factors and interactions with others also affect identity-based chronic strains.

<sup>32</sup> Findings are mixed regarding the causal direction between financial hardship and depression. One longitudinal study found that the effects of Wave One financial hardship on Wave Two depression was explained by high baseline levels of depression (Butterworth, Rodgers, and Windsor 2009). Conversely, Burgard, Brand, and House (2007) found that unemployment's effect on mental health was not simply due to people with poorer mental health being more prone to lose their jobs (i.e., social selection effect).

1999) and the way in which we experience stressors (Pearlin 1989; Thoits 1999). By examining identity, we can enhance the model's explanatory value by more easily unearthing subjective and social psychological (as opposed to objective or material) chronic strains. For example, one's objective salary may be high (low chronic strain), but one may experience strain when one feels one is not what he or she is "meant to be" occupationally (high chronic strain). Additionally, including identity in the model will enhance its explanatory value when using it to examine life events involving the loss of a role that was also a salient identity (e.g., divorce, job loss, etc.) by illustrating another way (i.e., identity discrepancies) that self-esteem and mastery may be strongly affected, and that social support may boost mental health (i.e., through identity verification).

Status, a major social structural component of the Stress Process Model (Pearlin et al. 1981), often becomes a part of one's identity (e.g., Bettie 2003). So identifying with a role that is congruent with our statuses should reduce identity discrepancies and thus potentially reduce distress caused by challenges to identity.

Likewise, because the extent and depth of our connections to social networks and institutions strongly contributes to our identities (Stryker 1980), one's involvement in social institutions may provide available alternate roles on which to base one's identity or which may become more salient identities (and thus reduce distress) if an important role identity (e.g., worker) is lost. Both cases provide a situation in which it may be easy to get others' feedback that one is meeting role expectations, thereby validating one of our new or increasingly salient identities. This identity verification reduces distress (Burke 1991; Burke and Stets 2009).

Finally, distress results from a process that occurs over time (Pearlin et al. 1981), so having more structural options that allow us to maintain a consistent subjective sense of identity over time should reduce identity-based distress. In sum, our statuses, social institutions and networks in which we are involved, and structural conditions that help us maintain a consistent self across time (e.g., “I’m still a mother, even though I’m no longer an employee”) should help reduce identity-based distress after job loss. Exploring the links between the structural conditions emphasized by Pearlin et al. (1981) and identity, which is more subjective (Bettie 2003; Burke 1991; Burke and Stets 2009; Norris and Milkie 2007; Stryker 1980), should help us better understand the stress process, including coping strategies, after job loss.

### **Unemployment and Underemployment as Key Cases**

This dissertation uses unemployment and underemployment as key cases that allow us to examine how involuntary role loss and identity relate to distress and coping strategies. I define *unemployment* as involuntary job loss within the past six months, followed by a lack of any paid work. Consistent with other underemployment researchers, I define *underemployment* as any one or more of the following: a mismatch between the education, experience, and/or skills one has and those needed for one’s present job (Feldman 1996; Johnson 1989; Sullivan 2004), fewer work hours than desired or expected (Creed and Moore 2006; Feldman and Turnley 1995), and/or or lower pay than desired or expected (Feldman, Leana, and Bolino 2002; Johnson 1989), following involuntary job loss within the past six months.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Underemployment can also be defined in terms of job strain, low marketability, and job insecurity (Broom et al. 2006).

I focus on unemployment and underemployment for three reasons. First, unemployment and underemployment are social problems that negatively affect mental health (e.g., Dooley 2003; Kelvin and Jarrett 1985; Uchitelle 2006) and involve role loss. Second, scholars suggest that an identity-based approach is ideal for examining unemployment's and underemployment's mental health effects because the experience is subjective and involves a transition (e.g., Ezzy 1993). Empirical research on the categories with which people choose to identify after job loss (Cassidy 2001; Fraccaroli, LeBlanc, and Hajjar 1994; McFadyen 1995) supports the scholars (Ezzy 1993; Feldman 1996; Kalleberg 2009) who advocate for an identity-based approach. Third, a critical reading of the literature (e.g., Amundson 1994; Cassidy 2001; Garrett-Peters 2009; Sheeran and Abraham 1994) suggests that unemployment and underemployment can challenge identity, and that this experience varies by two social statuses - social class and gender. As such, unemployment and underemployment are ideal cases to use in examining how identity and mental health relate, and in moving toward identifying the links between involuntary role loss, identity change, and mental health.

#### *Unemployment, Underemployment, and Mental Health: An Overview*

Unemployment and underemployment affect mental health in a variety of ways. Unemployment relates to poor mental health for both blue-collar (e.g., Uchitelle 2006; Zippay 1991) and white-collar workers (e.g., Newman 1988; Yang 2002), and generally harms men's mental health more than that of women (Creed and Moore 2006; Thoits 1986). Unemployed people routinely experience depression (Creed and Moore 2006; Kelvin and Jarrett 1985; Newman 1988), anxiety (Andersen 2009; Kelvin and Jarrett 1985; Liem and Liem 1996), and anger (Hanisch 1999; Zippay 1991), and have high

suicide rates (Woo and Postolache 2009). Like unemployment, underemployment is also linked to negative mental health, including general distress (Feldman et al. 2002; Kalleberg 2009), low self-esteem, depression (Dooley 2003; Dooley et al. 2000), alcohol abuse (Dooley 2003), and anger (Borgen et al. 1988).<sup>34</sup>

*An Identity-Based Approach to Unemployment, Underemployment, and Mental Health*

Researchers (Ezzy 1993; Feldman 1996; Kalleberg 2009) advocate taking an identity-based approach to the relationship between unemployment, underemployment, and mental health, and to life events and mental health in general (Thoits 1999). Kalleberg (2008, 2009) notes the need to explore psychological and non-economic aspects of unemployment and underemployment (Kalleberg 2008), including identity confusion (Kalleberg 2009). The psychological impact of unemployment and underemployment can be quite strong for people who identify strongly with their jobs (Probst 2000), because work stressors do the most harm when they “threaten salient aspects of the self” (Warr 2005:560). Specifically, researchers advocate using a role-based (Feldman 1996) or identity-based (Ezzy 1993) theoretical approach from a symbolic interactionist perspective (Ezzy 1993; Sheeran and Abraham 1994) or using stress theory (Feldman 1996). Nevertheless, calls for this type of work have gone largely unheeded.

Most theoretical models of the link between mental health and unemployment and underemployment focus on factors other than identity. For example, authors examine things such as poor mental health causing unemployment, rather than vice versa (the individualistic “rehabilitation approach”) (Tiffany, Cowan, and Tiffany 1970),

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<sup>34</sup> One notable exception is Creed and Machin’s (2002) study that found no difference in the well-being of unemployed and underemployed people.

description of predictable emotional stages (the “stages model”) (Eisenberg and Lazarsfeld 1938; Hill 1978; Jahoda, Lazarsfeld and Zeisel 1971 [1933]), the contribution to the unemployment experience of individuals’ choices aimed at attaining specific goals, (Fryer and Payne 1986), and sense of personal control within a job, which produces what then appear to be the effects of unemployment (O’Brien 1985).<sup>35 36</sup>

However, a few theoretical models hint at the importance of unemployment and underemployment to identity. For example, in her “functional model,” Jahoda (1981, 1982) proposes that work (regardless of its quality) provides us with an identity, and so inherently enhances well-being (when compared to having no job). Similarly, in his “vitamin model,” Warr (1987) posits that work provides us with several features related to mental health: an opportunity for interpersonal contact; a valued social position (i.e., occupational role); environmental clarity, including low “role ambiguity”; and externally-generated goals, including “role responsibility.” Jahoda’s (1981, 1982) and Warr’s (1987) models support taking an identity-based approach to unemployment and underemployment but posit that work itself or work conditions are objectively “good” or “bad,” and thus the same conditions produce the same outcomes for everyone. My study expands on their models by doing as Ezzy (1993) suggests - giving the subjective aspect of work (identity) systematic attention, and exploring how this relates to distress. As Ezzy (1993) also suggests I go beyond a strict cause-and-effect stance to instead delve deeply into the *process* through which moderating variables (e.g., social statuses such as age and gender) may produce differences in mental health after job loss.

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<sup>35</sup> Work in this vein typically downplays the relationship between agency and objective reality, society and/or institutions, and constitutes a “psychological reductionism” (Ezzy 1993:47).

<sup>36</sup> This model is limited to one aspect of the psychological experience of unemployment, but it does highlight the role of social class (i.e., *resources*) in producing variance in the sense of personal control.

### *The Subjective Nature of Unemployment and Underemployment*

Just as work extends beyond its objective content into one's subjective experience (Watson 1980), so do unemployment (Koeber 2002) and underemployment (Feldman 1996; Koeber 2002; Liem and Liem 1996). Subjective experience is therefore important to understanding how unemployment and underemployment relate to mental health. Empirical research on job loss shows that distress is not simply due to losing a role; distress occurs because of the meaning one ascribes to that role (Simon 1997). Job loss may pose a threat to one of our more salient identities (Tausig 1999:259). When this type of threat occurs, role loss is more likely to result in distress (Thoits 1991, 1995).

Unemployment and underemployment affect the self-concept through material deprivation, the real and perceived views of others (Kelvin and Jarrett 1985), interaction (Kelvin and Jarrett 1985; Willott and Griffin 2004; Yang 2002), and cultural expectations (Yang 2002). Job loss may create subjective differences in one's expectations of work stability, work commitment, strength of one's "employee" identity, and the amount of pride one takes in one's work (Koeber 2002). A sense of subjective failure in a role (e.g., as unemployment relates to the "employee" role) may bleed over into other roles, ultimately increasing frustration and depression (Thompson and Bunderson 2001).

Unemployment and underemployment also affect the self-concept through reference groups, including those connected to social statuses (Tausig 1999), such as social class (Willott and Griffin 2004) and gender (Yang 2002). For example, formerly middle-class Korean men reported that, following unemployment, the cultural emphasis on the male breadwinner role stressed them more than their economic problems (Yang

2002). In other words, the subjective experience of unemployment was harder for them than its material aspects.

Social statuses may moderate the effect of unemployment on mental health, by producing a discrepancy between one's role (e.g., unemployed) and social status (e.g., male). So what is seen as an "ideal" role or the type of role one "should" have is subjective, and may depend on one's social status.<sup>37</sup> Therefore, role loss may or may not harm mental health (Thoits 1995; Wheaton 1990). Because one's prior biography (which is affected by social status) influences one's subjective understanding of unemployment and underemployment (Ezzy 1993; Riach and Loretto 2009), we should examine the subjective meaning of these experiences in order to discover *why* variables such as gender moderate the effects of unemployment and underemployment on mental health (Ezzy 1993).

#### *Unemployment and Underemployment as Transitional Processes*

Unemployment and underemployment are not discrete events; they are transitional processes (Koeber 2002). Scholars interested in work-related stress should examine process in order to understand how economic stressors (e.g., unemployment and underemployment) lead to negative consequences, such as depression (Probst 2005). Essentially, we need research that examines what exactly occurs during the transitional process from "employed" to "unemployed" or "underemployed," and how aspects of that process ultimately affect mental health. In other words, we need further research on what mediates the effect of job loss on mental health.

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<sup>37</sup> Unemployed people may also challenge the social meanings of statuses. For example, older and disabled unemployed people refused to self-identify with others' stated views that they were "too old" or "too ill" to do more than menial work (Riach and Loretto 2009).

Transitional processes affect (and are affected by) identity (Amundson 1994; Ezzy 1993). Unemployment and underemployment are transitional processes that may involve the employee identity, so a processual, identity-based approach could help us understand how job loss relates to mental health and distress-relieving coping strategies. As one interacts with others, he or she continuously and gradually co-constructs the meaning of unemployment and underemployment (Ezzy 1993) during a time in which his or her objective roles have shifted. During transitions that occur due to role loss, we may feel that who we claim to be does not match our objective role, and people may treat us differently from the way we see ourselves (McFadyen 1995). These experiences amount to identity discrepancies.

Using identity-based theories can help us pinpoint identity processes that relate to job loss and its effects (Ezzy 1993; Feldman 1996), including mental health outcomes (Ezzy 1993). Because identity-based theories emphasize the ways in which identity relates to our thoughts and behaviors (Burke and Stets 2009; Ezzy 1993), and because identity discrepancies relate negatively to mental health (Burke and Stets 2009; Higgins 1987; Swann, Pelham, and Krull 1989; Tajfel and Turner 1979, 1986; Turner 1985; Turner et al. 1987), examining identity processes may reveal the mediators between unemployment, underemployment, and mental health. Identity and identity-based coping strategies may be critical aspects of the process between job loss and mental health.

#### *Am I Unemployed?: Self-Categorization Literature on Unemployment*

Scholarship on whether unemployed people choose to self-categorize (i.e., self-identify) as “unemployed” also highlights the importance of identity in the

unemployment and underemployment process. This line of research directly connects unemployed people's identity and mental health; illustrates that the "unemployed" identity is a *process*, not a discrete event; and shows that social statuses relate to whether or not one self-categorizes as unemployed.

Identity relates to the mental health of unemployed people, and may mediate the relationship between unemployment, underemployment, and mental health. According to social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 1979, 1986), we are motivated to identify with a category that will help us feel good about ourselves.<sup>38</sup> Unemployed people are likely to self-identify in ways that allow them to minimize stigma and lowered self-worth (McFadyen 1995). For example, rather than calling themselves "unemployed," they may prefer to identify with their former occupation or with a non-occupational role (McFadyen 1995). Basically, when an unemployed person identifies with their former occupation, it can help them feel good about themselves.

Some empirical work on unemployment supports social identity theory and McFadyen's (1995) argument. Unemployed people who identify as "unemployed" are more distressed than unemployed people who identify with their former occupations (Cassidy 2001). Similarly, unemployed people who reject identification with the "worker" role are more depressed and anxious than unemployed people who identify as "workers" (Fraccaroli et al. 1994).<sup>39</sup> These findings suggest that the subjective

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<sup>38</sup> Conversely, other theorists (Burke and Harrod 2005; Cast and Cantwell 2007; Swann 1983) argue that we prefer to have a consistent identity, and so would rather feel bad about ourselves than to feel like we have changed or feel like we are getting contradictory feedback. In essence, these theorists argue that we are motivated to avoid temporal discrepancies.

<sup>39</sup> Oddly, rejecting identification with the "unemployed" role also relates to higher depression and anxiety levels (Fraccaroli et al. 1994). This may be because many of the participants in Fraccaroli et al.'s (1994) study did not identify as "workers" or "unemployed," which may have left them with a highly stressful identity void, or "vacuum" identity (Ebaugh 1988).

“unemployed” identity (and not just the objective unemployed role) may mediate the relationship between job loss and mental health. Therefore, using an identity-based approach to examine how unemployment and underemployment relate to mental health could prove fruitful.

### *Unemployment, Identity, and Mental Health*

Unemployment and underemployment research suggests that job loss and employment in jobs that are very different from one’s old occupation can challenge identity (Tausig 1999:259) and that this harms mental health. As discussed next, several articles in particular illustrate a relationship between identity challenges and mental health for unemployed and underemployed people. Although they do not embed their findings in a theoretical model of stress, nor do they use sociological terminology, a careful reading of these articles suggests that they are a good starting point for further exploring the link between identity challenges and mental health for people who have lost their jobs.

*Unemployed People.* Unemployment scholarship that examines the effects of unemployment on the self-concept (Sheeran and Abraham 1994; Sheeran and McCarthy 1990, 1992) supports the idea that unemployment relates to identity discrepancies that, in turn, relate to mental health.<sup>40</sup> Unemployed people report greater discrepancies between who they would like to be and who they currently are (Sheeran and Abraham 1994;

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<sup>40</sup> These authors (Sheeran and Abraham 1994; Sheeran and McCarthy 1990, 1992) use very different terminology from my language of identity discrepancies. For example, these authors term the difference between one’s actual and ideal self alternately as “self-evaluation” or “private self-esteem,” self-esteem as “self-affection,” and self-verification alternately as “public self-esteem” or “reflected appraisals.” Nevertheless, their conceptualizations fit with my conceptualizations of identity discrepancies and self-esteem.

Sheeran and McCarthy 1990), as well as poorer reflected appraisals (Sheeran and Abraham 1994; Sheeran and McCarthy 1992) than do employed people. In turn, those discrepancies relate to increased depression (Sheeran and McCarthy 1992). Further, when one experiences more than one identity challenge at a time, depression is higher than when experiencing just one (Sheeran and McCarthy 1992). Finally, poor reflected appraisals mediated unemployed people's identity discrepancies (Sheeran and Abraham 1994). These findings indicate that there are several types of identity challenges or discrepancies, that they are conceptually distinct, and that they have discrete effects. It would thus be fruitful to systematically examine how unemployment relates to a variety of identity challenges, and how these relate to mental health.

*Underemployed People.* Underemployment scholarship supports the idea that underemployment relates to identity discrepancies, specifically those involving statuses. For example, underemployed recent college graduates, defined as working in a job that did not require a college degree (a potential challenge to one's "educational identity"), had a higher overall level of negative moods (e.g., boredom, loneliness, and anger), as well as lower levels of life and job satisfaction, than those who were not underemployed (Feldman and Turnley 1995). Similar effects held for those who had spent more time in their careers.

The effects from the subjective experience of underemployment may, in some cases, even rival underemployment's material effects on mental health. Although pay cuts between former managers' past and current jobs did not relate to job satisfaction (Feldman et al. 2002), perceptions that their skills were underutilized (a challenge to one's "educational identity") strongly reduced job satisfaction (Feldman and Leana 2000;

Feldman et al. 2002). Because reduced job satisfaction can lower psychological well-being (Dooley 2003) underemployment, through the mechanism of identity discrepancies, may harm mental health. Taken together, these findings suggest that it would be fruitful to examine systematically how underemployment relates to identity challenges, and how these challenges then relate to mental health.

### *Evidence for Identity Challenges during Unemployment and Underemployment*

A careful reading of the literature shows that unemployed and underemployed people's identities can become discrepant through: a challenge to the *temporal consistency* of our identities; a challenge to the *congruence* of one's roles and/or identities with one's *statuses*; and negative or non-existent evaluative feedback (*i.e., lack of verification*) regarding one's role performance. Although the challenges are conceptually distinct, they may overlap in one's lived experience. The literature also shows that these challenges may harm mental health.

#### *I. Challenges to Identity's Temporal Consistency ("Temporal Consistency Discrepancies")*

Unemployment and underemployment may produce challenges to the temporal consistency of our identities. People strive to have a consistent sense of their identities across time (e.g., Swann 1983; Burke 1991, 1996) so as to make the world predictable. Therefore, it may be distressing to not have a consistent sense of oneself across time (Burke 1996) and so challenges to temporal consistency may harm mental health. For example, when sudden changes occur that block one's progress toward work-related goals, comparing one's current and past work experiences can harm mental health (Warr 2005). Additionally, underemployed people who experience role ambiguity from flexible

and changing job tasks have heightened stress levels (Gallagher 2005), suggesting that challenges to the temporal consistency of our identities – whether day-to-day or across a larger amount of time since one’s past job – may be a stressor.

Unemployment scholarship (unwittingly) documents the importance of temporal consistency. At some point during unemployment, one may start to feel like he or she can no longer legitimately identify with his or her former occupation, and instead begins to identify as “unemployed” (McFadyen 1995). Identifying with a new role with which one did not previously identify may be conceptualized as a challenge to the temporal consistency of identities. Adopting “unemployed” as one of our identities relates to mental health – it lowers self-esteem (McFadyen 1995) and increases depression and anxiety (Cassidy 2001).

Examples of temporal consistency are woven throughout the unemployment literature. For example, researchers recommend that counselors help unemployed people deal with identity issues (Amundson 1994:99). Counselors should underscore unemployed people’s *existing* skills, (e.g., “I am an organized person”), attitudes, or *existent* personal qualities that have remained the same since job loss (Amundson 1994), all of which can serve to “bridge” identities across time and maintain temporal consistency. Similarly, support groups for unemployed people explicitly instructed job seekers to wash, dress, and self-present *like they would have* at work, even when they were at home, thereby “drawing on and reinforcing previous notions of what it meant to be a hardworking professional” (Garrett-Peters 2009:555-556). Additionally, support groups for unemployed people officially recognized job-seekers’ accomplishments in non-work domains that were *important to them before the layoffs* (Garrett-Peters 2009).

In essence, all these examples show how transferring existing aspects of unemployed people's identities to their current situations helped them maintain temporal consistency in the face of an identity threat – loss of the “employee” role.

## *II. Challenges to Identities' and Roles' Congruence with One's Statuses (“Status Consistency Discrepancies”)*

Incongruence between one's identities or roles and one or more of one's statuses may also constitute an identity discrepancy, as suggested by Thoits' (1985) work on status inconsistency. Status inconsistency involves a mismatch between one's social status, such as gender or social class, and one's occupation or occupational status (e.g., unemployed). For example, unemployed managers struggled with identity conflicts between their old job statuses and the new lower-level jobs for which they applied (Mendenhall et al. 2008) or accepted (Feldman et al. 2002). This led to low levels of job satisfaction (Feldman et al. 2002), which can reduce psychological well-being (Dooley 2003). Similarly, manual workers refused to apply for lower-level *or higher-level* jobs inconsistent with their working-class background, such as office work or any jobs that involved reading or writing (Nixon 2006), that could be conceived of as “college boy” jobs. Additionally, underemployed recent college graduates experience more boredom, loneliness, and anger than their working counterparts who are not underemployed (Feldman and Turnley 1995). This may be due to the discrepancy between their actual jobs and the kinds of jobs they believe are congruent with their statuses and identities as college graduates. Also, because middle-class people are used to stable work and relatively high work prestige, unemployment may produce more shame for them than for working-class people (McFadyen 1995). For example, middle-class unemployed people

had higher levels of anxiety and depression than working-class unemployed people (Andersen 2009).<sup>41</sup> The discomfort caused by the incongruence between one's status-based identity and one's role may explain why middle-class people generally prefer to remain unemployed rather than become underemployed (Dunn 2010; Lane 2009; McDaniel 2003), whereas unemployed working-class people are more willing to take any kind of job (Dunn 2010).<sup>42</sup>

Challenges to identities' and roles' congruence with statuses can be created when cultural expectations equating maleness with being a breadwinner (Nixon 2006; Townsend 2002; Willott and Griffin 2004) come up against the reality of a man's unemployment.<sup>43</sup> These cultural expectations likely make the employee identity more salient for men than for women (McFadyen 1995; Thoits 1986). For example, men who believed unemployment threatened their masculinity engaged in illegal behaviors (thus bolstering their masculinity) to make money rather than take low-paying jobs (Willott and Griffin 2004). Working-class men would not take sedentary jobs because they saw them as "feminine," and preferred jobs that would allow them to utilize their (masculine) ability to fix things with their hands (Nixon 2006). Additionally, unemployed Korean white-collar men reported that their inability to fulfill cultural masculinity expectations (e.g., breadwinner) troubled them more than the economic aspect of unemployment, and

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<sup>41</sup> Interestingly, classes higher than the middle class did not show increases in anxiety and depression upon becoming unemployed (Andersen 2009), purportedly because the loss of their highly-stressful jobs may serve as what Thoits (1995) calls a "relief event" (Andersen 2009). The reduction in stress provided by a relief event, combined with having enough money to withstand long-term unemployment, perhaps could neutralize the negative effects of identity discrepancies after job loss.

<sup>42</sup> Not all middle-class men preferred unemployment to underemployment; some stated that they actually enjoyed their new lower-level jobs (Lane 2009).

<sup>43</sup> Some middle-class men do not equate masculinity with work, and do not believe that domesticity challenges their masculinity (Lane 2009).

that the inability to fulfill expectations led to low self-esteem (Yang 2002).<sup>44</sup> These challenges to congruence between identities and statuses may help explain why unemployment harms men's, more than women's, mental health (Creed and Moore 2006; Thoits 1986).

### *III. Identity Verification Challenges (“Verification Discrepancies”)*

Unemployment and underemployment can produce experiences of negative (or non-existent) evaluative feedback regarding one's role performance (e.g., Willott and Griffin 2004; Yang 2002). It can also lead to one's own belief that he or she is not properly performing a specific role, such as employee or breadwinner. Both situations may harm mental health (Burke 1991, 1996). For example, unemployed working-class men reported that neither their wives, nor their peers at the pub, treated them as though they were still “workers” (Willott and Griffin 2004). As another example, unemployed Korean white-collar men noted that job loss led to changes in family interactions – they lost authority and power in their household (Yang 2002). The men in these two studies experienced distress because they were no longer treated as “men of the house” or breadwinners.

By contrast, when an unemployed person is treated as though he or she is still employed in his or her former profession, this reduces distress.<sup>45</sup> For example, an

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<sup>44</sup> The identity aspects of Feldman et al.'s (2002) and Yang's (2002) work overlaps conceptually with the ideal, should, and actual selves referenced in Self-Discrepancy Theory (Higgins 1987), as well as the distress experienced when these selves are incongruent (Higgins 1987; Large and Marcussen 2000). Although these aspects may easily be subsumed in my conceptualization of identity incongruence, as well as its lived experience, the three types of identity discrepancies I have identified are conceptually distinct from those identified in Self-Discrepancy Theory.

<sup>45</sup> This also reflects maintenance of temporal consistency, thus illustrating how these identity discrepancies overlap in lived experience.

unemployed male executive whose employment counselor provided him with an office and secretarial support during their job searches noted that he felt this led others to see him as a professional (Feldman and Leana 2000). This amounts to identity verification, which thereby benefits mental health. Similarly, middle-class men who lost their jobs benefited emotionally when their families interacted with them as though nothing had changed, and when their wives treated them as though they still were masculine and in charge of the household (Buzzanell and Turner 2003). These studies show that distress following unemployment may be partially due to a lack of identity verification and that ensuring identity verification after job loss can benefit mental health. Taken together, these studies support the idea that unemployment and underemployment can result in identity challenges that, in turn, relate to mental health.

*Summary - Evidence for Identity Challenges during Unemployment and Underemployment*

A careful reading of the literature reveals that three types of challenges to identity – those involving temporal consistency, status congruence, and identity verification - can result from unemployment and underemployment, and that these challenges harm mental health.<sup>46</sup> Therefore, we could more fully understand how job loss affects mental health by closely examining the ways in which identity relates to distress and coping strategies. Specifically, in my study, integrating knowledge from three literature strands – identity and mental health, stress process, and work and occupations - will help us better understand how unemployment and underemployment ultimately affect mental health.

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<sup>46</sup> Although the temporal consistency discrepancies and verification discrepancies I put forth bear some resemblance to Swann's (1983) self-verification within his self-consistency theory, the concepts differ. Swann's (1983) concepts are typically limited to one's self-esteem, and Swann (1983) and Burke (1991) emphasize consistency with (and others' verification of) one's existing self-evaluation, whereas I emphasize one's own perception of consistency with a past *identity* across time.

## **Summary of Literature Gaps, My Study's Contributions, and Research Questions**

My study addresses gaps and unexplored linkages in three strands of literature – identity and mental health, stress process, and work and occupations - that relate to the process through which stressful, involuntary life events lead to mental health outcomes. These literature strands clearly illustrate that identity and statuses relate to mental health outcomes and that job loss can trigger identity-based distress. They also suggest that identity work may be successful in coping with this distress. However, despite conceptual linkages between the three strands, research in these areas remains distinct.

My study makes three sociological contributions. First, it illustrates why we should include identity in processual models of distress and coping. This is not currently done in either the stress process literature or in the work and occupations literature. Second, my study shows how structural factors, such as statuses and social institutions, expand or constrain one's identity work options after job loss. Finally, my study illustrates that notions of identity must go beyond the temporal present. Despite hints throughout the literature that identity consistency across time is important to mental health (Burke 1996) or that people may shift to a past identity to boost mental health after involuntary role loss (Gecas and Seff 1990; Sieber 1974), most conceptions of identity focus on identities rooted in present time.

I thus propose the following research questions:

- 1) How does identity relate to distress and coping after job loss?
- 2) How do structural factors expand or constrain identity work options?
- 3) How does time relate to this distress and coping?

## CHAPTER THREE: DATA AND METHODS

In this chapter, I first discuss the methods and data used for this study. I start by describing my overall study design. I then detail the characteristics of my sample, recruitment and screening procedures, and analytic techniques and procedures. Appendices A, B, and C detail characteristics of each participant, their financial and family situations, and the full sample, respectively.

### **Overall Study Design**

My qualitative study design consisted primarily of semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted in two waves for each participant, supplemented by observations of specific participants in their daily lives, as well as in group settings.

Between July 2010 and August 2011, I conducted two waves of semi-structured in-depth interviews with unemployed and underemployed participants (median time elapsed between interviews = three months; total of 48 interviews). Each interview lasted about two hours. Of the 25 participants who completed the first interview, 23 also completed the second interview (92 percent retention rate).<sup>47</sup> Interviews were conducted in private or (with participant permission) semi-private locations, such as public libraries, coffee shops, outdoor parks, my academic office, participants' homes, churches, as well

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<sup>47</sup> I made at least three attempts to contact each of these participants via phone and e-mail. One attrited participant was a 62-year-old white female who had been unemployed longer than anyone else in the study at the first interview. She responded to my e-mail requests for a second interview but only agreed to participate if I sent her a questionnaire instead of conducting the interview in person. I then sent her the most important interview questions via e-mail but she never responded. The other was a 48-year-old African-American male. He returned several of my messages, but we never connected directly. Eventually, he no longer returned my messages. Both participants had other stressors: the female had an unemployed, psychologically distressed husband and custody of two nieces; the male had a full-time (underemployed) job and was the sole financial support for his wife and three children. Although these factors may have made them too busy or preoccupied to participate in Wave Two, these kinds of conditions were also very common among those who did complete the second interview.

as offices, conference rooms, secluded alcoves, classrooms, and auditoriums located within unemployment networking groups, participant's former workplace, social services building, and a university.

At the first interview, I asked questions centered on the following topics and themes: orientation to overall daily life (e.g., where he or she lives, family status, what overall life is like); typical daily experience in last job; process leading to job loss; subjective experience of job loss; identifying the hardest part of job loss; identity discrepancies (temporal consistency; obligation; aspiration; status consistency; verification); subjective meaning of various statuses (e.g., gender, age, etc.); job search activity; and emotions/distress/distress relief. Because distress and support may stem from conditions other than job loss, I also asked about social support, financial situation, whether any other major life events had recently occurred; and lifetime history of mental health diagnoses. (See Appendix D for interview schedule, demographic form, and screening questions.)

At the second interview, I focused on questions from the original interview schedule that reflected the most important emergent themes, as shown by my analysis of the first set of interviews. After first reminding participants of the date of their last interview, I asked them to update me on what has happened in their lives since then. I explored any newly-emergent themes that participants identified as important, then focused on any connections to themes from the first set of interviews, often asking many of the same questions I had asked at the first interview in order to determine if objective or subjective changes had occurred. I focused primarily on changes (as well as consistencies) in: distress; identities; coping; level of involvement in social institutions,

roles, and activities; and job search activities.<sup>48</sup> At the second interview, I also presented each participant with verbatim quotes from his or her first interview (especially those centering on themes I had identified from the first batch of interviews, or those that seemed particularly emotionally powerful for the participant at his or her first interview), and asked him or her to tell me where he or she now stood on that quote. This allowed me to take stock of changes over time in participants' perceptions about a variety of topics relevant to the study.

At both interviews, I allowed time for the concepts of identity and identity discrepancies to emerge on their own. (They almost always did within the first 30 minutes of the interview.) If identity did not emerge as an important theme after about one hour, I asked questions specifically about participants' identities and identity discrepancies, especially as they related to unemployment, distress, and coping strategies.

Additionally, to give additional depth, insight, and nuance to the study, I conducted a total of eight observations – six at unemployment organizations, and two with individual participants as they interacted with social institutions important to them. These observations lasted between one-and-a-half to four hours each.

I conducted five of these observations at unemployment networking groups, and one at the state unemployment office. In these observations, I looked for: interactions among group participants; general “mood” of the organizations; topics of concern and attitudes toward unemployment and job seeking voiced by group participants; coping suggestions and attitudes toward unemployment and job seeking voiced by group leaders;

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<sup>48</sup> I de-emphasized questions specific to aspiration and obligation discrepancies, as well as willingness to take specific jobs that would leave one underemployed, because my initial analysis of the first set of interviews indicated that themes involving verification, status, and temporality had emerged as more central to distress and coping. However, if aspiration and obligation discrepancy themes emerged as important to the participant at his or her second interview, I pursued these themes.

indications of identities as connected to work or unemployment; positive or negative highly-charged “flash point” topics or moments, including disagreements; and self-presentation of group members.

I conducted two observations with specific participants. I observed one participant in her home as she conducted her daily routine and interacted with her daughters. I observed a second participant at his church. In these observations, I looked for: interactions with others, especially regarding unemployment, roles, or identity; indications of comfort, discomfort, or distress; self-presentation; positive or negative highly-charged “flash point” topics or moments, including disagreements; and consistency or inconsistency with claims from their interviews.

I obtained IRB approval prior to the start of the study, and I obtained informed consent (see Appendix E for informed consent form) prior to each interview and each observation of specific participants.

### **Sample Characteristics**

I recruited a purposive sample of 25 unemployed ( $n = 21$ ) or underemployed ( $n = 4$ ) former white-collar workers between the ages of 30 and 63 (median = 52), who lived in or near a major Mid-Atlantic city.<sup>49 50 51 52</sup> The sample consisted of women ( $n = 15$ )

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<sup>49</sup> I selected this age range because of the curvilinear relationship between age and mental health of unemployed people (Ezzy 1993). Workers younger than 25 may not have had long enough for their occupations to become part of their self-concepts, may not identify as “employee” or “unemployed” (Fraccaroli et al. 1994), and may accept unemployment as a temporary necessity while searching for the “right” job, so their self-concepts may not be harmed by unemployment (Kelvin and Jarrett 1985). Workers age 55 or older may redefine their unemployment as “early retirement” (Barnes-Farrell 2005; McFadyen 1995), are more experienced at managing stress cognitively (Hansson, Robson, and Limas 2001) and using coping resources (Osipow and Doty 1985), which may help explain why they are less emotionally reactive than younger workers (Barnes-Farrell 2005). Similarly, Wheaton (1990) found that, when there was a high level of stress at one’s previous job, job loss served as a “relief event” for unmarried men (ages 25-50), older married men (age 50+), and younger (ages 25-37) married women. I included

and men (n = 10), and was racially split between whites (n = 16) and African-Americans (n = 9), including 1 participant who emigrated from Africa). Participants' annual household incomes prior to job loss were relatively high, as follows: of all participants, fourteen had had annual household incomes at or above \$100,000; nine had incomes between \$50,001 and \$99,999; and two had incomes at or below \$50,000.

Participants were married (n = 12), divorced (n = 8), single (n = 4), or separated (n = 1). Of the 25 participants, 16 had children, whereas 9 were childless.<sup>53 54</sup> The median number of children for participants who had children was two. Of the 25 participants, 13 were the sole breadwinner for themselves or their families. Participants' education levels were: some college (n = 3), Bachelor's degree (n = 14), Master's degree (n = 6), and professional degree (both Juris Doctorates) (n = 2).

Conditions related to unemployment were varied. The median duration of unemployment at the first interview was three months. Nineteen participants had experienced job loss before; for six participants, this was the first time they had lost a

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unemployed people age 55 and older, but I did not see the expected pattern of reduced distress for older unemployed participants, perhaps because I limited participation to those who were not seriously considering retirement at the first interview. Although some participants did experience job loss as a relief event, they typically still also experienced identity-based distress.

<sup>50</sup> I define white-collar employment as jobs that involve primarily non-manual "knowledge work," and typically require a college degree (whether or not the participant has one).

<sup>51</sup> Examples of job titles are: chief executive officer (CEO); senior programmer/software engineer; editor; account executive; contracts administrator; and senior mortgage banker.

<sup>52</sup> Unemployment and underemployment status were as of the first interview.

<sup>53</sup> Four of the childless participants were African-American; almost half of the African-American participants (44 percent) were childless.

<sup>54</sup> Children's ages ranged from age three to adults who had left the home. My measure of children includes stepchildren, and children that live with a parent other than the participant. One participant had two nieces that lived with her; I did not count these nieces as children.

job.<sup>55</sup> The conditions under which participants lost their jobs varied: sixteen reported that they were laid off (due to downsizing, reorganizations, etc.); seven reported being fired for cause; and two participants reported resigning when they believed their bosses was planning to fire them.<sup>56</sup> Nine participants had some advance notice regarding job loss, whereas fourteen participants did not.<sup>57</sup> For those participants who had advance notice, the median amount of notice was one month, although a few participants had as much as three or six months' notice. By the second interview, seven of the original twenty-five participants were working for pay; three of those seven were working jobs that left them underemployed.

### **Participant Recruitment**

I recruited participants using a variety of non-probability sampling techniques. Because I was interested in identity after job loss, my sample was purposive (see “Screening” section, below, for detail). Specifically, I recruited participants by: attending and making in-person announcements and posting flyers (see Appendix F) at two separate unemployment networking groups (n = 12); snowball sampling from current study participants (n = 5); getting referrals from personal contacts who were not study participants (n = 4); getting referrals from two separate personnel recruiters

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<sup>55</sup> Given that job stability within a company has not been the norm and that layoffs have increasingly been a common and accepted way for companies to increase profit (Kalleberg 2009), I do not believe this necessarily represents pre-existing mental health problems or poor job performance for my sample.

<sup>56</sup> The layoff conditions of one participant were notable: The company simply stopped paying employees. Ultimately, the boss disappeared, never to return, and the company was investigated by a government agency regarding illegal activity. This participant continued to attend work for three weeks after his last paycheck, in the hopes that things would change.

<sup>57</sup> These counts only add up to twenty-three because of the two participants who “voluntarily” resigned. However, they could conceivably be categorized as having had advance notice.

(“headhunters”) (n = 3); conducting in-person recruitment and posting flyers at a local unemployment office (n = 1).<sup>58 59 60</sup>

As an incentive to initially participate and for continuance through the second wave of the study, I entered participants into a drawing for a \$25 Target gift certificate. One participant (of the twenty-five) who completed the first interview, one participant (of the twenty-three) who completed the second interview, and one participant (of the two) who participated in the one-on-one observation each received a gift certificate. I selected winners randomly after each wave of interviews/observations was completed.

### Participant Screening

Potential participants were screened for the following requirements for participation: employed regularly (i.e., not a temporary worker) for at least 35 hours per week in last job; (prior to first interview) lost job within the past six months and currently unemployed or underemployed; white-collar profession in last job; and not currently considering retirement.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Both networking groups were non-profit organizations. One networking group was religiously-based and targeted workers in a variety of occupations (i.e., working-class and middle-class); the other focused on general strategies, skills, and issues encountered when job seeking, but also focused on issues specific to middle-aged and older job seekers.

<sup>59</sup> I also attempted to recruit participants via electronic announcement (using the flyer) on the e-mail list of a private religious social services agency (sent directly from the director of this agency), but this did not yield any participants.

<sup>60</sup> Because people generally want to avoid the stigmatizing “unemployed” label (McFadyen 1995) and because applying this label to oneself relates to a higher distress level (Cassidy 2001), I used the term “job loss” instead of “unemployed” when making announcements and on my flyer.

<sup>61</sup> Because people who have been unemployed between six months (Sheeran and McCarthy 1990) and one year experience more psychological distress than first-time and shorter-term unemployed people (Cassidy 2001), and because cumulative exposure to chronic strain generally enhances its effect on depression compared to more sporadic and shorter-term chronic strain (Kahn and Pearlin 2006; Pearlin et al. 1981), I was conservative in my sample selection by (mostly) only including people who (at the time of their first interview) had been unemployed six months or less. Due to miscommunication prior to the interview, I did

I screened potential participants for their subjective evaluations of how strongly they identified with their former job titles 1) when still employed; and 2) at the time of screening.<sup>62</sup> I asked participants to rate their identification on a scale ranging from 1 to 10 (10 being the most). A score of at least five (representing a moderate level of identification) on at least one of these measures was required for participation. The median score on identification with job title while still employed was eight; the median score on identification with job title at time of screening was six. I required at least a moderate level of identification with one's last job for participation purposes because I was interested in how identities are both affected by and actively used as a coping strategy after job loss, and because we would not expect identity-based distress, nor identity-based coping strategies, to occur for people who had never identified with their jobs. Therefore, it would not make sense to include non-identifiers in my purposive sample. Additionally, it is not simply role loss that affects distress levels. Rather, the meaning of the lost role and fulfilling this meaning are critical (Simon 1997), and only "relevant standpoints are motivationally or emotionally significant" (Higgins 1987:326). It was therefore important to ensure that study participants currently or previously identified with their jobs.

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include two participants who lost their jobs six-and-a-half months and eleven months earlier. The participant who was unemployed for 11 months (with underemployment also occurring within that 11 months) is one of the participants who did not complete a second interview. I chose to include people who had lost jobs in the past because unemployment at some point in one's life is not uncommon since the advent of downsizing as a standard business maneuver to increase profits (Kalleberg 2009).

<sup>62</sup> Both evaluations were measured at the screening, after job loss. Because of this, some retrospective bias may exist (Scott and Alwin 1998) in participants' evaluations of their past identification with their jobs. I believe that this would most likely manifest as reporting less identification than they had actually had when employed, so as to help salvage self-esteem.

## **Data Analysis**

I analyzed my data with the following research questions in mind:

- 1) How does identity relate to distress and coping after job loss?
- 2) How do structural factors expand or constrain identity work options?
- 3) How does time relate to this distress and coping?

My aims in analyzing the data were to: understand the lived experiences of unemployed and underemployed people as they related to identity discrepancies; clarify links between identity discrepancies and distress; and identify ways in which people try to cope with identity discrepancies and identity-based distress in general. I also sought to discover how social statuses (such as gender and social class), involvement in social institutions, and time condition these experiences.

I approached my analysis with “anticipatory data reduction” in mind using a deductive, theory-based approach (Miles and Huberman 1994:430). This approach is ideal when examining many similar cases and when concepts (e.g., identity discrepancies and identity work) are already well delineated (Miles and Huberman 1994). I have a conceptual model suggested by theory and empirical literature, as illustrated in Chapter One. From the literature, I extracted “types” of identity discrepancies that were likely to occur (i.e., temporal consistency, status consistency, and verification discrepancies), but the exact ways in which they are experienced, relate to distress, and connect to coping strategies are unknown. Therefore, I created conceptual borders to sharply focus my analysis on specific topics by using a deductive, theory-based approach to analysis (Miles and Huberman 1994). This helped the exact interrelation of variables to emerge from my data. I conducted a case-focused, generalized analysis. In other words, I examined topics

within the context of participants' lives and illustrated general themes across cases from which we can learn general (potential) truths (Weiss 1994). This type of analysis was ideal for my study because it leads to typological description (Weiss 1994) (e.g., types of identity discrepancies, types of coping strategies, and how both relate to distress).

I recorded and coded data in a manner consistent with answering my research questions. I audiotaped and transcribed interviews verbatim, in full, and wrote analytic memos to summarize ideas about each interview immediately after each interview (Miles and Huberman 1994). Immediately after each interview, I also audiotaped my initial impressions of participants, themes, and how these related to other interviews. I took an iterative approach to data analysis, examining transcripts line-by-line multiple times. In my first round of analysis of each interview, I began by coding for the themes I had identified from the literature and also performed open coding to identify additional themes (Esterberg 2002; Lofland et al. 2006). I followed this with focused coding to connect all identified themes (Esterberg 2002; Lofland et al. 2006) and to ensure that all manifestations of themes – confirming or disconfirming – had been noted.

The themes I extracted from the literature became my preliminary coding categories, and included: temporal consistency in identities; consistency between social status (e.g., gender/education/social class) and work status or type of occupation; interactions with others and feedback; distress (including depression, anxiety, anger, alcohol use, self-esteem, and self-evaluation); feelings of mastery and sense of control; conditions of job loss; thoughts/feelings about current work status; importance of job to identity; managing job loss and its material, emotional, and interactional consequences; managing identity discrepancies; and job search activities, thoughts, and decisions.

As my analysis progressed and themes emerged, I conducted focused coding, line-by-line, for the following emergent themes: shifting; sustaining; identity void; involvement in social institutions; statuses; and conceptions of time. I also coded for other factors that were likely important to the experience of unemployment, such as financial strain; relationship strain; pre-existing mental health problems; physical health; and social support.

I used cross-case analytic procedures – primarily data matrices (Miles and Huberman 1994; Lofland et al. 2006) - to achieve my analytic purposes. I focused on finding themes of similarity across cases, as well as variation between cases (Lofland et al. 2006; Miles and Huberman 1994). I used data matrices to cross-classify the key dimensions of interest (i.e., identity discrepancies; social statuses; involvement in social institutions; distress and distress relief; identity work/coping strategies) by placing these dimensions in rows and columns, along with examples and quotes (Lofland et al. 2006). This helped me find out how the dimensions of interest fit together, whether the “shape” of each case is similar to or different from others (Miles and Huberman 1994), and to hypothesize about how the process unfolded - from unemployment to identity work/coping (or its absence) to distress. In order to ensure validity, I actively searched for disconfirming evidence (Creswell and Clark 2007) for these dimensions and the ways they interrelated, using these same methods (Lofland et al. 2006). I used ATLAS.ti 6 to assist with qualitative analyses on my interview and observation data.

## **Summary**

In this chapter, I have described my study design and the characteristics of my sample, specified my research questions, and have delineated my participant recruitment and data analysis procedures. In Chapter Four, I present results illustrating three types of identity-based distress after job loss. In Chapters Five through Seven, I illustrate each type of identity work strategy or identity path that emerged from the data – shifting, sustaining, and identity void, respectively. I present my conclusions in Chapter Eight.

## CHAPTER FOUR: IDENTITY-BASED DISTRESS AFTER JOB LOSS

In the next four chapters, I present the results from my study. In this chapter, I focus on results showing that for many middle-class people, job loss also means a loss of "who one is" (i.e., identity), leading to distress. In Chapters Five through Seven, I illustrate three types of identity work in which unemployed people engage. In Chapter Five I show how some people cope with identity-based distress by making new meaning of other roles as identities, specifically by *shifting* to (or more strongly emphasizing) an alternate role as an identity. Chapter Six centers on the ways in which people *sustain* their ideas of themselves as employees to cope with job loss distress. Chapter Seven concentrates on the emotional distress that occurs when people find themselves in *identity void* after job loss. Within Chapters Five through Seven, I highlight the importance of social institutions and social statuses for expanding or constraining one's identity work options.

### **Introduction to Chapter Four**

In this chapter, I use symbolic interactionist and stress process perspectives to illustrate how identity discrepancies operate as a stressor after job loss. I present results illustrating that, for many middle-class people, job loss often means a loss of "who one is" (i.e., identity), which is very distressing. Distress after job loss resulting from financial problems (Pearlin et al. 1981), challenges to one's social status (Tausig 1999), and relationship problems (Newman 1988) has been well documented. However, most theoretical models of the link between job loss and mental health, as well as the Stress Process Model (Pearlin et al. 1981), neglect to systematically examine how identity

relates to distress after job loss. But because our identities are often closely tied to our roles (e.g., employee) (McCall and Simmons 1978 [1966]; Stryker 1980), they may be threatened when a job is lost. It is therefore worth exploring how job loss, identities, and distress interrelate (Ezzy 1993; Feldman 1996; Kalleberg 2009).

In this chapter, I present cases that illustrate three types of identity-based distress that may occur after job loss: temporal consistency discrepancies; status consistency discrepancies; and verification discrepancies. I also discuss a fourth type of identity-based distress - identity void – in Chapter Seven.<sup>63 64</sup> Identity-based distress is conceptually separate from, and exists in addition to, distress produced by economic strain, pre-existing mental health problems, or other negative life events, making it important to examine and address in its own right. If distress is identity-based, it may require identity-based coping strategies to reduce it.<sup>65</sup> If left unmanaged, identity-based distress can become a chronic strain.

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<sup>63</sup> With *identity void*, participants noted that they did not know who they were at all – they felt “identityless.” I do not explore identity void in this chapter because I devote an entire chapter to this path.

<sup>64</sup> Two additional discrepancy types – aspiration and obligation - previously identified by Higgins (1987) also emerged. With *aspiration discrepancies*, participants noted that they were not who they *wanted* to be. With *obligation discrepancies*, participants stated that they were not who they felt they *should* be. At times, these discrepancies overlapped. For example, an unemployed man who doesn’t feel like a breadwinner might report status consistency, aspiration, and obligation discrepancies.

<sup>65</sup> Regarding the existence of identity-based distress, there was minimal difference between participants who had been previously diagnosed with mental health problems and those who had not. Seven of the eleven (64 percent) people who stated that they had previously been diagnosed with mental health problems or had recently experienced other (non-job-related) negative life events reported experiencing identity-based distress over and above those other issues. As a comparison, 10 of the 14 people (71 percent) who had *not* previously been diagnosed with mental health problems and had *not* recently experienced other (non-job-related) negative life events also reported experiencing identity-based distress over and above distress produced by financial strain, relationship strain, etc. This minimal difference between groups may be because people who experience mental health problems or other stressors still hold role identities, so we would not expect them to be immune to the effects of role loss. It is also important to note that the distress these participants experienced was not due solely to other negative life events or pre-existing mental health problems. In fact, these participants were often very clear in attributing specific feelings of distress to specific identity discrepancies.

Of the 25 participants, 17 (68 percent) reported experiencing identity-based distress after job loss, and 7 participants (28 percent of total sample; 41 percent of those experiencing identity-based distress) described challenges to identity as the “hardest part” of job loss.<sup>66 67</sup> They spoke of the difficulty of “disengaging,” being “crushed,” losing “a life” or “a skin,” and losing their “importance.” They reported that their distress was manifested in sadness, crying (including crying during the interview), depression, anxiety/panic, frustration, anger, sleeplessness, weight gain, overeating, excessive alcohol use, and physical symptoms (i.e., chest pain).

I begin by describing one case in depth to illustrate aspects of job loss and emotional reactions to it that many of my participants experienced in common. I then build on this case by presenting quotes from a number of cases that illustrate emergent themes, organized around each of the four main types of identity-based distress that emerged from the data. I use multiple quotes to illustrate similarities across participants’ experiences and understandings. At the end of each thematic section, I summarize its

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<sup>66</sup> One reason so many participants reported that identity-based distress was the hardest part of job loss may be the middle-class nature of my sample. Being middle class was a prerequisite for study participation. Middle-class people may be more prone to strongly identify with work than are working-class people, and so are likely to experience greater distress when they become unemployed (Andersen 2009). The idea of the hardest part of job loss being identity may also be an artifact of one prerequisite for study participation - a strong current or past employee identity. In general, middle-class workers have less economic strain after job loss (Johnson and Jackson 2011) and perceive their jobs as a career (Payne, Warr, and Hartley 1984), and so are perhaps more likely to identify with their jobs (Andersen 2009) or pay attention to the non-economic aspects of their distress. Six of the eight participants (75 percent) who experienced no or little identity-based distress were concurrently experiencing severe financial strain or other powerful stressors (e.g., family member’s death), perhaps lessening their focus on identity as a stressor. However, 11 of the 17 (65 percent) participants who experienced similar (non-identity) stressors did report identity-based distress. Additionally, 10 of the 17 participants (59 percent) who experienced strong identity-based distress also experienced similar severe financial strain or other powerful stressors. It appears that although financial strain and non-identity stressors may slightly reduce the likelihood of experiencing identity-based distress, these factors do not typically eliminate the impact of job loss on identity-based distress.

<sup>67</sup> I allowed ideas about identity-based distress to emerge on their own. Most reports of identity-based distress typically emerged spontaneously (usually within the first 30 minutes of the interview), long before I asked any questions about identity. If by the last quarter of the interview, participants had not mentioned identity, I asked specifically about it to clarify their thoughts on it and to gather potential disconfirming evidence.

themes. At the end of the chapter I summarize and expand on themes from all cases taken together.

### **Setting the Stage: The Story of Charlotte's Job Loss**

I begin this section with the case of Charlotte who suffered identity-based distress toward the end of her job and after job loss. Charlotte, a 41-year-old white woman with a Bachelor's Degree, had spent her entire 18-year career at a non-profit organization, where she had worked her way up from secretary to Chief Financial Officer (CFO) and earned over \$100,000 per year. She was her family's sole breadwinner and her husband had stayed home after quitting his former job several years ago to take care of their two preschool-aged children. When I first spoke to Charlotte she had been unemployed for four-and-a-half months.

We sit on a blanket in the grass, just outside a public library, on a warm, sunny summer day. Charlotte, with her barely five foot tall squat frame clad in casual summer wear, defies the stereotype of a CFO. Her legs are bare under her above-the-knee khaki A-line skirt, topped by a blue linen short-sleeved button-down shirt splashed with large yellow and pink flowers, flat brown leather thong sandals, and three pink and yellow plastic "Silly Bandz" on her left wrist.<sup>68</sup> The front part of her mostly graying shoulder-length hair is clipped on top of her head with a barrette. Her skin and hair appear pale, dull, and colorless, but her personality is just the opposite. As her vibrant eyes peek out from behind her frameless oval-shaped glasses, she seems very comfortable, forthcoming, and positive as she sits with legs splayed out in front of her and arms resting in her lap. She starts to munch on Fritos and sips her iced coffee as she tells me her story.

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<sup>68</sup> Silly Bandz are thin brightly-colored stretchable plastic bracelets popular with children at the time of the study.

Charlotte relates what her daily experience at her job had been like prior to a management change:

[W]hen I was a year out of college...I started as the receptionist and then started to work to do some administrative work for the controller, and then took over some of the accounting, and then became the deputy controller, and then she retired and I became the controller, and I eventually became the CFO and also for a while was the chief administrative officer as well. I had the HR function reporting to me and office services, as well as meeting planning, as well as all of the finance... I reviewed financial reports. I prepared schedules for various audits. I coordinated the budget activity and compared those results on a regular basis, budget to actual. I handled cash management. I was responsible for all of the vendor relationships, with our bank, with the landlord, you know, with the lease. That sort of thing. I supervised the director of HR, so I had HR oversight responsibility, benefit plans, the insurance broker, personnel situations, hiring, recruiting, training...I had probably three or four regularly-scheduled meetings a week, you know, like a staff meeting on Tuesday morning and a senior team meeting in the afternoon...I was the senior financial person there for 12 years. [Charlotte, 41-year-old white former CFO, first interview, unemployed four-and-a-half months]

She had had the same boss for most of her career at this employer, and this boss gave her a great deal of autonomy, trusted her judgment, and gave her positive feedback about her performance as a CFO. As a result, she strongly identified as a CFO:

[F]or most of my career I only had one boss...[T]here was a lot of trust...However...he didn't put a premium on innovation and fresh ideas. He... just wanted us to do things the way that we had always done it...I loved it when I was working for the former executive director and I understood what was expected of me...I was told that I was good at that job and I felt that I was good at that job. [Charlotte, first interview]

However, about three years before Charlotte lost her job, there was a change in management, which left her with a new boss who expected different things from her workforce:

[A] couple of years ago the board decided not to renew the executive director's contract and so they had hired a new executive director...[S]he expected us to be much more in touch, much more reachable after hours. I'm sort of talking about certain cultural changes...She came...from New York City and worked...about 65 hours a week...10 o'clock at night, 11 o'clock at night. She once came in and said she couldn't believe that the cleaning crew would come as early as eight o'clock and she found it so disruptive and could I see if they could clean later, like after eight...She would comment to me that she could see out her window that people were going out to the Starbucks down the street and

that she couldn't believe that people would leave during the day, that it wasn't necessarily akin to stealing from the company but that used to really, really bother her...[S]he, I think, envisioned that she could be sort of a mentor to me and could sort of.. show me how to dress and how to act and that she would help me do those things. And I actually.. was pretty pleased with myself in how I worked and how I dressed. And that became a little bit difficult after a while because I think her management style and her work style was not something I particularly wanted to emulate, so was gonna be difficult... [Charlotte, first interview]

Changes in management, in many cases preceded by a company merger, often led to identity-based distress. Specifically, this distress often occurred as a *verification discrepancy*. I now turn to Charlotte's verification discrepancy experience, and expand on it with quotes from other participants who had similar experiences.

### **Verification Discrepancies**

Participants who indicated that they no longer felt like they were good at their former employee role in some way, either because of reported negative feedback from others or their own negative self-evaluation, exhibited what I call *verification discrepancies*. Like Charlotte, many participants described having performed at high levels and feeling good at their jobs under their initial bosses. But reorganizations and mergers often came with new management, leaving them with new bosses who gave them continuous and extensive negative feedback.<sup>69</sup> This triggered self-doubt about their employee identities for those who had previously seen themselves as excellent – even award-winning – employees, and led to identity-based distress. For example, things got very difficult for Charlotte as her new boss began to constantly critique Charlotte's performance. Because of her boss' constant critiques, and the interactions that redefined

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<sup>69</sup> Many of these bosses were likely under structural pressure to downsize, as often occurs after mergers and/or restructuring.

the meaning of what a CFO “really” was, Charlotte became uncertain about whether she was a CFO and was distressed by this:

It became obvious to me that I was not the CFO that she was looking for, and that I would never be...It was terrible. I used to joke to my family and to even some of my colleagues there that it was like almost an abusive relationship...[S]he would at the last second throw me an atta-boy and I would take her back in a second. You know, like she would (laughs) be so awful to me and then she would bring me flowers and say “I’ll never do it again.” I’m kidding. You know, but it would be like when women are in relationships and then “Oh, I promise I’ll never do it. I love you so much,” and that would just make me so happy. She would say, “This sucks. This sucks. This sucks,” and I would be devastated and then I would get “Oh that was a good idea,” and it would be as if the sun rose and set and that was very hard. Very hard. [Charlotte, first interview]

Charlotte was distressed about her CFO identity both while employed and after losing her job, but she also expressed emerging concerns about finances. Charlotte’s substantial severance package had allowed her family to continue to live at their former standard of living in an upper-middle-class suburb in a wealthy county. But Charlotte had begun to think about their spending (such as questioning whether she should continue to shop at a gourmet grocery store) and wondered about whether they would ultimately be able to afford college for their (now young) children. Despite her worries, Charlotte made very little change in her spending routine, and avoided calculating the specific amount of money they had left because of the stress this produced. For Charlotte, identity-based stressors appeared to engender more coping strategies than did financial stressors.

Similar to Charlotte, Cindy, a 62-year-old white former account executive in hotel industry, told me she had been an award-winning employee before her company’s

reorganization, which left her with a new boss almost half her age. This boss' demands were impossible to meet, but Cindy did not realize that at the time.<sup>70</sup>

As I drive along the busy main street of a small city to get to Cindy's home, I notice that most of the homes are large and expensive mansions that reflect an "old money" lifestyle, although a few homes are of a smaller ranch style. I exit onto a residential side road into a quiet neighborhood with many large older trees and small flower gardens, and find Cindy's home, a modest 1500-square-foot townhouse; its décor reflects her upper-middle-class lifestyle. As I enter her home, she offers me tea and gives me a tour of their remodeled kitchen, pointing out the light-colored smooth wood cabinets and dark granite countertops. Cindy tells me to "ignore the dirty dishes in the sink" and mentioned that she has a cleaning lady and hopes she "doesn't have to give that up." Although Cindy's severance package, husband's retirement funds, and their savings have helped them retain their upper-middle-class lifestyle, Cindy was aware that finances could eventually become strained, and told me they had decided to postpone the travel they had planned before she lost her job.

At our first interview, Cindy, a heavy-set white woman wearing a red V-neck t-shirt and black poly-cotton slacks, had been unemployed for two-and-a-half months. Her graying short reddish-brown hair is feathered back lightly from her face and brown oval-shaped glasses frame her blue eyes. Cindy is friendly, welcoming, and talkative. Several chunky gold and silver two-tone rings in braided patterns flash as she gets a pen and a pad of paper to take notes during the interview.

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<sup>70</sup> Cindy told me that much later her co-workers told her that they didn't actually meet the boss' requirements either; they had simply fudged their numbers, which Cindy was unwilling to do.

We sit in her living room, which is decorated in a modern style and swims in cream, beige, and earth tones. Modern art paintings and sculpture are placed throughout the living room. Cindy seems relatively comfortable as she faces me, one leg crossed over the other, while we sit in beige-orange leather swivel chairs placed on Brazilian cherry hardwood floors. But Cindy tells me that after her new boss continuously gave her negative feedback on her performance as a hotel executive, she began to lose her hotel executive identity, and had become depressed, anxious, and physically ill:

[The new boss] said something like, “That’s not working for you. I think you should be in something else.” And I felt like, here she had written me up twice...[E]verything was turned on its head, the whole concept of how I had been trained for all these years with Gentai Hotels. So I just could not keep above...I was more and more stressed. I was depressed. My body hurt... Anxious, I guess, is the word... I just.. had such terrible feelings of self-doubt...I felt that...something had happened to me, that I was no longer a top-like salesperson... I just felt that...there was no way I could succeed, that I was going to fail regardless... [Cindy, 62-year-old white former account executive in hotel industry, first interview, unemployed two-and-a-half months]<sup>71</sup>

Cindy ultimately became so distressed by this situation that she took medical leave for psychological problems and underwent cognitive testing to rule out Alzheimer’s disease.<sup>72</sup> As I discuss in future chapters, even by her second interview Cindy had lost a sense of who she was – her identity – and was struggling to find a new identity.

A similar situation occurred with Minnie, a single 63-year-old white former staff editor at a prominent journal, who had been financially self-sufficient all her life. Minnie had pursued a career and had never married. She was highly

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<sup>71</sup> Because Cindy no longer felt like she was the person she used to be (hotel executive) this also reflects a temporal consistency discrepancy (described in the following section). Although they are conceptually distinct, identity discrepancy types often overlapped or co-occurred.

<sup>72</sup> After her boss’ feedback, Cindy believed she might be in the early stages of Alzheimer’s because of her age. She had not worried about this when she had worked for her previous boss. Cindy’s tests for cognitive decline revealed that she was normal or above normal on every cognitive dimension they tested. She had a hard time believing the results. I discuss this in Chapter Seven and relate it to Cindy’s inability to sustain her identity as a hotel executive because she believed that identity was “for young people.”

experienced, having worked in her field for fifteen years, and for this particular employer for one-and-a-half years. Her severance package had run out shortly before I first interviewed her, and she was paying her mortgage and other bills with her unemployment check and savings. She had recently cashed in one of her two CDs and was down to the last \$500 of it. Although she had planned to remodel her kitchen, she had postponed it and although she knew she would have to cash in her second CD, she was distressed by the thought of doing so. Although she was still relatively financially comfortable, she could see a looming financial crisis if she did not find employment in the next few months.

Minnie looks like the stereotypical grandmother: her dark gray hair is pinned back smoothly over the top of her head by an antique-looking pewter barrette, and her dated look could have been more fashionable in the 1980s. She wears an ankle-length black cotton skirt printed with dark purple and green flowers, a dark purple cotton scoopneck shirt, and dark hunter green woven leather flats. She wears oval orange-gold framed wire rim glasses. Minnie spoke quietly, used few words, and often looked down much of the time. Throughout the interview, she seemed depressed, but occasionally smiled and laughed during the interview.

Minnie's story of job loss echoes a theme I heard often throughout my interviews. Shortly after being hired by her most recent employer, Minnie had gotten a new, much younger boss who gave her consistently negative feedback about her performance as an editor. During her first interview, Minnie described the distress she felt after her new boss chastised her for making two, relatively minor, correctable errors:

And at that point, we had a long talk and she said, you know, “I can’t be responsible for your work as well as my work. I don’t wanna have to go behind you, check you, have somebody else goin’ behind you. And there can’t be any more mistakes.”...I was so tense and so stressed out that I started having episodes of rapid heartbeat at night...And I started to get anxiety medication...and an antidepressant...She said “This just isn’t working for me... I think we need to go talk to Dawn, who’s the head of HR, and see what the options are.”... She did say...that she just didn’t feel that she could have confidence in my work...[Minnie, 63-year-old white former staff editor, first interview, unemployed two months]

The feedback Minnie got from her boss influenced her own identity as an editor and worker, and led to distress. When I ask Minnie to describe the hardest part of job loss, she answers by describing its effect on her identity, noting that she is no longer confident in her identity as a worker:

I think doubting myself. Having come to doubt myself and to feel...uncertain about my ability, not just as an editor but as an effective worker. [Minnie, first interview]

Participants experienced identity-based distress after getting feedback from bosses indicating that they were poor employees. Because this feedback preceded job loss, participants often felt a “one-two punch” of messages – first, the poor feedback; then the job loss - that indicated they were not the employee they had thought they were. This left participants feeling depressed, anxious, and even physically ill. I now move to describe a second type of identity discrepancy triggered by job loss – the *temporal consistency discrepancy*.

### **Temporal Consistency Discrepancies**

With *temporal consistency discrepancies*, participants indicated that they no longer felt like the same person they had been before their job loss, and that this was distressing. In essence, participants reported a disruption in their sense of self across time – that they were no longer the same person, “felt like a different person,” or had seen

themselves in terms of their careers, but could no longer do so after job loss (or during the last few months of their jobs, when things were going wrong).<sup>73 74</sup>

For example, in Charlotte's case, her boss ultimately fired her from her CFO position and reassigned her to work on "special projects." Charlotte saw this new "special projects" role as inconsistent with her identity as a CFO. This produced enough identity discomfort for her to chose to leave the organization:<sup>75</sup>

I said, "I'm not gonna take that [job] because that's not my job. That's not I was trained for. I am a CFO. I'm the CFO here. That's my job. Let's negotiate my exit. And that's what we did. [Charlotte, first interview]

Charlotte's distress at work was related to the mismatch between her identity as a CFO and the meaning of that same role for her new boss. She was not able to be the person that her boss wanted her to be because her identity as a CFO was very different from what her boss defined as the meaning of CFO. In other words, she would not have been able to perform her job in the way required by her boss and still feel like the same person she had always been – even the thought of doing so was highly distressing:

[W]hat I thought being a CFO meant was different from what the current executive director thought...She just had a different idea...At first I thought I couldn't be who she wanted me to be and I think at the end I realized that I didn't want to be that person...I don't think that's me and I don't want to be that person...[I]t just was never gonna work. [Charlotte, first interview]

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<sup>73</sup> Not all reports of temporal consistency discrepancies were negative. Some participants mentioned that the new person they had become was better than the old person they had been, or that they had changed for the better.

<sup>74</sup> Given that temporal consistency discrepancies were often distressing, it is logical that the flip side of this phenomenon - maintaining a consistent identity by *sustaining* one's identity as an employee - might reduce distress. Results supported this idea (see Chapter Six on "sustaining").

<sup>75</sup> Although Charlotte's job loss is technically voluntary, she perceived it as involuntary. It is similar to a few other participants' experiences of job loss in that her resignation was effectively forced, despite the supposed "mutual severance agreement" of which some participants spoke.

Lorna, a 51-year-old African-American who had worked in media as a quality control supervisor for 28 years, also felt like she was not the same person she had been before she lost her job. After about a two-year period of negative feedback, Lorna noticed that other employees were getting their annual performance evaluations and she was not. For about a week, her boss put off Lorna's questions about when her evaluation would occur. By the end of the week, she was called into the vice president's office and fired. Lorna felt angry about being fired, but was also distressed that she no longer felt like the person she had once been.

Lorna lived with her husband and two adult children in their single-family home. Her 6-month-long severance package had run out just before I interviewed her the first time. Although Lorna used to routinely go on major shopping sprees on pay day, she had sharply cut back on shopping and eating out. Lorna was keenly aware of the financial impact of job loss. For example, her daughter would now attend a public state school and live at home even though she had initially planned to go to a private university. Even though Lorna's husband was still employed, his income was lower than Lorna's had been, and they had always needed two incomes to make ends meet. Lorna and her husband were struggling financially, and were between one to four months behind on their mortgage at any given time since Lorna's job loss.

As I sit with Lorna in a public library, she is dressed casually in jeans, a yellow t-shirt with a map of France on it, and dark brown loafers. Her black closely-cropped hair is graying at the temples. She is of average height, has an apple-shaped body type, and light brown skin. Her large eyes and full Cupid's bow lips make Lorna appear surprised. At her second interview Lorna has been without work for eight-and-a-half months. She

is talkative, but speaks very slowly. She is mostly upbeat, but her mood fluctuates widely from happy to angry to pensive depending on what she is discussing. She reports that her work in media had made her feel important, but that now that she had lost her job she no longer feels like the same person anymore, has lost her part of her identity, and no longer feels important, and that this hurts her emotionally:

I think not bein' at JCC, kinda lost my whole music [media] identity...It made me somebody. It made me somebody important. It made me – there was a time I could walk in a room, especially with my kids and their friend [sic]. I started talkin' about it, everybody'd be quiet and listen to what I had to say... I was in the elevator [at work] one day...and these three or four guys were gettin' off and they kinda scared me cause they looked like a buncha thugs. And [my son] was like “Mom, that was Big Rappa and his boys. Aren't you excited?”... Now I don't have it anymore. I'm just like the average person, readin' about it or watchin' it on TV. I don't have that front-line exposure anymore. So that, that kinda hurts. It hurts...[N]ow it's all gone. [Lorna; 51-year-old African-American former quality control supervisor; unemployed eight-and-a-half months; second interview]

Participants experienced identity-based distress after losing their jobs because they felt like different people than they had been before. Sometimes this made them feel that they were no longer important; other times they just felt “different” from the person they had been before and felt distressed by this. I now discuss the third type of identity discrepancy triggered by job loss – the *status consistency discrepancy*.

### **Status Consistency Discrepancies**

With *status consistency discrepancies*, participants indicated that being unemployed or underemployed was not consistent with aspects of their identities connected to status, such as gender or age. For example, many men reported that being unemployed often meant that they could not fulfill their definition of being a “man” – that of breadwinner.

Saul, a 48-year-old African-American, and his family had had a rough time regarding employment and finances for several years. Although he and his wife previously owned a large and expensive home in an upper-middle class suburb and had run their own financial services company for six years, they ultimately lost their business as a result of the housing bust in 2007. They tried to salvage it by taking out a home equity loan, but were unsuccessful and then lost their home as well. Although Saul had found progressively lower-level work in finance, he also was laid off from each company for whom he worked as the economy continued to struggle. Saul was the sole breadwinner at the time of his first interview and he, his wife, and his three children were living in an apartment.

Saul's family had cut back sharply on expenses, including removing their children from private school and denying the children the clothing and gadgets they requested. Although Saul said he had previously spoiled his children with any purchase they wanted, he now doled out a small amount of cash to them at the start of the week and handed them McDonald's coupons to use when buying their afternoon snacks. Saul had been unemployed for six months, and he was currently underemployed. He had just begun working as an exterminator – a job he had pursued for a full month before being hired – a few weeks before I interviewed him.

Saul, a jovial and gentle man with a large six-foot frame and a bald head, wears dark khaki “business casual” pants, worn-looking medium-brown leather loafers with tassels, and a medium-gray short-sleeved button-down shirt splashed with colorful geometric shapes. Gold wire-rimmed glasses frame his dark brown eyes. As we sit at a small square wooden table underneath the oak trees on a cool, slightly cloudy day, Saul

cries periodically during our discussion as he discusses what it means to him to be a man. He explains to me that job loss was “crushing” for him because it conflicted with who he believed (and perhaps others believe) he should be as a man – a breadwinner:

I think our jobs become kind of what we are because at least in the past [men have] been the breadwinners and...you’re expected to be the breadwinner and do what it takes. So I guess you just take on the job as your identity... And I think with all the transitions, with jobs coming and going, and you put your identity there and then it gets crushed... [Saul, 48-year-old African-American former senior mortgage banker and business owner; unemployed six months; currently underemployed for several weeks as an exterminator; first interview]

In essence, Saul was concerned that he had failed in his breadwinner role. Saul mentioned that although recently he had felt hopeful and happy, not long ago his job loss had left him feeling like a failure and that had been in deep despair:

I was actually depressed and the kids saw that and it was not good...[I]t was just the reality that I lost my job. That’s never happened to me before. It usually happens to other people around me, but never me...[M]y wife was really concerned because she felt like I needed to talk to somebody...She endured a really, really tough period and I appreciate her being there for me because she had a right to divorce me. I mean, really that’s how bad I really was. I was really in bad shape...I got to the point where (clears throat) I didn’t really wanna do anything at all. I didn’t wanna even be around the kids... I just wanted to be alone, felt like a failure. I won’t say that suicide came to my mind but I thought boy, I’d rather not be here. [Saul, first interview]<sup>76</sup>

Another participant, Amber, relates that it bothers her that her role as an unemployed person is inconsistent with her identity as a 30-year-old. Amber, an impish-looking 30-year-old single white woman who lives in her parents’ basement with her unemployed fiancé, wears her wavy dark brown hair in a 1960s hippie style – all one length, parted in the middle, and hanging to her waist. She has large pouty lips and dark brown eyes, which peer through black oval plastic-framed glasses. She gives off the impression of being “alternative” or a “hippie chick,” and reminds me of Janis Joplin.

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<sup>76</sup> Although Saul’s distress relates to his loss of identity as a breadwinner, Saul was also experiencing severe financial distress. This likely contributed to his depression and suicidal thoughts.

She gives off an impish vibe, frequently smirking and seeming to be on the verge of giggling. She wears a white short-sleeved t-shirt, dark blue jeans, and flats. A three-dimensional pewter flower necklace dangles just at the base of her throat from a small pewter chain.

Amber and her fiancé's funds were extremely limited after her fiancé's job loss. They could no longer pay their bills and moved in with Amber's parents. After Amber also lost her job her parents were livid, especially when they found out that she had fallen behind on a loan for which they had co-signed. Her parents had also taken on Amber's medical expenses, including her insulin, and often made thinly veiled comments expressing their resentment about this. Finally, despite the dire financial situation, Amber's parents gave she and her fiancé a deadline by which they had to move out, whether or not they had employment, which was highly stressful for Amber.

Amber's job loss had come suddenly and had surprised her. Amber had been very unhappy at her workplace where she had been a reporter for the past three years. Her boss had warned her that her performance was slipping, but subsequently had said she was doing fine. She was surprised, then, several months later when she was given two weeks' notice to find another job.

During her first interview, just two weeks after her job loss, we sit facing one another in chairs in my office, and Amber's moods swing wildly from hostile to giddy. She sits with one leg crossed over the other, hands clasped together in her lap, and tells me that being 30 meant she should be self-sufficient, and being unemployed meant she could not do so, which was "depressing":

I'm 30 years old. By this time, I would think I'd be able to take care of myself and that I'd be able to at least make enough to support myself. The fact that I can't is just really,

really depressing...I feel like I haven't really launched anything of myself. You know? Other people can say "my apartment." I can't. I can say "my dad's basement."...[O]ver time it just sort of degrades your self-esteem. [Amber, 30-year-old white former staff editor/reporter; lost job two weeks ago; first interview]

Amber's degraded self-esteem did not come solely from being unemployed, but from the mismatch of her "30-year-old" identity and her "unemployed" role. The meanings and expectations of these roles and identities conflicted and produced distress. Participants reported that mismatches between the "unemployed" role and identities based on age, gender, and education caused distress.

### **Disconfirming Evidence: Participants without Identity-Based Distress**

Not all participants experienced identity-based distress.<sup>77</sup> In fact, some participants specifically stated that they did not suffer from distress about their identities.<sup>78</sup>

Theo, a 60-year-old divorced white man who lost his job as a computer programmer two-and-a-half months before his first interview, looks like a casually-dressed short-bearded Santa Claus and self-identifies as a "hippie." He sports long white hair pulled into a bun at the back of his head, has a pot belly, and wears an orange t-shirt, khaki shorts, and black sandals. Some of his beliefs are eccentric, bordering on delusional. He says he struggled for many years with anger issues and borderline personality disorder.

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<sup>77</sup> At the screening for study participation, all participants stated that their work identities were moderately to highly important to them either today, when they had been employed in their last job, or both. However, this does not on its own imply that one will suffer identity-based distress. When identity-based distress is the focus of a study, one must select participants who identify or identified with the lost role. Otherwise, we would not expect to observe any identity-related effects of the role loss.

<sup>78</sup> This is not to say that they did not suffer any distress. Even participants who did not experience identity-based distress suffered from distress related to the job loss in other ways (e.g., financial, feeling bored, etc.).

Although Theo did not receive a severance package he had only fallen behind on some minor bills. He had grown up in a wealthy area, but now lived in a small working-class town. He covered his mortgage with the “generous monthly gift” his elderly wealthy mother had always given him (and continued to give him). He lived alone and described his home as unclean and in disarray, which had resulted in extreme displeasure from his girlfriend.

Despite Theo’s personal and financial struggles, he is very talkative and positive, and seems mostly rational, calm, and happy when discussing his job loss. Theo defined himself as a learner, so as long as he continued to learn and think – with or without a job – he maintained his identities and his happiness:

I don’t worry about [the job loss]. I don’t.. feel bad about it. I don’t say “Oh, I’m a bad engineer. They fired me.” (laughs heartily)...I think of myself primarily as a learner... and those roles haven’t changed at all...So anyway I have so many other interests and projects on the fire, good ideas in my notebook (sniffs), being out of work is just a blip...I have a pretty strong, pretty solid core of my identity and I know who I am. I’m glad I am who I am. [Theo, 60-year-old white former software programmer, unemployed two-and-a-half months; first interview]

Currently underemployed part-time in accounting, Norman, a tall, slender 51-year-old married white man with two teenage children who looks like a young John Kerry, is wearing a brown leather jacket, jeans, and sneakers. He had lost his job as a financial manager four-and-a-half months ago.

Norman and his family own a house in an upper-middle-class suburb. Although Norman has eliminated any spending on hobbies, they have largely been able to sustain their standard of living, including sending their oldest son to college. Norman’s 3-month severance package and part-time job, as well as his wife’s substantial income, help them continue to live as an upper-middle-class family.

Norman speaks quickly and fidgets throughout the interview as he emphasizes the separation between his job and his identities:

ME: [D]o you feel like the job loss has affected your identity in any way, or not?

NORMAN: Um, no. Um..I thought..it would but no...[P]eople know you for your personality. You're not identified by your job. [Norman, 51-year-old white former financial manager, unemployed four-and-a-half months, first interview]

Connie, a 56-year-old African-American, lost her job as Director of Human Resources three months ago. Connie's comfortable and tomboyish style is reflected in her very closely-cropped graying hair, gray pageboy checkered men's cap, a camel-colored button-down low V-neck sweater with a thin yellow cotton Oxford button-down shirt underneath, faded jeans, and men's-style black loafers. She has ashy skin and somewhat hollowed cheeks.

Connie's economic situation is complex. She owns her own home in a part of the city that borders a violent and dangerous area and one that is rapidly gentrifying. She lives alone, having divorced many years ago, and is solely responsible for her mortgage. After hearing nothing back from one government program aimed at reducing her mortgage, she finally became involved with another government program that temporarily reduced her mortgage. Connie did not receive a severance package, and within six months of losing her job was one month away from exhausting all her savings. She received an unemployment check and worked three part-time jobs that paid close to minimum wage, but had spent all of her 401k funds and held \$8000 in credit card debt. Although she lamented that she didn't know how she would pay her mortgage, she had recently received a large inheritance after a relative passed away. This would certainly help her with her expenses, but she was reluctant to use it.

As we sit at a round table near a floor-to-ceiling window in a public library on a cold winter day, Connie tells me that her job alone does not define who she is:

I don't think that that two-year stint speaks to who I am and what I can do. I know that I bring a lotta value to the table to any company and I will not allow that to be.. me. I'm just not gonna allow it to be me. It's not who I am...[The job loss is] not gonna define who I am. [Connie, 56-year-old African-American former Director of Human Resources, unemployed three months, first interview]

Over one-third (38 percent) of participants who did not experience identity-based distress generally had a strong sense of self regardless of their work status, and/or selected jobs that *reflected* their pre-existing identities (prior to taking the job).<sup>79</sup> This indicates that although their identities were to some degree grounded in their careers, they conceived of their identities as pre-existing their work roles, and so their identities would continue relatively undisturbed after job loss. Additionally, over one-third (38 percent) of participants who did not experience identity-based distress had strong positive views about their own uniqueness within society, had had very unique, non-conformist life paths that typically involved struggle against structural barriers and stereotypes, about which they were more concerned than their employee identities.

Participants who did not experience identity-based distress were also generally older (median = 57) than those who did experience it (median = 48), were more likely to be single, and were slightly more likely to have worked at their last job for a very short time (less than six months) than those who did experience it.<sup>80 81</sup> It is possible that,

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<sup>79</sup> This was only the case for one participant (6 percent of the sample) who experienced identity-based distress.

<sup>80</sup> The “not single” category includes people who were separated or having troubled relationships and “single” includes participants who were in a relationship or even were engaged, but not married. I therefore take this pattern with a grain of salt.

<sup>81</sup> The older participants who *did* experience identity-based distress tended to report very high levels of this distress.

being older, they were more able to conceive of a new identity as “retired.” However, only one of them (a 60-year-old white man) mentioned considering that possibility. The existence and extent of identity-based distress did not appear to relate to extent of financial strain or duration of unemployment (as measured at first interview).<sup>82</sup>

## Summary

Most participants experienced identity-based distress after job loss, and almost half of those who experienced it described it as being the hardest part of job loss. This distress manifested in emotional (e.g., depression, anxiety), physical (e.g., chest pain), and behavioral (e.g., drinking to excess) ways. Identity-based distress was triggered by discrepancies between one’s conception of his or her own identity and contradictory feedback from a boss (“verification discrepancies”); disruption in one’s sense of self across time (“temporal consistency discrepancies”); and discrepancies between one’s role as “unemployed” and one’s identity based on status (e.g., gender, age) (“status consistency discrepancies”).

Job loss stressed former employees’ identities, leaving them depressed, anxious, and with a sense of doubt as to who they were. Role loss that led to identity discrepancies was clearly a stressor that could become a chronic strain if not managed. But if identity discrepancies were the source of the distress, could identities also be used to cope with the distress? I now turn to one way in which identities were used as a coping strategy – subjectively *shifting* to (or more strongly emphasizing) an alternate

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<sup>82</sup> Half of the participants who did not report identity-based distress (50 percent), as well as about half of those who did (53 percent) report identity-based distress reported moderate to severe levels of financial strain. The median duration of unemployment for those who did not report identity-based distress was four months, as compared with three months for those who did report this distress.

(past, present, or future) role as one of their identities.

## CHAPTER FIVE: IDENTITY WORK: COPING WITH JOB LOSS DISTRESS BY SHIFTING TO "IDENTITY MAGNETS"

### **Introduction to Chapters Five through Seven**

In Chapters Five and Six I show how people perform identity work to cope with job loss distress. In Chapter Seven, I illustrate a path that may occur when one cannot or does not perform identity work. In Chapters Five through Seven, I also highlight the ways in which structural resources – particularly *social institutions* - expand or constrain one's identity work options. Social institutions are collections of interdependent roles "of strategic significance in the social system in question" (MacKinnon and Heise 2010:73) that structure our experiences and expectations (Stryker 1980). Examples of social institutions include family, church, the workplace, community organizations (e.g., volunteer organizations, sports teams), etc.<sup>83</sup>

The function of social institutions as a coping resource after job loss (and for involuntary role transitions more generally) has not been fully appreciated in the literature. Although existing literature explores the ways in which social institutions may provide social/emotional support (e.g., encouragement) or material support after job loss (Pearlin et al. 1981), it does not examine how these institutions may provide support by facilitating (or constraining) identity processes.

Additionally, existing research on involuntary role transitions largely neglects the role of social institutions, and instead views these transitions in individualistic and/or interactional terms (e.g., Duran-Aydintug 1995). Further, existing research tends to put

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<sup>83</sup> In my study, I focus primarily on meso-level social institutions because they are what emerged from the data. For example, I focus on a specific school as opposed the education system as a whole, or a church instead of religion overall.

forth stage models of involuntary role transitions (e.g., Drahota and Eitzen 1998) rather than examining structural factors that may condition one's identity process (and distress) across time. Finally, the bulk of existing research examines role transitions outcomes at one point in time (e.g., Riach and Loretto 2009), instead of exploring the process involved in making these transitions. By contrast, my current study combines symbolic interactionist and structural approaches to focuses on the role of social institutions, using longitudinal data to capture the transition process across time.

In Chapters Five through Seven, I show that after job loss social institutions may act as a resource by providing ready-made alternate roles from which to *shift* to (or more strongly emphasize) as one of our identities. These roles serve as “identity magnets” after job loss. My results show that when people incur identity-based distress after job loss, involvement in social institutions is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition to facilitate one type of identity work (i.e., “shifting”), is a necessary and sufficient condition to facilitate another type (i.e., “sustaining”) and, when involvement in social institutions is largely absent, one is unsuccessful in using identity work and often remains highly distressed (i.e., “identity void”).

I also show that social status, or “systems of stratification...such as those based on social and economic class, race and ethnicity, gender, and age” (Pearlin 1989:242), may operate in conjunction with social institutions to further expand or constrain identity work options after job loss. I will present evidence for this by highlighting the identities people do *not* choose, as well as those they do choose.

Finally, I show that time (future and past) influences the identity work process by serving as a reference point for potential new (or increasingly salient) identities and for maintaining identity consistency.

### **Roadmap of Chapter Five: Shifting**

In Chapter Four, I presented evidence to show that when job loss occurs, identity-based distress often ensues. However, people engage in identity work to try to alleviate this distress. In this chapter, I show how people may cope with threats to identity after job loss (and reduce distress) by performing one type of identity work: *shifting* to an alternate identity. For example, one may have always identified as a “worker” but after job loss may shift her identity more strongly toward “mother.” These shifts reduce their identity-based distress after job loss.

Additionally, in this chapter I will show that people do not choose their new identities randomly. Structural factors, such as involvement in social institutions (other than the workplace), as well as social statuses, expand or constrain their identity work options. Often, one begins to more strongly emphasize an identity from a role embedded in a social institution (e.g., family, religion) in which he or she is already involved – one that provides a role consistent with social and personal meanings of one’s statuses (e.g., gender, age). For example, a woman may easily shift from a strong identity emphasis on “worker” to emphasizing “mother” because it is much more socially acceptable for women than for men to be stay-at-home parents. The roles that are congruent with one’s statuses and are easily accessible because of one’s involvement in a specific social institution provide identity magnets to which one often shifts. In essence, people may be

most likely to shift toward emphasizing identities based in roles that are easily available and likely to be confirmed or verified as identities by others.

In addition to structural factors, time influences the identities to which participants shifted their emphases. Some participants revisited ideas they had held in the past about who they would someday be (e.g., “In my youth, I had really wanted to be a coach”); others looked to the future to determine who they would someday become (e.g., “I’m an exterminator right now, but someday I’ll be in management”). Of the twelve shifters, two chose former/past roles to emphasize as identities, seven chose current/pre-existing roles as identities, and six chose anticipated future roles as identities.<sup>84</sup> Finally, some participants hunkered down into and strengthened identification with roles that they believed they had performed poorly in the past, but now had the opportunity to perform well because they no longer had to focus on paid work.

Participants who shifted tended to have strong involvement in social institutions outside of the workplace prior to job loss, and had statuses that they believed were congruent with at least one of their institutional (other than their former workplace) roles. They shifted their emphases to new identities rooted in past, present, and future roles, and the salience of identities that could “fix” past (perceived) poor role performances appeared to increase.

### **Making the Shift**

Many participants who suffered identity-based distress after job loss shifted (or attempted to shift) to more strongly emphasize other roles as identities. They reported

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<sup>84</sup> This total is greater than 12 because some participants used identities based in multiple temporalities (e.g., both past and future).

that these shifts often reduced their identity-based distress. Of the 17 participants who reported identity-based distress after job loss, 12 (71 percent) used (or attempted to use) shifting to reduce their distress. Of these 12, 10 participants (83 percent) were successful in actually making the shift in their identity salience hierarchy and in reducing identity-based distress.

Shifters were typically strongly involved in social institutions other than the workplace (e.g., family) prior to job loss. They generally strengthened their emphases on identities from roles (e.g., mother) that existed within those institutions. However, involvement in social institutions did not appear to be sufficient to facilitate a shift. Shifters also tended to choose new identities that matched social expectations for their statuses (e.g., female). For example, a woman who lost her job might increase her identification as a “mother” (e.g., see herself more as a mother than as an employee) and this would reduce her identity-based distress. Yet men almost never shifted to “father,” perhaps because many men conceive of father as “breadwinner” (Townsend 2002).<sup>85</sup>

Charlotte, the former CFO I introduced in Chapter Four, had previously strongly identified as an employee. She told me that most of her life she had believed she was not a good mother, and instead seen herself as primarily a “worker”:

[Before I lost my job] I had this picture of myself that I was the worker and my husband was the caregiver and that that was just the way it was and thank God that that was the way it was because apparently I was very good at work and just really stinky at this parenting thing...I’m yelling at the children. I don’t have any patience. I guess I wasn’t cut out for this. I’m really glad that I have crafted my life in such a way that it is my husband who’s the primary caregiver of these children because if it were me, boy, this would be really messed up. [Charlotte, first interview]

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<sup>85</sup> Some men in the sample did not have young children or lived in a separate residence from their children. However, many men in the sample did have young children with whom they lived, but still did not shift. Additionally, some women who shifted to the mother identity did so despite their children being in their late teens or early twenties.

But after her job loss, Charlotte shifted her “entire identity” and self-presentation away from employee, and now saw herself as a mother - a role that was easily available to her because of her involvement in family (a social institution). She tells me that this has made her happier:

Charlotte 2.0 is all about strengths of my relationships with my family and friends...[N]ow my entire identity is wrapped up in being a mother...not because I’m a brilliant parent – [in “sidebar” voice] [but] I think I might be...I’m pretty sure that’s why I’m wearing the Silly Bandz all the time, so people will see me as a mother...I’m very casual now. I’m not like a working person... I present as a non-working (laughs) person... I’m so much happier now that I feel like I’m the person who I was supposed to be... [Charlotte, first interview]

Charlotte is consciously shifting her identity emphasis to reduce her distress. At her second interview, she reflects upon the mother identity that had become more salient months earlier and notes that she intentionally made this salience shift in order to manage her identity-based distress by deemphasizing her (unsuccessful) employee role and increasing her identification with a role at which she now feels successful:

I think I found comfort in that [mother] identity on those days when I wasn’t succeeding on my job search. It was okay, well, let’s make caterpillars out of egg cartons. I can be supermom. So I think I turned to it as a way to make me feel better and I found a lot of solace in being the kind of parent that I always wanted to be...When [the job search] wasn’t going well, I could ditch my job search and immerse myself in motherhood. [Charlotte, second interview]

For women with children living at home, involvement in the social institution of family made shifting their identity emphases to “mother” a very accessible identity work option. Lorna notes that she also consciously shifted emphasis to the mother identity to help reduce her distress:

I think that’s why I’ve taken on this whole role of housewife, mother thing and makin’ that my job since I don’t have a paying job...I try to take the things I do for my family and make that the job...[I]f I didn’t I’d probably go crazy. I wouldn’t have anything to do...[Being a mom] is hectic, but it takes my mind off of not having a job and being depressed. [Lorna, first interview]

However, at her first interview, Lorna still misses her media identity, and says that although being a mother reduces her distress by giving her something to do, it does not “make her happy”<sup>86</sup>:

[I’m] sometimes depressed because, I’m used to bein’ in broadcasting and that’s what I would like to do and I’d like to go back to it and get paid for it. So it’s kinda hard cause [being a mom] keeps me busy but it doesn’t make me happy. It’s not what I really wanna do. [Lorna, first interview]

By the time of her second interview, the effects of Lorna’s shift to “mother” went beyond helping her keep busy; it now facilitated an increasingly salient identity. Her identity as a mother had deepened and her distress had decreased because her newly salient identity “made her happy.”<sup>87</sup> By moving away from an unsuccessful employee identity that lowers her self-esteem and toward the mother identity at which she felt successful and important, she got out of the “funk” she had been in. Overall, she attributed her reduced distress to “staying on the mommy track”:<sup>88</sup>

[Being unemployed] sometimes makes me feel like I’m a less of a person, which is why I stay on the mommy track so intensely...because I’m not an employee anymore so I don’t have that...I really feel [being a mother] has been [very quietly] a positive aspect that has helped me kinda get outta that funk I was walkin’ around in... [Lorna, second interview]

Even when I presented Lorna with her previous quote about motherhood not making her happy, she held strongly to her strengthened identification as a mother. She

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<sup>86</sup> I coded for three separate effects of newly emphasized roles that could reduce distress – keeping busy, providing social support, and facilitating a new identity. The first two effects did not count as shifting because they do not, on their own, address identity-based distress. I only counted participants as shifters if they provided clear evidence of their new role facilitating a new identity.

<sup>87</sup> There were many stressors in Lorna’s life by the time of her second interview: she had now been unemployed for nine months; her severance package had run out; and she had had very few interviews. Although one might expect that she would be more distressed because of these factors, her mood had improved. This does not mean that financial strain and unemployment length were not distressing to Lorna – they were. However, she reported that her overall level of distress was lower than it had been at the first interview.

<sup>88</sup> Charlotte and Lorna were already mothers while employed. But they now *subjectively identify* more strongly with this role – they have made “mother” their primary identity – and by doing so reduced the identity-based distress connected with losing the employee role.

reacted to me with shock and told me that she now sees the mother identity as just as important as her old employee identity. She was adamant that not only does she identify as a mother, but that being one makes her happy:

LORNA: Well..I said that?...Oh my God.

ME: What are you thinkin' about..that you said that?

LORNA: Because, well, because it is me. It is me. And I'll always be a mom...I musta really been depressed that day...Bein' a mom is a real big deal to me and...right now that job is just as important as bein' an employee somewhere. So, you know, if I said that I must have really been down that day or somethin' was goin' on real negative with me, and I don't feel like that today. I don't. [Lorna, second interview]

### *A Note on Time and Shifting*

Time was also an important factor in identity work. One way in which this manifested was the selection of a new or more strongly emphasized identity that would allow participants to transform what they perceived as a past poorly-performed role into one that they performed well today. Charlotte and Lorna are examples of this. Recall that Charlotte had mentioned having been “really stinky at this parenting thing” in the past, but since her shift she now thinks she might be a “brilliant parent.” Lorna echoes this idea. Her identity shift allows her both to escape both the pain of losing her employee role and the threat to her employee identity, and to repair a past “poor performance” of her mother role. The memories of her attempts to balance the mother and employee roles are still fresh in her mind, even though these events occurred over a decade ago:

Well, workin' my way up, a lotta times I had to work nights...And I wouldn't be there to put my children to bed. I wouldn't be there to give 'em a bath or read 'em a story...I felt like, this is terrible...And sometimes I would go to sleep and they would get up and cut the light out and get back in bed and go to bed, and I'd wake up and I'd fallen asleep in their room...I'm supposed to be readin' them the bedtime story...I felt bad...[Today] I

felt like I wanted to give back to my kids and my husband for all those times that I've worked when they were little and couldn't necessarily go to the plays... So that's why I kinda threw myself into that and then I just enjoyed it... And like I said I wanna try to do it right. That I didn't used to do it the way I really wanted to do it cause I had to work. So now I feel I'm completing another phase of me because I've been given the opportunity to do it for six months. [Lorna, first interview]

After experiencing identity-based distress after job loss, Charlotte and Lorna both shifted their identities to more strongly emphasize roles that they had held even while employed – “mother.” Like most shifters, Charlotte and Lorna chose to more emphasize as identities existing roles that were available within social institutions in which they were already strongly involved – in their case, family. Also like most shifters, they chose to identify more strongly with a role that matched societal expectations for their female status – in other words, society expects and approves of women being mothers. Time was also important in selecting their identities to emphasize – they gravitated toward identities that would allow them to repair a perceived past poor role performance. Overall, participants who: 1) were strongly involved in social institutions; and 2) had an available role that matched expectations for their status tended to shift and usually reported that this reduced their identity-based distress.

#### *Beyond “Mother”: Shifts to Other Roles as Identities*

Participants shifted their identities toward a variety of roles beyond mother. Although men also selected new identities from roles within the social institutions in which they were involved, they almost never shifted to “father” as their most salient identity. They typically shifted to emphasize identities that were consistent with stereotypes about masculinity, such as involvement in sports or working with heavy machinery.

Marcus, a divorced 47-year-old African-American, lives alone in the house he owns. His teenage son visits him on weekends. He had worked as an operations director at a green technology company. He had lost his job after the boss consistently delayed paying employees and got investigated by a government agency. Marcus continued to come to work for several weeks after the paychecks stopped, hoping for a positive resolution, but once the boss abandoned the company and could no longer be found, Marcus left along with the rest of the employees.

Marcus, a slender but fit man of average height with dark brown eyes and a closely-cropped black mustache, is clad in a white pin-striped button down shirt, jeans, and a brown baseball cap. He reported minimal financial strain since job loss which he attributed to smart investing and saving habits throughout his life. He had received no severance pay, and was currently paying his bills by cashing in one of his CDs and by using his unemployment check. Although he used to shop frequently for clothing, and would take his son out to the movies and dinner, he had cut back on these expenses, instead renting a movie and cooking dinner at home.

Marcus seemed laid-back and calm, but also seemed to avoid discussing his emotions, instead focusing on facts. Speaking quietly, he tells me during his first interview that he had strongly identified with his job, and that he still does. He emphasized this by noting that his identity as an executive director would have been “off the charts” of my identity scale screening if I had asked him about it a year ago, and that it remains very high:

ME: [I] guess when we had talked over the phone I asked you something about a one-to-ten scale of how much you saw yourself as an executive director, and you said nine for then and for now...

MARCUS: Well, I woulda probably told you a 15 if you had asked me a year ago. [Marcus, 47-year-old African-American; former operations director at green technology company; unemployed seven months; first interview]

At the first interview, Marcus reported having identity-based distress, noting his concern that he was no longer the provider that he saw as essential to being a man. At the first interview, Marcus was tentatively edging up to more strongly emphasizing his identity as a coach for underprivileged children, so the salience of this identity was increasing. This identity was based on a role within a social institution (volunteer organization/sports team) in which he was involved while still employed.

Marcus, like many other participants, went beyond using roles and identities that he currently held as he performed identity work; he looked to both the past and the future. In this example, Marcus used an identity rooted in the person he had “always wanted to be” in the past; this was based in the sports coach role. The more the salience of this identity as someone he could be in the future increased, the more his distress decreased. He noted that decades ago he had thought the coach identity was his true calling, and said that today being a coach helped reduce his distress:

[W]hat I’ve kind of thrown myself into - I do a lot of community work...I coach... basketball, and one of the teams I coach is in like, not a great area. And I kind of spend time tryin’ to mentor some of those kids. That kinda makes me feel better about stuff, that I’m able to do some stuff there...I guess my biggest thing is trying to figure out where I wanna go from here. You know, what do I really wanna do...I was an athlete in high school and in college...[W]hat I really wanted to do was to coach, and for a short period of time I taught, some years ago. I kinda got away from that because teachers don’t make a lot of money...[B]ut what was rewarding when I coach, that’s probably when I’m my most relaxed. [Marcus, first interview]

By the second interview, despite a full year of unemployment, Marcus also described his mood more positively. In contrast to his first interview, he was also much less concerned about his employment status and his identity as a manager and provider:

I've been great. I've been pretty light-hearted...and I'm almost surprised at the fact that I'm not concerned. It is my goal to find employment, but I'm not overly concerned about not working. [Marcus, second interview]

The salience of his manager and (to some degree) provider identities decreased somewhat, and his coach identity became more salient. He had turned down at least one job offer, and had begun to shift his identity emphasis away from being a manager.<sup>89</sup>

[I]t was strange but while I was sitting there in the interviewing, I was like "This is what I'm supposed to be saying to try and get this job." My heart was not (laughing) in that interview. I was thinking "I don't know if this is really what I wanna do"...I almost felt like when I was a teenager or a kid when your parents want you to go somewhere. Like I remember having to go to my dad's boss' house and I really didn't wanna go. But we had to go. And it was like that. [Marcus, second interview]

By the second interview, Marcus's coach identity had become much more salient as illustrated by his noting that "all of a sudden" coaching had become much more important to him. He said that he was strongly considering (and pursuing) paid coaching jobs. He reported great joy from this "calling," and considered that perhaps he had really been meant to be a coach all along, that that was who he "really" was:

I coach basketball...[A]ctually, I really enjoy that. That's my passion anyway... I'm thinking maybe [coaching/mentoring is] my calling...And I don't know why that's all of a sudden important to me. Before it was like, yeah, okay. But now it really just makes me feel good...[I]t made me start to wonder, has my calling changed? Or maybe I was supposed to be doing this all along and I ignored it. [Marcus, second interview]

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<sup>89</sup> Marcus had previously rejected coaching as a line of paid work because he thought it would not also allow him to be a provider, which he thought was essential to being a man. At his second interview, he said that he realized with just a little contract work, he was providing, albeit at a lower level. He told me that a comment from his teenage son – that he didn't need material things, but just needed to spend time with his father – seemed to facilitate a release from some of the necessity to provide. Additionally, several parents had contacted Marcus and asked him specifically to mentor their kids, providing positive feedback ("advance verification") for this identity.

Marcus' shift into an increasingly salient coach identity, which was embedded in a social institution in which he had been involved while still employed, as well as in his past and possible future, reduced his identity-based distress. Notice that conceptions of time were also important to Marcus' identity shift. He revisited ideas he had held in the past about who he might like to be someday (e.g., coach) and superimposed this identity onto his near future as a possible self he would someday become.

Time was also a factor in Amber's (described in Chapter Four) shift. Just two weeks after Amber lost her job as a reporter, she began to shift to a future possible identity as a teacher, which she said was consistent with her past aspirations:

[O]ne of the things that I'm looking into is teaching abroad... I went to school originally to study education. I wanted to be a teacher...So that's my biggest thing and that was I think my original intent going to college was to get my certification. [Amber, first interview]

During her first interview, Amber seemed to increasingly emphasize a possible future teacher identity, and did not mention any desire to be a reporter again.<sup>90</sup>

However, by the time of her second interview she had found a new job as a reporter, embraced it as an increasingly salient identity, and had abandoned her possible future teacher identity, chalking those shifting attempts up to desperation:

I think I was grasping at straws when I said that...[N]ow that I'm in a different position that seems to have some possibilities I'd rather explore those...It still seems like a great, wonderful profession and I would love to be able to call myself a teacher...But considering my temperament and all the other things that I wanna do..it's just probably not a good fit for me...[W]hen I lost my job at Johnson County Weekly I don't think that I really thought I'd find another newspaper job. The fact that I have found another newspaper job I think is just the biggest point for me. Because I could see myself being very happy with a career in publishing... [Amber, second interview]

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<sup>90</sup> Amber did state that while she had been employed as a reporter, she had actually hoped to use that experience to continue her career as a reporter working on more challenging stories, instead of the "junk beat" she was covering in that position. This indicates that the reporter identity was, in fact, important to her before she lost her job.

With the reporter role once again firmly in hand, she felt free to re-embrace it as an identity. When I asked why she didn't mention wanting to go back into publishing during her first interview, she replied:

Because I don't think I..at that point, I didn't think I was going to. (laughs)...I didn't think that that was a possibility at that point. [Amber, second interview]

Many participants shifted to more strongly emphasize specific alternate identities after job loss. Most of these new identities were based in social institutions – family, sports/volunteer organization, and a (part-time) workplace – which provided existing potential role identities.<sup>91</sup> The identities into which they shifted were congruent with gender expectations – the “nurturing woman” and the “physically active” man. Additionally, conceptions of time – past, present, and future – played a role in participants' processes of reconceptualizing identity. I now explore more deeply the importance of status for shifting.

#### *A Note on Social Status and Shifting*

Shifters had several characteristics in common. They usually were strongly involved in social institutions other than the workplace (e.g., family) prior to job loss. Shifters also typically chose to emphasize identities from roles within those institutions; these roles were ones that they believed matched expectations for their statuses (e.g., gender, age, education level). For example, Charlotte and Lorna shifted to “mother” which matches expectations for a woman. Marcus shifted to “coach” which matches expectations for a man.

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<sup>91</sup> Amber is an exception to the typical pattern of shifters having strong connections to social institutions. Perhaps because Amber had no social institutions that provided her with an age-consistent role (as noted in Chapter Four), her shift was geared somewhat ambiguously toward the future and past rather than being centered on social institutions in the present. Once she had reestablished connections to the social institution of the workplace, she recentered her identity on a role within it – that of reporter.

Some participants, such as Charlotte, were highly aware that they were choosing to emphasize identities that matched expectations for their status. When I ask Charlotte what it is like for her as a woman without a job, she answers by describing how much easier it is for her to shift her identity more towards “parent” than it would be for most men (including her husband) because “mother” matches societal expectations for a woman:

I think it’s much easier...[W]hen I’m in that park with the kids during the day, they don’t see me as an unemployed person. But when [my husband] is in that park, I’m sure they think “Oh, did he take the day off to spend the day with his children?” And I just think that’s so much harder for him...[P]eople talk to me all of the time. And [my husband] says they never talk to him in the park. [Charlotte, first interview]

As Charlotte notes, others’ responses to one’s salient identities are important for making the process of strengthening the new identity “much easier.” One reason participants may have chosen to emphasize identities that matched their statuses may be that others tended to give positive, verifying feedback to them once they started enacting these identities. Lorna also notes the positive feedback she has received for strengthening her emphasis on the wife and mother identities:

I’m doin’ it and I’m not so bad at it. I mean, my husband likes it because there’s always dinner on the table...[M]y husband, I overheard him tellin’ some people, he said, “I enjoy having her there cause she cooks more.” [Lorna, first interview]

Whereas women often shifted to “mother” and/or “wife,” men shifted to identities based in roles that matched expectations for hegemonic masculinity, such as future “manager, executive, or entrepreneur,” “boat captain,” and “sports coach.”<sup>92</sup> Because almost all men in the study said that to be a father meant to be a provider, men may have had trouble with making a shift to “father.” But when men found other potential role

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<sup>92</sup> Other identities to which women shifted included “administrative assistant” and “school volunteer.”

identities that could express a “masculine” identity, they often shifted to them. Marcus tells me that although being a man means providing, it can also mean being a role model:

I mean, right now, for me, again, like I said, [being a man] means, you know, providing. I’m like Charles Barkley. I think it’s being a role model, you know, doing what’s right and sometimes in the face of adversity...contributing. Trying to make, you know, to help people and make the world a better place. [Marcus, first interview]

Recall that being a role model was exactly what he was doing in the role into which he had shifted his identity – volunteer basketball coach with underprivileged boys. Overall, participants shifted to strengthen role identities that were congruent with expectations for their statuses.

#### *Avoided Identities: When Does One Not Shift?*

Status also helped explain why some participants *avoided* shifting to particular new employment-related roles (and potential identities). Many did not want to incur a mismatch between new role identities and their statuses, which can produce distress (Norris 2011).

Janelle, a vibrant and talkative youthful-looking 39-year-old African-American woman who had been laid off after many years of working in media as an online programming manager, avoided specific types of identity shifts. Janelle, who keeps her sunglasses on throughout the outdoor interview, looks as if she just stepped out of a music video in her stylish military-print denim jacket with padded shoulders and a nipped-in waist, which she wears over a tight black scoopneck shirt. A thick black studded belt is wrapped around the waist of her black parachute pants (fitted from the knee down), and military-print slingback sandals with a four-inch heel that expose her

candy-pink painted toenails. Janelle said that being almost 40 meant that one should be “established”:

Forty is a milestone. Like I feel like you shouldn't be starting over. Like I feel like you should already be firmly where you're supposed to be at...It means, I guess..uh, getting old. Being mature. I guess bein' established. Um, and I feel like I'm not established. (Janelle, 39-year-old African-American, former online programming manager, unemployed nine months, second interview)

She then pointed out the mismatch between her age and a potential job that was offered to her - product demonstrator at a large box store:

I said what if I see somebody from my old job at [my potential new job at] Save-a-Buck? Am I gonna be like duckin' between the – Like “Oh, my God. It's really bad. I saw Janelle like handin' out hamburger patties.” ...[I]t was horrible. And I was like maybe if I was 20. Maybe if I was 25. But I'm 40. [Janelle, second interview]

The mismatch between her age and the product demonstrator role was strong enough to lead Janelle to avoid taking this type of job. This occurred despite the financial strain she was experiencing. Janelle's unemployment check barely covered her rent for which, as a single person living alone, she was solely responsible. Before her job loss she had dreamed of owning her own home, and had been saving for a down payment, but this money was now being used to pay her expenses and she told me she would never again dream of home ownership. She had not yet tapped into her retirement funds, and occasionally received small amounts of cash from her mother and boyfriend, both of whom lived in separate states. Her attempt to receive food stamps involved three in-person visits to the government agency, only to receive under \$20 per month in food stamps and a traffic ticket upon leaving.

Despite this financial strain, identity and status continued to make it difficult to accept particular types of work. Janelle noted that being African-American made it hard to accept “product demonstrator” as a new role or identity:

[B]ein' a minority...I'm very..sensitive to that. And I don't wanna get stuck.. in that box. You know what I mean? It's hard enough as it is. [Janelle, second interview]

Marsha also avoided potential roles and identities that could conflict with her status.<sup>93</sup> Marsha, a 41-year-old white divorced mother of two, seems friendly, but a little depressed. Her wavy dark-brown shoulder-length hair appears freshly styled and recently dyed dark red, with long waves in loose spirals around her face. A black short-sleeved soft cotton shirt and khaki slacks skim her heavy frame. She has smooth pale skin and wears brick red lipstick. Before she lost her job, she worked as a middle manager in public safety. Marsha said she was uncomfortable with the mismatch between another one of her statuses (Christian) and potential job-related roles or identities (car salesman):

...I can never be a used [car] salesman or misrepresent anything because I'm excessively honest and Christian, and so it cuts a lot of jobs out of my realm...I guess if you were to categorize your priorities in your life ...being a Christian is really at the top of my list... [Marsha, 41-year-old white female, former middle manager in public safety, unemployed one month, first interview]

Participants looked toward social institutions in which they were strongly involved before job loss, and from them chose to emphasize identities based on roles (e.g., mother) that matched the social and personal meanings of their statuses. In contrast, participants avoided shifting their identities into roles that could create a mismatch with the meanings of their statuses.

### **Disconfirming Evidence: Those Who Could Easily Shift, but Did Not**

A few participants who had identity-based distress did not shift to emphasize other identities, even though they were strongly involved in social institutions other than the workplace, and those institutions contained roles that matched their statuses.

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<sup>93</sup> This discomfort with a mismatch occurred despite Marsha having worked in a traditionally male field.

Corey, a 46-year-old African-American woman and former director of an affirmative action program, wears medium-blue jeans, flat shoes, and a light-pink cotton-ribbed V-neck shirt with a wrap waist. Her hair is styled in a short bob, she wears a little black eyeliner and frosted pink lip gloss to enhance her creamy medium-brown skin, and she seems optimistic, thoughtful, and forthcoming. She tells me her story of receiving negative feedback from her boss and resistance to the initiatives she tried to put into place, which ultimately led to her forced resignation.

At her first interview, Corey discusses her involvement in a volunteer organization as a mentor to underprivileged girls – a role certainly congruent with the nurturance expected of a woman.<sup>94</sup> However, she does not strengthen her subjective sense of *identity* associated with any of these roles. She reported that these things made her feel better because she was helping someone else, but did *not* report that her distress had anything to do with a new *identity*.<sup>95</sup>

...[T]hat's another thing that I did to get out of that mode. Help somebody else. It makes you feel better...I love working with the young girls. I work with high-risk youth and helping them with life skills and life choices...[Corey, 46-year-old African-American female, former director of affirmative action, unemployed two-and-a-half months; first interview]

...I think it helped me not sit up and be feelin' sorry for myself to be able to go ahead and remember that even though you're in the situation you can go out and help somebody else. I think that helped keep me sane. [Corey, second interview]

Corey discusses her mentoring in terms of involvement in roles and helping others, not in terms of a change in *who* she is (i.e., identity). Corey could have shifted to

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<sup>94</sup> Corey herself said that to be a “good woman” meant to be nurturing.

<sup>95</sup> Note the similarities between Corey and Lorna (at her first interview), who had reported that being a mom “kept her busy, but didn’t make her happy.” Then note the contrast between Corey and Lorna (at her second interview) when she reported that “being a mom made her happy” (she had shifted to mother at her new identity).

emphasize as part of her identity the role she already inhabited (mentor) in the social institution in which she was involved (volunteer organization), and received social approval for doing so. However, she did not make this shift. Instead, helping others (and getting support from her friends who continually reaffirmed that the job loss was not her fault) reduced her distress.<sup>96</sup> In essence, they may have helped verify her employee identity after it had been threatened by job loss, thus reducing her need to shift.

Stanley, an easy-going 34-year-old African-American male who seemed eager to tell his story, sports black hair, mustache and goatee, all closely-cropped. He wears a yellow short-sleeved Ralph Lauren Polo shirt with thin blue stripes, black cotton canvas business pants, and white Nike sneakers. He has a softness or innocence to his face, and could pass for being in his twenties, a physically fit frame of about 5'10", and a friendly demeanor.

Stanley was laid off from his job as an information technology (IT) specialist for a government contractor when the company's contract was not renewed. Despite Stanley's long-standing strong involvement in the meso-level social institution of a tennis team (congruent with masculinity expectations), he did not shift to emphasize his "tennis player" identity. Playing the sport, rather than its identity implications, helped relieve his distress, albeit temporarily:

I try to do my best to try to kinda deal with [job loss distress]...[Y]ou run around and the only thing you're really thinkin' about is hitting the next ball that's coming towards you...[M]y mood has been pretty down lately. And even in the moments where I feel like, I feel okay, or like, goin' out and bashin' a tennis ball around for [an] hour, so it

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<sup>96</sup> Several participants mentioned the distress-reducing effect of helping others. However, most of them noted that helping others and shifting identities were conceptually separate, and had distinct effects on distress reduction. For those who shifted, the shift itself appeared to kick distress reduction into high gear, even when the effect of helping others had already been helping to some degree. Although it is clear that other strategies, such as keeping busy and helping others reduce distress after job loss, my findings that the effects were conceptually separate and had separate effects bolsters my position that identity-based distress is best reduced by using identity-based strategies.

feels pretty good. But then after it's done, it's like, well, gee, I don't have a job. [Stanley, 34-year-old African-American male, former IT specialist, unemployed one month, first interview]

Stanley's involvement with tennis teams helped relieve his distress, but only temporarily, perhaps through distraction. However, perhaps because he did not shift his identity emphasis to this (or another) role, the distress-reducing effects of this activity were short lived.

Only three of the seventeen participants (18 percent) with identity-based distress had the conditions (social institutions, plus congruence between status and role) that could facilitate shifting, but did not shift. It may be that participants who did not shift when conditions were ripe for them to do so simply were not experiencing a high enough level of identity-based distress for a long enough time. For example, although Corey and Stanley both expressed identity-based distress, they compartmentalized it (perhaps reducing its effects) and the peak of this type of distress was short-lived.

## **Summary**

Most participants who experienced identity-based distress coped with it (or tried to cope with it) by shifting to emphasize non-employee identities as higher in their identity salience hierarchy. But they did not do so randomly; social institutions were critical to the process. The identities that became more salient were typically deeply embedded in other social institutions (e.g., family) that provided readily-available roles within those institutions.<sup>97</sup> These "ready-made" roles served as magnets, providing

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<sup>97</sup> The social institutions and identities were not limited to the present, but could be rooted in the past or anticipated future as well.

potential new (or existing) identities to which to participants could shift their emphases. For example, Charlotte shifted to emphasize a role identity within the family (“mother”), and Marcus shifted to emphasize a role identity within a sports team/volunteer organization (“coach”).

Shifters also tended to emphasize role identities that they believed matched expectations for their statuses (e.g., gender, age) and avoided identities that could create a mismatch. For example, Charlotte and Lorna shifted to more strongly emphasize the “mother” identity, which is consistent with societal expectations for a woman. And Janelle did not enter the “product demonstrator” role or identity because she saw it as inconsistent with the meaning of her age.

In addition to structural factors, time influenced the identities to which participants shifted. Some participants revisited ideas they had held in the past about who they would someday be; others looked to the future to determine who they would someday become. And some participants hunkered down into identities that they believed they had performed poorly in the past, but now had the opportunity to perform well because they no longer had to focus on paid work. In short, those identities became more salient.

Participants who did not have social institutions from which they could select a new or more strongly-emphasized identity or for whom the potential identities did not match social expectations for their statuses were unlikely to shift (or occasionally would shift to possible future and/or past identities, as illustrated by Amber). This may be because identities often require verifying feedback from others for their maintenance (Burke and Stets 2009), and we may be more likely to get that feedback if we are meeting

societal expectations. Recall that all 10 of the 10 successful shifters (100 percent) were strongly involved in social institutions (as compared with 4 of the 6 participants (67 percent) who had identity-based distress and who did not shift).<sup>98</sup> Had participants not already been strongly involved in social institutions – family, community sports team, sailing/towing community – the roles into which they shifted their identities perhaps would not have been as readily available. Additionally, 5 of the 10 participants (50 percent) who successfully shifted were strongly involved in social institutions that *also* provided status-congruent roles (as compared with 2 of the 17 participants (12 percent) who had identity-based distress and who did not shift).

The combination of strong involvement in social institutions and available status-congruent roles appeared to provide ideal conditions for new (and increasingly salient) identities to emerge and flourish.<sup>99</sup> Participants who were not strongly embedded in social institutions, or were embedded in social institutions that *did not* provide them with status-congruent roles, typically experienced different paths (instead of shifting) in their identity work process after job loss. In Chapter Six, I explore one of these paths – that of sustaining the sense of self as an employee.

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<sup>98</sup> Although 12 participants attempted to shift, only 10 did so successfully.

<sup>99</sup> The process of shifting is often conscious and multi-faceted. People are often aware that they are intentionally shifting in an attempt to cope with identity loss. The “new” identities they selected often also tended to help them repair what they believe were past “poorly-performed” identities. For example, a woman who had formerly felt like she had previously been a “bad mother” could now be a “good mother.” In essence, the identities they chose could lessen distress in two ways: by helping them find a new identity and, as a side benefit, by helping them “fix” a former identity. However, sometimes these shifts introduced new challenges to identity, creating ambivalence and, at times, reintroducing some distress. See the case of Paul in Chapter Six for an illustration of this phenomenon.

## CHAPTER SIX: IDENTITY WORK: COPING WITH JOB LOSS DISTRESS BY SUBJECTIVELY SUSTAINING THE “EMPLOYEE” IDENTITY

In Chapter Five, I presented data to show that most participants who reported experiencing identity-based distress after job loss shifted or tried to shift to more strongly emphasize an alternate identity to cope with that distress. In this chapter, I show how people may use a second identity work strategy to reduce that distress: subjectively *sustaining* one’s identity as an employee, despite awareness that one is (objectively) unemployed. For example, one may reframe existing hobbies as employment, effectively transforming a “hobbyist” role into an “entrepreneur” identity.

### **Roadmap of Chapter Six: Sustaining**

As in Chapter Five, this chapter on subjectively sustaining the employee identity will show that macrostructural factors – social institutions and statuses – expanded or constrained identity work options. Participants who sustained were strongly involved in non-workplace social institutions – most notably family - prior to job loss. But these institutions typically did *not* provide roles congruent with their statuses. For example, being unemployed was not congruent with being male because of male/father breadwinning expectations, making it difficult to shift emphasis towards a “father” identity without also seeing oneself as an employee.

Social institutions expanded or constrained participants’ identity work options in three ways. First, the institutions with which they were involved typically supplied participants with a) settings and activities that were “similar enough” to their former workplace or job; and b) feedback from others that they were some type of “employee.” These things helped sustain the highly salient employee identity. For example,

participation in a volunteer organization may elicit comments from others that one is “like a real employee,” thus helping one believe it is so.

Second, participants who had been strongly involved in family as the sole or primary breadwinner before job loss (or self-identified as such), found the breadwinner identity challenged once he or she became unemployed. This left someone who had once been the breadwinner and saw that as one of his or her most salient identities with strong incentive to continue identifying strongly as such.

Third, dyadic microstructural factors were important to the likelihood of sustaining. Specifically, ongoing involvement in vitriolic romantic relationships prior to (and after) job loss was common among sustainers. It may be that if arguments within a relationship are very intense, one may worry that the relationship (and thus the partner or spouse identity) may end. Because identities involving work and romance may be highly salient, an unemployed person in the above situation may try very hard to sustain the employee identity, so as not to simultaneously lose two important identities at once.

Finally, time influenced the strategy of sustaining. Participants appeared to try to maintain a sense of temporal consistency in their identities (e.g., “Even though I’m out of work, when I market goods online I still feel like an employee.”)

### **Making It Last: Subjectively Sustaining the “Employee” Identity**

The second most common identity work strategy among participants was subjectively sustaining one’s “employee” identity regardless of being objectively unemployed. Sustainers reported that this strategy reduced their identity-based distress. Of the 17 participants who reported identity-based distress after job loss, 11 (65 percent)

used (or attempted to use) sustaining to reduce their distress. Of these 11, 9 (82 percent) were successful in sustaining their employee identities. The total number of participants that used all strategies combined is greater than 17 because some participants used (or tried to use) multiple identity work strategies; one strategy typically emerged as the primary and successful strategy.

*“Similar Enough”: Social Institutions Expanding Options*

Involvement in social institutions (prior to job loss) that provided roles, activities, and/or settings that were “similar enough” to one’s former job helped participants sustain their highly-salient identities as employees, and sometimes also made available feedback that verified these identities.

Marsha (described in Chapter Five) is one example of this. After a six-month political battle with both a boss and a disgruntled subordinate, Marsha was suddenly called into a meeting and given a distressing ultimatum – resign immediately with a severance package or be fired. Marsha, a divorced custodial mother of two teenage children, was the sole breadwinner for her family (although her ex-husband did contribute child support). She owned her own home in a working-class area, and it was in need of repair. Although she had been making ends meet and was able to send her daughter to community college, she had never had much to spare after expenses were met, and was now withdrawing from the minimal amount she had saved for retirement in order to pay bills. But after job loss she struggled to pay the mortgage, buy food, and procure clothing for her children. Although she was on public assistance, and friends and

family helped her with cash where they could, she appeared to stifle tears as she discussed using her daughter's college financial aid money to help pay bills.

Despite the severe financial strain Marsha was experiencing, a threatened employee identity was also a major concern for her. Marsha told me that her distress was lower when she was involved with social institutions that were similar enough to her old job that they helped her sustain the employee identity. Her EMT class provided her with a role and potential identity similar to her former "public safety employee" identity; increasing her emphasis on it helped her maintain the highly salient employee identity and feel positive because "it was like I was still working." But after that class ended, she became depressed:

I would say that I've probably been depressed...[Recently] I spent probably three days in bed probably just not motivated to go do anything...[A]t the time of the...forced resignation I was in the middle of an EMT class...[T]hat was good because it gave me a transition. [I]t was like I was still working. And then once I was out of [the EMT class] the first week I really didn't know what I was gonna do. [Marsha, first interview]

Marsha became depressed not right after being fired, but after the end of the activity – EMT class - that helped her sustain her highly salient employee identity.<sup>100</sup> Her distress increases or decreases within fairly short time periods depending on her involvement in roles similar to her old job. Today she is involved with another EMT volunteer institution, is sustaining her identity as an employee, and is feeling more like herself again:

Now I'm what they call an intern...where you have to get field training hours with another EMT...I've already done four this week. This is my first week back after the training and I'll probably go spend an overnight...I think that's getting me back to me. [Marsha, first interview]

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<sup>100</sup> Marsha also told me that her children were with their father for those three days and that being alone may have contributed to her depression.

At her second interview, Marsha is still sustaining her identity as an employee by taking college courses related to her former line of work. Her ability to sustain her salient work-related identity rests upon continued involvement in social institutions that support it. Marsha is highly distressed by the knowledge that she must soon leave her role as a criminal justice student, a role that has allowed her to subjectively continue to be the person she used to be when she had worked in her field.<sup>101</sup> She uses powerful language to describe the dread she feels about “not being that person anymore,” and compares this feeling to what she went through once her EMT class ended (as discussed in her first interview). She has been happier while involved in a role that helps her sustain her employee identity, but she is already anticipating an increase in identity-based distress as she approaches the end of her class:

[W]hat I was experiencing after the EMT class [discussed in the first interview] is pretty similar to what I’m comin’ up on here towards Christmas...[It’s] ominous...It’s really quite awful actually...I would love to work in my field...[I]t’s hard not to be that person anymore... [Marsha; second interview]

Similarly, Ken, a married 57-year-old white former Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of a non-profit organization, uses a social institution to sustain his identity as an employee and relieve distress. Ken is a jovial, happy-go-lucky, and forthright man with gray hair combed back from his face in waves. Today he wears business slacks and a dark blue polo shirt as he sits behind the desk of his “office” for our first interview. His desk is scattered with many trade-related newsletters and publications, and it appears as though he has been hard at work.

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<sup>101</sup> When she completes the course she will receive an Associate’s Degree in Criminal Justice. Despite her landmark accomplishment, she experiences great distress at the thought of exiting her “criminal justice student” role.

Ken was the wealthiest participant in the study. He reported that he and his family were not experiencing financial strain because he received a four-month severance package and his wife made well into six figures per year. He and his wife had even recently spent a large sum remodeling their bathroom and had had no trouble paying their daughter's college tuition. He noted that the hardest part of unemployment was not financial, but instead related to his identity.

Ken was fired one-and-a-half months ago after making decisions that were politically unpopular with a high-ranking official in a separate organization. This official had approached the chairman (to whom Ken reported) during a meeting, used a slur to describe Ken, and asked that Ken be fired. The new CEO was allowing Ken to use an empty office on the same floor of his old workplace. Thus, his old workplace operated as a sustaining social institution. Ken reported that, compared to staying at home, being at the office helped alleviate his depression by making him "feel like he still works here":

One of the biggest benefits is having this office. I was home one day last week...and I didn't come into here at all and it was kind of depressing. So having this office has made a big difference to me...It kind of feels like I work here except I just don't get a paycheck. [Ken, 57-year-old white former CEO; lost job one-and-a-half months ago; first interview]

Marsha's and Ken's distress levels varied depending on their active involvement in a social institution similar enough to their old jobs to help sustain their employee identities.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> It is notable that Marsha was experiencing a very high level of financial distress, especially by her second interview. Despite this, the class she was taking (which sustained her employee identity) alleviated some of this distress, which indicates that her distress was not only related to financial distress, but also to identity.

### *The Importance of Feedback*

Not only did social institutions provide roles, activities, and/or settings similar to one's former job, they could also provide feedback from others that helped verify one of their key identities - the employee identity.

Paul, a 56-year-old white father of three adult children is talkative with an exuberant, yet agitated energy. He stuttered throughout his first interview. He is six feet tall, athletically built, and at his first interview dressed in "business casual" attire – black cotton-polyester slacks, a black button-down shirt with orange-beige patterns on it, and black cotton t-shirt underneath. He has penetrating light blue eyes and thinning light brown short hair with random section sticking up in the front. Three months ago, Paul was laid off from his job as a general manager at a publishing company after having received six months advance notice and helping bring his soon-to-be-eliminated division to a "soft landing."

Paul, the sole household breadwinner, is separated from his wife and lives in the basement of the home they owned together. One of his adult children is severely disabled and lives with them in the house. Despite this, he reports minimal financial strain other than having to make his own lunches at home and has incurred monthly COBRA costs. He has not fallen behind on any bills. His four-month severance package, unemployment checks, and selling items from his basement online have helped him maintain his lifestyle.

Paul's involvement in a social institution - a job seekers' seminar – provided him with feedback that helped sustain his highly-salient employee identity. The seminar

leader assigned a nickname – “Marketing Man” – to Paul, who shortly thereafter began to enact this identity by creating a web site and business cards:

[H]e started calling me “Marketing Man” during this seminar, which was really cool, very confidence building. So two, three days after that I went to GoDaddy.com and MarketingMan was taken. Then it was a choice of “Do I want ‘MyMarketingMan’ or ‘YourMarketingMan?’”...[C]learly “YourMarketingMan” comes off right...I’m embarking now on toying with the idea of being Your Marketing Man... I have a business card for a business that I would like to start. [He pulls a newly-printed business card from his briefcase that reads “YourMarketingMan.com.”] [Paul, 56-year-old white former general manager in publishing; lost job six-and-a-half months ago; second interview]<sup>103</sup>

Paul also enacted this identity at an unemployment networking group:

I’ve been passionate about volunteering at Unemployed No More, helping people with resumes. Well, that comes under what? Personal [marketing]...It’s pure passion. It’s pure rush. It’s pure confidence. [Paul, second interview]

Like other sustainers, Paul got feedback from social institutions that helped sustain his employee identity, and he enacted that identity in additional social institutions. Sustainers often used professional organizations, seminars, and volunteer groups to sustain the employee identity in this manner. However, these social institutions typically did not offer them a status-congruent role into which they could shift (or more strongly emphasize) their identities (as shown in Chapter Five). In fact, involvement in family (especially for men) generally constrained their ability to emphasize the father role as an identity because of the strength of the breadwinner identity.

I now move to discuss the family as a social institution that increased the likelihood of participants using the “sustaining” strategy – in essence, sustaining the employee identity by helping them to maintain their identities as breadwinners.

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<sup>103</sup> At the time of this writing, 15 months after this interview, the website is still not active.

### Family and the Breadwinner Identity

Family was an important social institution for most sustainers. Most sustainers identified strongly as a primary breadwinner, which appeared to be high in their salience hierarchies. For most sustainers, this identity had been rooted in the social institution of family. This may have provided strong incentive for participants to sustain this highly salient identity (rather than shifting their identities more strongly toward another role).<sup>104</sup>

For example, Paul stutters through his description of his distress as being strongly linked to the mismatch between his status as a man and the “unemployed” role:

[I]n my family and to myself I am known as a provider... that’s probably the number one thing...I’m defined by how I provide...[Since I’ve been laid off] I’m not doing my job. Um, I’m not, uh, yeah. The- I’m, I’m, uh, deficient. I’m, uh, incomplete. I’m in trouble. Um, I have to be wary. Um, worried, anxiety. [Paul; first interview]

Paul’s role and self-identification as a breadwinner gave him strong incentive to sustain this as an identity after job loss. By the time of Paul’s second interview, his severance package had ended and he had not yet found work. I expected Paul to be in a desperate emotional state. However, Paul arrives for our second interview in a business suit. His stutter is almost completely gone. He exudes confidence and calmness. He has decided that he is *not* unemployed after all.<sup>105</sup> Paul reconceptualizes his existing “hobbyist” role as an “entrepreneur” identity, thus sustaining his identity as an employee

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<sup>104</sup> This effect was likely especially powerful for men, whose male status corresponds with expectations of breadwinning (Townsend 2002).

<sup>105</sup> This reduction in distress level is especially interesting given that there were no major objective changes in his life since our first interview. Paul has run this same Ebay business as a hobbyist for eleven years. His monthly income has stayed the same, due to online holiday sales and unemployment pay. His decreased distress appears to relate to *reconceptualizing his hobbyist identity* to be consistent with his male status.

and breadwinner and reducing the distress that came from the discrepancy between his male status and the “unemployed” role:

ME:...[L]ast time we spoke, you said that at that time being a man without a job made you feel deficient and incomplete. Is that still the case?

PAUL: No, and it wasn't the case when I spoke that. That wasn't truth. Because I am not and I wasn't unemployed then...[T]he mental fact of the matter is I had a source of income when I made that statement and that source may be a career. I can make that work...And so instead of saying I'm unemployed, I should have said I'm a successful small business owner or I'm a successful entrepreneur on Ebay...I'm not necessarily spinning because those are all true.<sup>106</sup> [Paul, second interview]

When I ask Paul what his mood has been like since we last spoke, he says:

Just incredible positive confidence. It's awareness of yes, I'm doing the right things. I'm thinking the right things. I'm accomplishing the right things... [Paul, second interview]

Time was also an important factor in identity work. Like several other participants, including shifters Charlotte and Lorna, Paul also chose to transform a perceived past poorly performed role into one that he was performing well today. His former hobbyist role was based on his past compulsive shopping and hoarding, of which his wife had strongly disapproved. Paul noted that now that very same role, reconceptualized as a breadwinner identity, would today show his wife that he really was, in fact, a breadwinner. In effect, he killed two birds with one stone, simultaneously regaining his breadwinner role and repairing the damage caused by the negatively viewed “hoarder/hobbyist” role:

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<sup>106</sup> Paul's new identity as an “Ebay entrepreneur” may be overstated. When I posed the possibility of observing him at his business, which he runs from home, he said: [O]nly Jesus if he came and walked on this earth should be able to see my room... It's an unfinished basement...[I]t's incredibly disorganized. Incredibly messy. It's a disaster area...[I]t's an area that should be just for living - television, relaxing, reading, bed - is really my shipping area...All those areas are all mixed in so I mean I may be packing something on my bed... It's honestly, it's an archeological dig.” At the end of the interview he told me that if I were to see his business I'd think he was “just some guy with a bunch of stuff in his basement.” He worried that his subjective identity as an “Ebay entrepreneur” might not stand up to others' scrutiny.

I think my wife has always thought it was a fantasy anytime that I thought that there was money to be made in some project that I was doing because it was nontraditional...I've done many different things with collectibles over the years that were nontraditional and I don't think that was acceptable to her...I think she may be understanding that, wow, this guy is providing. Before it was...something that took away a husband's time or the husband's focus. [Paul, second interview]

Paul had successfully sustained his employee and breadwinner identities, as well as his identity as a man. He had also transformed a past role that his wife had viewed negatively into a positive "breadwinner" identity, and had decreased his distress with this strategy.

The family was an important social institution within which people negotiated their many identities after job loss. The breadwinner identity within family was often challenged by job loss, and participants aimed to reclaim it. Other examples of sustaining included former breadwinning participants who said they felt like they were still an employee by: dressing up in business clothing to go to the library for job searching; contacting others at their former workplace with work-related advice or information; and taking one-day temporary jobs that were similar to their old line of work.

Beyond meso-level social institutions (e.g., family, school, volunteer organizations), micro-level social structure also related to sustaining. In the next section, I discuss how micro-level social structure in the form of troubled romantic relationships may have increased the likelihood of using sustaining as a strategy.

#### *Microstructure: The Troubled Romantic Relationship*

Involvement in highly troubled romantic relationships before job loss (and continuing after) was common among sustainers. For example, Marsha was a divorced single mother of two children. Her ex-husband had recently filed for custody of her

children. The existing custodial relationship was highly antagonistic. Her ex-husband's new wife had served Marsha with court papers requesting her husband's full custody of the children, who currently lived with Marsha. She approached her husband about these papers, feeling devastated. He replied with a hurtful and insensitive comment about her unemployment:

I said, "How could you do this to me?" And he was like, "Well, you're gonna lose everything soon anyway. [The kids] might as well have a stable place to live." [Marsha, second interview]

Another example is Paul's separation from his wife. Although they lived in the same house, Paul's hoarding and extramarital affairs had pushed his wife to the point of telling him he had to live in the basement, and to ask for a divorce, which Paul did not want. What remained of their marital interactions was intensely negative:

She has anger problems in my view...*She* [said in hostile, mocking tone, as if saying "Queen She"] has a sensitive nose. *She* got so angry at me because I was eating a Subway sandwich... in her kitchen area...[I]t's like she's doin' it intentional... You don't pick a fight with a guy while he's eating...[I]t happens a lot (laughs a little). I'd just stand up, take my plate, throw it all away. Leave. [Paul, second interview]

It is possible that when two major identities are threatened simultaneously (i.e., spouse/partner and employee; mother and employee), the tendency is to try to sustain at least one of them (in this case, the most recently-threatened one, employee) because a collapse of both could be emotionally crippling. This may be why troubled relationships related so strongly to sustaining.

To fully understand the conditions under which participants were prone to sustain, one must examine instances in which participants avoided sustaining employee identities (and identities associated with a particular line of work). I explore this phenomenon in the next section.

## When Does One Not Sustain?

Participants avoided sustaining employee identities and identities associated with a particular line of work if those identities could create a mismatch with the meanings of their statuses. For example, Cindy (described in Chapter Four), who had said the hardest part of job loss was the loss of a sense of self, was still strongly drawn to the “hotel executive” identity, but believed she should not sustain that identity and should increase her identification with the non-work roles:

I’m trying to develop another - not so much another set of friends, but just another-.My whole life has been consumed with the hotel industry and the people in it...I have to develop something else...I’ve always was identified as...in the hospitality industry. [Cindy, first interview]

By her second interview, Cindy had decided to abandon her hotel executive identity, although she still spoke of it with longing. Despite wanting to “be herself,” she had not yet found alternate identities that were highly salient:

[S]ometimes you love something and you have to let it go. And I know that’s a trite kind of thing but I just feel like I have to let go that thing that surrounded me in my job. And I can be myself, whatever that is. [Cindy; second interview]

Despite reporting a highly successful ten-year career in her field, Cindy believed her status as a 62-year-old was what prohibited her from sustaining her identity as a hotel executive:<sup>107 108</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Cindy’s “poor performance” began with the arrival of a boss that was half her age who gave her a great deal of negative feedback. Additionally, after she lost her job, her co-workers told her that they could not perform at the required levels either – they had been fudging their numbers to appear that they were “high performers.”

<sup>108</sup> Cindy’s belief that she had cognitive decline went so far that she got tested for dementia, and was shocked when the results showed she did not have it. She attributes these beliefs about cognitive decline (and thus inability to be a successful “hotel employee”) to age:  
CINDY: I had this family history of Alzheimer’s or dementia in the family, and I thought maybe I am having...early signs of dementia...I went through.. a series of tests...and I had this like huge document that shows all the results and everything. And the result was no. I didn’t have [dementia]...[I]t’s like somebody saying, they’re part of the who’s who’s of the has-beens... [H]ave I peaked at this level and I really do need to look at other options?

[The] thought of having to go back into the hotel industry just...makes me crazy...I don't know though that somebody at my age..could be valued in the hotel industry. It's really made up of much younger people now... that's old and done with and I'm finished. [Cindy, second interview]

Similarly, Skip also believed he should no longer identify with his old line of work because he is 53 years old and banking is “a young man’s game.” Skip, a white former vice president in banking, resembles an older, taller version of the *Seinfeld* character George Costanza. He wears a dark forest green heavy wool sweater and a hearing aid in his right ear and has a minor speech impediment.

For the past several years, Skip has rented a two-story house with a yard and basement along with four roommates in an expensive suburban neighborhood. Each roommate has his own bedroom and they share the rest of the house as common areas. Skip divorced several years ago and his wife and four children live in another state. Although his ex-wife is employed, Skip has had trouble paying alimony (as well as his own rent) and her home is now in foreclosure. Skip trades in-kind work for a rent reduction, works part-time as a boat tower, receives occasional payments from a company who leases some land he owns, and had a three-month severance package. When his car broke down, he could not afford to fix it and shares his friend’s car when necessary. Although Skip is somewhat distressed about finances, he is not overly concerned with them and believes he will find work eventually. He highlights aspects of his unemployment that relate to his identity.

In the past Skip had always identified strongly with his job, but could no longer do so because of his age:

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ME: What makes you think that that could possibly be the case?

CINDY: Just looking around and the industry’s still very young. [Cindy, first interview]

[H]istorically, I've always felt that my job is me and I'm my job. And I've been certainly guilty of not leading a balanced life there...[T]he modern banking is the way our larger banks practice, is very much a young man's or young person's game...Long hours and...Blackberries and very much expected to respond to calls and e-mail even over the weekend...That's not me. (laughs) [Skip, 53-year-old white male; former Vice President in banking industry; lost job three months ago; currently underemployed doing boat towing; first interview]<sup>109</sup>

### **Disconfirming Evidence - Those Who Could Easily Sustain, but Did Not**

A few participants who identified strongly as breadwinners and were involved in social institutions “similar enough” to their past workplaces did not try to sustain their employee identities (or had very limited unsuccessful attempts to do so). Minnie's (described in Chapter Four) involvement in a job networking group, Moving Along, allowed her to use some of the same skills she used in her past job, and she gained feedback from others in the group that she was good at her job:

MINNIE: [T]he way to get over [my insecurities as an employee] is to move on and have success in the future and I haven't gotten to that. I haven't gotten a chance for that yet except in [job networking] class, which is not the same kind of thing cause you're not being graded...Still, I know that I am a very good editor. I'm probably gonna be editing all the resumes of my classmates. A couple of them have asked me to do that and I'm very happy to do that...

ME: [W]hat were the things that made you know that you were a good worker?...

MINNIE: Well, I've gone back through a lot of stuff in doing the Moving Along class, gone back through my really old performance evaluations...Some of the things that we've been working on here in the class have made me feel that same sort of sadness, sense of...not feeling real good about my abilities... [Minnie, first interview]

Despite having an institution in which to (somewhat) enact her employee identity and receiving verifying feedback, Minnie did not sustain this identity, perhaps because of the short-term, limited nature of her involvement in the group, or the fact that specific

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<sup>109</sup> Interestingly, Skip's part-time boat towing job left him on-call at various hours and days of the week, yet he did not interpret that job as a “young man's game,” perhaps because he had not received feedback to that end as a boat tower.

tasks they asked her to do (e.g., recall the last thing you did really well) also produced reminders of failure. Perhaps because her remaining identities were not particularly salient, she instead fell into a vacuum identity (as described in Chapter Seven).

Janelle (described in Chapter Five) was also involved in a social institution - a workplace for whom she volunteered every day - that could have helped her sustain her employee and “marketer” identities. However, she did not do so:

The positive thing is I started volunteering...[T]here’s a guy...[H]e has a start-up...He doesn’t have an office. Everybody’s virtual. And he does like Facebook, Twitter...and I’m workin’ from home...[T]he cons are I’m by myself...I miss the interaction. I miss getting up and going out and getting dressed...[Janelle; second interview]

Janelle volunteered from home and did her work electronically. It may be that her very limited interaction with others in the organization left her without the needed feedback to sustain her employee identity. In fact, even during the period in which Janelle was volunteering, doing work similar to what she once did, she experienced identity void (as described in Chapter Seven). Once again, although Janelle had other identities, they may have been less salient simply because of her minimal social contact with others.

Some participants, such as Janelle and Minnie, were involved in social institutions that could have helped them sustain their employee identities, and had been the primary or sole breadwinners for their households, but yet only made minor efforts to sustain their identities as employees.

## **Summary**

Of the 17 participants who experienced identity-based distress, 11 (65 percent) coped with it (or tried to cope with it) by subjectively sustaining the employee identity.

But they did not do so without influence from social structure; social institutions were critical to the process. After job loss, sustainers (like shifters) looked to social institutions in which they had been strongly involved before job loss, but these institutions typically did not offer them alternate roles (and potential identities) that matched the social and personal meanings of their statuses (e.g., male), thus constraining their ability to shift their identity emphases.

However, because many sustainers had identified as breadwinners and saw their statuses as congruent with the breadwinner identity, they tried to sustain their identities as employees to try to maintain a consistent sense of who they were. They often used non-workplace social institutions that were “similar enough” to their old workplaces, or offered roles that were “similar enough” to their old lines of work. These institutions offered them a place to enact “employment-like” behaviors and receive verifying feedback for the employee identities they were trying to sustain. In contrast, participants avoided sustaining employee identities that could create a mismatch with the meanings of their statuses (e.g., “hotel executive” versus “62-year-old”), for which they might not get verification.

Finally, sustainers also had been involved in vitriolic romantic relationships prior to (and continuing after) job loss, which may have increased the likelihood of sustaining at least one of what are often two important identities – employee and partner or spouse.

Of the nine participants who successfully sustained their employee identities, five (56 percent) were strongly involved in social institutions.<sup>110</sup> Only three of the seventeen participants (18 percent) with identity-based distress had the conditions (social institutions similar enough to their old workplace) that could facilitate sustaining, but did

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<sup>110</sup> Although 11 participants attempted to sustain, only 9 did so successfully.

not use them to sustain. It may be that the temporary or isolated nature of some of these conditions limited their utility in terms of sustaining.

Additionally, 10 of the 11 participants (91 percent) who attempted to sustain had been (or strongly identified as) primary breadwinners prior to job loss, and 9 of them also had a spouse and/or children in their household. Only 29 percent of participants who reported identity-based distress and who were (or identified as) primary breadwinners did not try to sustain.

Finally, four of the eleven participants (44 percent) who tried to sustain their employee identities had been involved in vitriolic romantic relationships prior to job loss. This may have contributed to their tendency to try to sustain. However, 43 percent of people experiencing similar relationship strains did *not* try to sustain their employee identities. It may be that a combination of pre-existing involvement in social institutions “similar enough” to their old workplaces, plus identification as a breadwinner, plus relationship trouble, created a “perfect storm” that enhanced the likelihood of trying to sustain the employee identity.

Unlike shifters and sustainers, some participants were either minimally involved in social institutions, or were not involved in the ways necessary to sustain or shift (as described in Chapters Five and Six); these participants experienced identity void instead of shifting or sustaining. Specifically, participants who were not strongly embedded in social institutions, or who were involved in social institutions but those institution neither provided new (or more strongly-emphasized) potential status-congruent roles (and potential identities), nor helped them sustain their employee identities, experienced a

dramatically different path in their identity work processes after job loss. In Chapter Seven, I explore the path of identity void.

## CHAPTER SEVEN: WHEN IDENTITY WORK FAILS: IDENTITY VOID

In Chapters Five and Six, I illustrated how people used two types of identity work - shifting to (or more strongly emphasizing) an alternate identity and subjectively sustaining the employee identity – in order to cope with identity-based distress after job loss. In the current chapter I present evidence for another path that follows job loss, that which occurs when identity work strategies are attempted, but fail: falling into *identity void*.

### **Roadmap of Chapter Seven: Identity Void**

As in Chapters Five and Six, this chapter will show that a particular path after job loss - identity void - occurred when specific structural conditions either expanded or constrained identity work options. Participants' statuses and their involvement in social institutions contributed to their likelihood of ending up in identity void – a highly distressing loss of who one is.<sup>111 112</sup>

Specifically, social institutions related to identity void in two ways. First, some participants who experienced identity void were only weakly involved in social institutions. Second, some participants were strongly involved in social institutions, but

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<sup>111</sup> This is similar to the “vacuum identity” Ebaugh (1988) described in her study of voluntary role change, as reported by participants after the transition had taken place. Ebaugh (1988) minimizes the effect of structural factors on the experience of vacuum identity, and did not explore the process as it occurred.

<sup>112</sup> Although losing one role does not necessarily mean losing all roles and identities, losing a highly-salient role could potentially have the effect of feeling like one no longer knows who one is (despite the continuation of other identities).

these institutions did not provide conditions that could facilitate shifting or sustaining as described in Chapters Five and Six.<sup>113</sup>

### **Identity Void as Lived Reality**

Five participants reported experiencing identity void after job loss. They described this experience as being very distressing, and that it led them to feel depressed, anxious, and confused.<sup>114</sup> They used death metaphors and references to loss, invisibility, separation, and drifting to describe their identities.

For example, Minnie (described in Chapters Four and Six), used death metaphors and language indicating loss and separation to describe her identity void after job loss:

I really sort of felt like a ghost and that was a little difficult... That I wasn't gonna be part of things any longer, that everybody else was still working... I think that's probably as close as I came to sort of feeling sorry for myself, just like I wasn't really a part of this but I wasn't part of anything else... [Minnie, first interview]

Janelle's description of identity void is similar to Minnie's:

[I]t is tough when you really like your job... [S]o it is kinda that.. part a your identity [sic]. And you're like "Oh man. What are you gonna be doin' next? What are you?"... [I]t is kinda like you're not part a that group anymore [sic]. It's kinda like a divorce. Or, I hate to say it, but it's almost like somebody died... [Janelle, first interview]

Charlie, a 62-year-old white former director of training, also described identity void in a similar way, and like Janelle, noted the feeling of being neither here nor there, having lost a highly salient identity, but not having another identity that was salient enough to give her a sense of who she is:

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<sup>113</sup> These conditions were an identity that matched one's status; and an institution "similar enough" to one's old job and/or verifying feedback, respectively.

<sup>114</sup> The total number of participants that shifted, sustained, and experienced identity void is greater than 17 because some participants used (or tried to use) multiple identity work strategies or moved in and out of identity void over the course of the two interviews as they began to use identity work strategies. In most cases, one strategy or path emerged as primary.

I'll be the first to say that I clearly was depressed, and I clearly felt anxious...I needed to disengage, but disengagement didn't feel good. I mean, that's not who I am. Disengage from the job and from that whole identity. That is almost like shedding a life, a skin. And so I had to - and I knew this intellectually - I had to mourn...[T]here's sort of a hangover from your work life...But I think I'm coming to a new identity...So I think I'm working on my story... So [taps on table] what do I want that story to be...? [Charlie, 62-year-old white former director of training at trade organization; lost job three months ago]

Identity void was highly distressing. It was experienced as separation and confusion about who one was, and induced depression. Words such as “died,” “divorce,” “cut a hole in me,” and “at sea” were typical of participants’ descriptions of identity void.

#### *Social Institutions: Weak Involvement*

Two of the five participants (40 percent) who experienced identity void (Minnie and Janelle) were only weakly involved in non-workplace social institutions before (and after) job loss.<sup>115</sup> For example, although Minnie had a small friendship network, she lived alone, was only minimally involved in non-workplace social institutions, and gave the overall impression of being relatively disconnected from other people. She noted that simply keeping busy with productive activities that she could do alone helped her feel a little better but did not fill her identity void:

I've tried various things...Go take a walk or go do something productive, whether it's cleaning the grout in the shower...Just something to change the scene...And it does help, but...it doesn't do anything in terms of resolving the feelings. It takes me away from them. [Minnie, second interview]

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<sup>115</sup> One potential explanation for the connection between low institutional involvement and identity void after job loss is that participants who experienced identity void had started with stronger employee identities than those who did not experience identity void. In other words, perhaps they were less involved in non-workplace social institutions because of their extremely strong ties to the workplace. I believe this explanation is insufficient. Participants who specifically experienced identity void had a mean score of identification with their old job titles (when still employed) of 8.5 (highest possible = 10). The mean score for participants who suffered identity-based distress but did not experience identity void was 8.3.

Minnie's involvement in a job seekers' networking group, Moving Along, had provided her with a small amount of verifying feedback from group members during some of the exercises they did. These things could have potentially helped her sustain her employee identity:

MINNIE: ...I know that I am a very good editor. I'm probably gonna be editing all the resumes of my classmates. A couple of them have asked me to do that and I'm very happy to do that...[O]n the one hand I still feel...perfectly capable, and yet this experience [of job loss] has really kinda rocked me.

ME: ...When you're feeling particularly capable, what's going on at that time...?

MINNIE: ...[W]hen I'm editing something either for myself or for somebody else. When I went back over all those evaluations from years ago and there was a lot of good stuff there about what I had contributed...And that, to me...that means a lot. You know, being told - ... That you were able to be fully a part of things. That other people knew you were there and that you could help them, and they were coming to you... [Minnie, first interview]

However, this feedback was minimal, and the group did exercises that led her to have conflicting ideas about her value as an employee:

[I]n the Moving Along class, there was this one book that was recommended to us...[H]e asks the question that you're likely to hear [in a job interview]...One, what was the last good decision you made?...And when I read that thing about what was the last good decision you made, I really thought "I don't know."...I second-guessed myself all the time...I think...the way to get over that is to move on and have success in the future...I haven't gotten a chance for that yet except in class which is not the same kind of thing cause you're not being graded... [Minnie, first interview]

Unfortunately, these factors did not ultimately relieve her identity void. All the feedback Minnie got from this social institution was very short-term and conflictual in nature, making it difficult for her to sustain her employee identity.

Janelle also had few strong ties to social institutions. She lived alone and although she was emotionally close to her family and boyfriend, they lived many hours away. Additionally, the bulk of her friendship circle had consisted of her (now former)

co-workers. She reported minimal involvement in social institutions, including her new volunteer workplace, and reported identity void at both interviews.

Janelle had made efforts to decrease her identification as an employee by discarding items that contained the company logo or otherwise reminded her of her old job:<sup>116</sup>

[W]hen I lost my job, I like, cleaned up. I've got ridda alla my t-shirts...It's like the first time it happened, it's like a boyfriend that you still like and you're hopin' that you get back together...[Y]ou know it's over this time. It's like he does that thing that you cannot forgive. And the second time I got rid of.. all my t-shirts..jackets, coats. [Janelle, first interview]

Perhaps because Janelle had no easily available role with which she could more strongly identify, as well as few institutions in which she could find one, she never entirely completed the shifting process.

By the time of Janelle's second interview, she had begun to work from home as a volunteer doing marketing for a new small company. Although she saw this as positive, her limited involvement, unstructured schedule, and lack of interaction meant this social institution was insufficient to relieve her identity void:

The positive thing is I started volunteering...But the cons are I'm by myself...I miss the interaction...[I]t's hard cause you don't really have a schedule...[Y]ou're just kinda in limbo...Like a Twilight episode where you're like you're dead and nobody told you and you're like goin' through the motions every day...[L]ike the ship crashed and all the astronauts, like nobody told them that like you guys are crashed or whatever...Is it purgatory? I mean, you're not in heaven, cause you're not livin' [in sing-song manner] la la la la. You're not in hell because you have your health...You're just kinda..in the middle...I guess my mood is in limbo too... [Janelle, second interview]

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<sup>116</sup> Janelle also kept many reminders of her old workplace - typically photos, awards, or otherwise customized reminders of her old job that usually contained the company logo. She brought these items with her to the first interview and spent about 15 minutes describing the memories associated with them, one at a time. This indicated that she still strongly identified with her old job in many ways.

Minnie and Janelle struggled to alleviate their identity-based distress after job loss. They were uninvolved in social institutions that could have helped them shift to (or more strongly emphasize) other identities, and their minimal involvement in non-workplace social institutions did not provide them with interactions and feedback that could have helped them sustain their employee identities.

*Social Institutions: Weak Match with One's Status*

Of the five participants who experienced identity void, two (40 percent) (Charlie and Cindy) were moderately to strongly involved in several non-workplace social institutions prior to (and continuing after) job loss. However, the institutions did not provide roles that were strong matches with their statuses, which made it hard to shift or sustain identities.

Three months before I first interviewed him, Charlie, a 62-year-old white former director of training, was laid off from the organization for which he had worked for twenty-four years. Charlie, whose immaculately-groomed short brown hair is graying at the temples, creates a “business casual,” yet drab, colorless impression. Black wire-framed glasses only highlight the wrinkles around his hazel eyes. He wears a dark blue zippered canvas jacket over a dark green cotton flannel shirt, which is made slightly dressier by its slender black and white crisscrossing pinstripes, dark olive green “business casual” slacks, and dark brown loafers. He had walked to the city library on this unusually warm and sunny winter day and we sat indoors at a study table with a wall of books behind us.

Although Charlie is friendly throughout the interview and seems relaxed at the start, his expressions of anger at his old boss grow as the interview continues until his anger is barely contained. Despite speaking quietly he seems to seethe and growl, as he bitterly describes her as a “clinical,” “antiseptic,” and “precise” “witch.” He had been bypassed for promotion to the vice president position he had always coveted; instead, the company had hired a woman 14 years younger than him for this position, and she was to be his new boss. According to Charlie, she had laid him off because of his age.<sup>117</sup>

Charlie, his wife, and two children (one teenager and one pre-teen) owned a house in an upper-middle-class neighborhood in a major city. Charlie reported that his financial strain was minimal, due to a six-month severance package, and substantial savings and investments. His wife, who was employed part time before Charlie’s job loss, had now returned to work full time. Overall, they were maintaining the same standard of living as they had before his job loss.

The path that led Charlie to identity void occurred over time, in steps. After Charlie was denied the promotion, he tried to shift to more strongly emphasize other identities based in roles that were rooted in the social institutions to which he belonged, such as family and church. Although none of these roles conflicted with Charlie’s statuses (middle aged, male, college educated), they were also not strongly congruent with them. Perhaps this is one reason he did not strengthen his identification with these roles. His attempts to shift failed. At our first interview, Charlie reported experiencing

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<sup>117</sup> It is unclear whether this claim is valid or not. Charlie’s own statements suggest that a few of his harshly negative interpersonal behaviors and self-proclaimed intent to do the minimum required (after not getting the promotion) may have played a role in his job loss.

identity void; he no longer truly identified as an employee, but he did not really have a new identity to replace it.<sup>118</sup>

...I started shifting away from the job to a different future...reconnecting with the essence of who I am...I'm a..good dad. I'm a good husband. I'm a good brother. I'm a good citizen. I'm a good.. financial guy...Good businessman. I'm a good friend. I'm a good parishioner...It was a profound, profound paradigm shift...I had a really, really hard time transferring significance and importance to this because I always said to myself..anybody can do that. Anybody can be a father. [Charlie, first interview]

Charlie also notes that, although he aims to shift from a very strong identification as an employee to more strongly emphasize another identity, this is especially difficult because of his status as a man:

I think for men especially, you are pretty much your job. If you have a reasonably good job, to disassociate that from who you are I think can make you feel weak and impotent and just at sea in terms of your identity...[Charlie, first interview]

Charlie tried to deemphasize his employee identity and instead more strongly emphasize other identities, such as father. This may have been difficult because for Charlie, to be a man had meant to have a job, and he had found no other potential identities that could restore his manhood. When that strategy failed, Charlie filed lawsuits against his old employer, perhaps in an attempt to subjectively sustain his employee identity by remaining in constant contact with company representatives. Not surprisingly, this tactic also failed (at least as an identity work strategy). This may have

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<sup>118</sup> Charlie also told me that he was very resistant to adopting the “retiree” identity, even though he thought others might think it fitting for him. Although he was toying with the idea of being a “retiree,” even looking it up in the dictionary to decide if it fit him, and deciding that the characteristics did somewhat fit him, he told me he would only really be a retiree when *he*, and not others, decided he was one (highlighting the subjective dimension of identity). In theory, he may have ultimately been better off emotionally had he settled on increasing the salience of any alternate identity, even “retiree.” As of this writing, I recently received a communication from Charlie indicating that he has started his own consulting business. However, there is no active website for this business, nor any apparent contact information for it that is easily available to the public. It may be that he is working on finding a way to subjectively sustain his employee identity, similar to the way that Paul did as an Ebay entrepreneur.

been because company representatives only reacted to him as an enemy rather than verifying his employee identity, leaving him in identity void at both interviews.

Whereas Charlie's status as a man (which he equated with employee) may have prevented him from shifting to emphasize another identity, Cindy's (described in Chapters Four and Six) status (and status-based identity) as a 62-year-old may have prevented her from sustaining her hotel executive identity (as shown in Chapter Six) because of her perceived mismatch between the two identities. Although Cindy toyed with taking (and eventually took) a lower-level job outside of the hotel industry, she was distressed that this would not fulfill her identity and self-esteem needs:

ME: [W]hat's the hardest part of losing your job?

CINDY: Oh, I think your sense of self...I always was identified as being in the hospitality industry...[I]f I decide I wanna go work for [high-end grocery store] or drive a school bus... that'll get me through, that'll take the edge off of things financially and timewise, but what else am I gonna do?... What can I do to make myself feel valued again? [Cindy, first interview]

At her first interview, Cindy notes that these activities will help her earn money and fill her time, but that that is not enough. She yearns to feel valued and to have an identity. Because she does not, she experiences identity void and reports that she mostly feels confused about her identity and is sometimes depressed.

By her second interview, Cindy no longer identified with the hotel executive identity that she had still partially clung to at the first interview, has found a new (lower-level) job, and no longer experiences identity void. When I remind her that, at her first interview, she had talked about always having had a hotel executive identity, she sighs and says:

[A]ll the wasted energy I put into (laughing) that...into (sighs) Miss Hotel USA. I don't think of myself in terms of my job so much anymore...I'm not (sighs), uh, defined by external-type things. [Cindy, second interview]

She notes that who she is does not depend on roles. She goes on to define who she was in the past and who she is today:

Cindy was a successful hotel sales representative for many years...who has gone on to a new experience that's more reflective of her current interests. [Cindy, second interview]

Cindy said that her involvement in a group of other women age 50 and older who were all going through transitions helped her redefine herself outside of role-based identities:<sup>119</sup>

Cindy is Cindy. And she's happy...I feel like all that kind of extraneous bullshit gone, I can just be myself...[I]t's a continuum...You learn something new. You drop something else...[Y]ou're constantly changing and adapting. And that's what I think a transition really is, is an adaptation more than anything else...I went through a period where I was kind of falling apart a little bit...and I adapt. Adapted. Adapting. [Cindy, second interview]

Cindy's reduction in identity-based distress may also be because she had found a new job that she believed was congruent with her age and with whom she had been in the past ("loved to write"). This was a "retirement job" as an administrative assistant to a writer.<sup>120</sup> Although Cindy was not sustaining her hotel executive identity, nor did she identify as an administrative assistant, she was able to sustain her employee identity with

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<sup>119</sup> Many things were going on simultaneously that could have influenced Cindy's identity and distress level. Cindy noted that several prospective employers at hotels had given her feedback about how valuable she would be to their organization. (However, she was mostly focused on lower-level, age-congruent "retirement" positions within the hotels.) She reported that this had made her no longer feel like "the who's who of the has-beens." At the same time, her friends were telling her not to go back to the hotel industry. These two lines of feedback may have helped free her up to pursue new aspects of her identity.

<sup>120</sup> Unfortunately, Cindy was experiencing non-identity-based distress in this new job because her boss was not treating her well. She waffled back and forth regarding self-reports of her distress level, but in my judgment, although her identity-based distress was gone, her overall distress was fairly high.

this job, perhaps because it did not conflict with her age status. She had therefore exited identity void at the time of her second interview.

Cindy, like Charlie, had increased her level of involvement in several social institutions (e.g., family, synagogue, and a relatively strong friendship network) since her job loss because she “had to develop something else.” However, she (like Charlie) was unable to shift to more strongly emphasize an alternate identity; the salience of the identities that the roles within these institutions could have provided did not increase. It may be that because none of them strongly equated with “female” (she had no children) shifting was not easy, and at the first interview she remained in identity void.<sup>121</sup> However, by her second interview, her new job had helped her sustain her overall employee identity and she exited identity void.<sup>122</sup>

Participants experienced identity void after job loss when their involvement in social institutions was weak, or when those institutions did not provide them with status-congruent potential identities. Identity void was deeply distressing, causing confusion and depression, and participants described it using death metaphors and language that conjured up loss, invisibility, and drifting.<sup>123</sup> Identity void was not always permanent, however. By shifting or sustaining participants could exit the void.

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<sup>121</sup> Her lack of success in shifting may also be because her involvement in some activities was not necessarily linked to specific social institutions. Additionally, many of her friends were from her former workplace and talked mostly about work, which she said made her feel like she wasn't a part of things. Her efforts to make non-workplace friends were not going especially well.

<sup>122</sup> Another participant, Nancy, experienced identity void during her first interview but had exited by the time of her second interview. In Nancy's case she had done so by shifting to the mother identity several months after the first interview.

<sup>123</sup> Other factors - including financial strain, relationship problems, pre-existing mental health problems, lack of social support, non-employment-related negative life events, and duration of unemployment - could potentially influence identities and distress. Minnie and Cindy reported lifetime struggles with depression. However, Cindy's identity-based distress was relieved upon taking a new job (thus sustaining her employee identity), which should not occur if a predisposition to depression was solely to blame. Minnie and Janelle

All participants who experienced identity void had made some attempt to either shift, sustain, or both, and some participants continued to make these attempts while experiencing identity void.<sup>124</sup> When identity work attempts were unsuccessful (i.e., when they did not fully embrace any of their other identities, nor did they still “feel like an employee”) reports of identity void were present. When identity work attempts were successful (i.e., they shifted to embrace or more strongly identify with a new or alternate identity, or subjectively sustained the employee identity) reports of identity void were absent or disappeared. Three participants made attempts to shift and/or sustain just before or after job loss (depending on whether it was anticipated), then fell into identity void when these strategies did not succeed. Two participants appeared to experience identity void very shortly after job loss, and quickly tried to shift and/or sustain. Only one of these two participants did so successfully, and she reported that her identity void disappeared after doing so.

### **Disconfirming Evidence: Those Who “Should” Have a Void, but Did Not**

A few participants were either involved in social institutions that would allow them to easily shift to, or more strongly emphasize, a new or alternate identity or sustain their employee identities, did not do so, and yet did not experience identity void. Others were minimally involved in social institutions that would help them avoid identity void.

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reported financial strain. Only Cindy had experienced a non-employment-related negative life event, and this event occurred after she had exited identity void. All participants who experienced identity void had, at minimum, a small supportive friendship network, and most had strong social supports. None of the participants who experienced identity void reported relationship problems. Mean duration of unemployment at the first interview for participants experiencing identity void was 3.3 months (versus 3.4 months for shifters and sustainers combined).

<sup>124</sup> Some attempts to shift or sustain appeared to be more intentional, conscious, and/or vigorous than others.

For example, Skip (described in Chapter Six) equated being a man with being a provider, yet was not involved in social institutions that would allow him to easily shift to, or more strongly emphasize, a new or alternate identity, nor sustain his employee identity. He noted that despite having experienced identity void in past job losses, simply keeping busy and receiving social support prevented identity void this time:

[T]hat's been an interesting.. aspect with this loss is that I'm not mourning. I don't feel like I've had a hole cut outta me the way I did the first two times because I've got other things goin' on. I got a support group and I've got two [part-time] jobs on the side that's keepin' me busy, and I've had time to think about the transition. [Skip, first interview]

Stanley (described in Chapter Five) described manhood in terms of breadwinning and was not involved in social institutions that could help him sustain his employee identity. Additionally, although he could have used his involvement in a tennis team to shift his emphasis into a stereotypically masculine “athlete” identity, he did not do so. He neither shifted nor sustained, yet did not experience identity void.<sup>125</sup>

I feel like.. basically the same person...I don't think anything about me has changed...I think I'm just as capable of doing my job as I was before... [Stanley, first interview]

Not all participants who might be expected to experience identity void did so. Many participants who experienced identity void had minimal involvement with social institutions, or were uninvolved with institutions that could help them shift or sustain in ways that matched their statuses. However, limited involvement with social institutions did not always lead to identity void.

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<sup>125</sup> Stanley did experience both financial and identity-based distress, especially as it related to being a man, but he did not fall into identity void. He still knew who he was.

## Summary

Five of the seventeen (29 percent) participants who reported identity-based distress after job loss reported experiencing identity void after job loss. They reported this experience as highly distressing. By the second interview, two of these five (40 percent) were no longer experiencing identity void – one had shifted to a new identity, and one had found a new job that she felt was congruent with her age (in contrast to her old job). Identity void typically occurred after participants had made several unsuccessful (conscious or unconscious) efforts to shift ( $n = 2$ ) or sustain ( $n = 2$ ), usually in that order.<sup>126</sup>

Two of the five participants (40 percent) who experienced identity void were only weakly involved in non-workplace social institutions before (and after) job loss. Two more of the five participants (40 percent) who experienced identity void were moderately to strongly involved in several non-workplace social institutions before (and after) job loss, but these institutions did not provide status-congruent roles. These conditions all made it hard to shift or to sustain identities.

Social institutions and statuses were critical to participants' experiences of identity-based distress and the ways they coped with it after job loss. In the final chapter, I summarize the three identity work paths, the ways in which structural factors relate to these paths, and how my findings relate to and expand existing knowledge about involuntary job loss, identity, and mental health.

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<sup>126</sup> Four of the five participants who experienced identity void first tried to shift before trying to sustain. (Only one participant instead first tried to sustain and never tried to shift.) Two participants who experienced identity void only tried to shift and did not try to sustain, probably because their attempts were successful at alleviating identity void, leaving them without reason to try to sustain.

## CHAPTER EIGHT: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter, I discuss my findings and theoretical contributions, along with the advantages and limitations of this study. I also discuss ideas for future research and applications of my findings.

In this dissertation, I used identity-based theories in conjunction with stress process perspectives to show how identity can operate as both a chronic strain and coping strategy after involuntary job loss. I asked: 1) How does identity relate to distress and coping after job loss?; 2) How do structural factors expand or constrain identity work options?; and 3) How does time relate to this distress and coping?

This study produced four main results that contribute to theoretical connections between identity, mental health, and involuntary role transitions. First, I showed that identity discrepancies can serve as a chronic strain that produces emotional distress, and I identified three types of discrepancies that may occur after involuntary job loss – temporal consistency, status consistency, and verification discrepancies. This illustrates the importance of considering identity, identity work, and identity discrepancies when studying distress and mental health processes. Second, I showed that this distress can be at least partially alleviated by using identity work, and that three paths may occur after job loss – *shifting* to an alternate identity, subjectively *sustaining* the idea one is “still an employee,” and falling into *identity void*. This helps us to better understand the process of involuntary role loss as it relates to identity and mental health. Third, I showed that the specific paths experienced after job loss often related to involvement in social institutions and social statuses. In essence, these results illustrate how social structural factors expand or constrain one’s identity work options. Not all types of identity work

are equally available to everyone; rather, social institutions and social statuses are critical to the ability to engage in particular types of identity work. Finally, I showed that people are not limited to current roles and identities when performing identity work; they also use past and possible future roles and identities. This shows that time plays a role in the identity work processes of people who have lost their jobs by serving as a reference point for changes in the salience hierarchy of identities, the emergence of new identities, and identity consistency.<sup>127</sup>

## **Study Conclusions and Contributions**

### *Identity's Place in the Stress Process*

The idea of identity as a critical factor in the stress process and in mental health (Thoits 1999), especially as they relate to job loss (Ezzy 1993; Feldman 1996; Kalleberg 2009), has been a suggested topic of examination for some time now. This dissertation's results illustrate that examining the stress process through the conceptual lens of identity is indeed a fruitful endeavor. Although literature (e.g., Burke and Stets 2009; Markus and Nurius 1986; Tausig 1999; Thoits 1999) firmly links identity, including identity discrepancies (Higgins 1987; Marcussen 2006), to mental health, my study helps address the need for research that connects *identity change* and mental health (Thoits 1999), including how identity change that may stem from role loss or gain, fits within identity-based models (Burke and Stets 2009). I contribute to the identity and mental health literature by taking a step toward identifying links between identity change, involuntary role loss, and mental health.

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<sup>127</sup> Time was an especially prevalent factor when using the strategy of shifting.

By explicitly examining identity as part of the stress process after involuntary job loss, I have unearthed explanations for distress that could potentially go unnoticed in existing sociological models of distress (e.g., Pearlin et al.'s (1981) Stress Process Model). I identified distress that was identity-based in nature and that existed regardless of (or in addition to) financial and relational strains sparked by job loss.

Specifically, I have added to Higgins' (1987) and Marcussen's (2006) link between aspiration and obligation discrepancies and distress by identifying three new types of identity discrepancies that cause distress after job loss – temporal consistency, status consistency, and verification discrepancies. I show that social support, material resources, and “keeping busy” usually do not fully alleviate the distress caused by these discrepancies. Rather, as suggested by stigma management (Riach and Loretto 2009; Snow and Anderson 1987) and occupational socialization (Pritchard and Symon 2011) literature, identity work more effectively relieves identity-based distress. I identified three paths that occur after job loss: two identity work strategies (shifting to an alternate identity and subjectively sustaining the idea that one is still an employee) and one additional path that may occur when these strategies are not undertaken or fail (identity void).<sup>128</sup> Overall, my dissertation punctuates the analytic power of using the concepts of identity discrepancies and identity work together.

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<sup>128</sup> Identity void is similar to the “vacuum identity” Ebaugh (1988) described in her study of voluntary role change, as reported by participants after the transition had taken place. Ebaugh (1988) minimizes the effect of structural factors on the experience of vacuum identity, and did not explore the process as it occurred.

*Expanding Our Understanding of Involuntary Role Loss*

This dissertation helps us better understand the process of involuntary role loss, especially as it relates to identity and mental health. Little research has been done on the topic of involuntary role loss, and Cantwell and Martiny (2010) point to the importance of understanding the links between identity change and *involuntary* role loss by examining identity discrepancies.

I build on existing research on involuntary role transitions (e.g., Duran-Aydintug 1995; Riach and Loretto 2009; Stier 2007) by examining the longitudinal process of role loss and identity change, while making explicit links to status, social institutions, and mental health. I build on studies by researchers (e.g. Baird 2010; Riach and Loretto 2009) who examine the way in which current identities may relate to mental health after job loss by examining past and future identities, as suggested by Markus and Nurius (1986). Overall my study helps clarify the links between involuntary role loss, identity change, and mental health.

A process involving distress and identity work may be triggered by involuntary role loss; the process and its effects often differ from that of voluntary role loss (Duran-Aydintug 1995; Turner 2007). My dissertation shows that involuntary role loss often triggers identity-based distress, which may necessitate identity work (supported by structural factors) as a coping strategy. By studying participants' self-concepts over time while the actual identity process was occurring, I was able to ascertain that through identity work, people may adopt (or more strongly emphasize) new identities or sustain their employee identities, and that distress can be reduced by adopting these strategies.

My study shows that unlike people who change roles voluntarily, and so preemptively seek to more strongly emphasize alternate identities and test out others' acceptance of those identities (Ebaugh 1988), people who lose roles involuntarily do not have time to make these plans. Rather, involuntary role losers may be especially prone to use whatever is structurally at hand (as manifested in social institutions and statuses) to serve as magnets for identities that they can more strongly emphasize, or to subjectively sustain their old employee identity. In other words, people (sometimes unconsciously) may take stock of their many existing roles and reorder their identity salience hierarchies (Stryker 1980), increasing or decreasing how strongly they identify with a particular role in order to cope with threatened identities (Gecas and Seff 1990; Sieber 1974; Simon 1997; Thoits 1995).

As suggested by Burke (1996) and Thoits (1999), creating some form of identity consistency often reduces identity-based distress. My findings may help explain why people who lost their jobs involuntarily but still identified with their old jobs had better mental health than those who no longer identified with their old jobs (Tosti-Kharas 2010). Additionally, my results, like those of other researchers (Drahota and Eitzen 1998; Hockey 2005; Stier 2007), show that maintaining some form of identity consistency is especially powerful for people who have lost roles involuntarily.

Overall, I show that unlike people who change roles voluntarily (Ebaugh 1988), those whose identities are threatened because of involuntarily lost roles have little time to carefully and thoughtfully prepare their identity work through anticipatory socialization. This leaves them with less control, which harms mental health (van Solinge 2007). My results imply that people try to regain control by using identity work strategies that are

highly likely to succeed – more strongly emphasizing other identities that they hold (that are embedded within their social institutions) and are congruent with their social statuses, or using similar roles within social institutions to sustain the threatened identity.

My findings may be applied to involuntary role transitions more broadly. For example, a man whose wife initiates divorce may experience a loss of control as his husband identity becomes threatened or lost. He may regain control by instead emphasizing more strongly other existing identities that are easily at hand and are congruent with societal expectations of men, such as employee or coach. Despite his divorced status, he may even still utilize the institution of family to try to maintain identity consistency by continuing to his father identity by actively parenting. Although this will certainly not relieve all his suffering it may lessen his identity-based distress.

Additionally, my work highlights the ways in which our many identities – past, present, and future – interrelate to provide involuntary role losers with identity work options. For example, if a banker is retired involuntarily due to layoffs, he may recall that he had “always wanted to pursue a writing career” and invest his identity more strongly in this role which he had abandoned in the past. It is possible that he could combine this strategy with sustaining his banker identity by volunteering to manage finances at his church. These strategies would seemingly reduce his distress.

Finally, others’ feedback is important for ensuring the success of our identity work. For example, if a woman loses her “healthy person” role by becoming physically disabled she may more strongly emphasize her identity as a sister, which requires more of an emotional than physical commitment, and is congruent with the emotional-relational expectations of women. Because of this, society (including her sister) is more likely to

treat her as a “good sister” and “good woman.” This will help her prevent identity void, maintain a sense of control and consistency, and will thus benefit her mental health.

*Structural Factors: Expanding or Constraining Identity Work Options*

Not all types of identity work are equally available to everyone; rather, structural factors - social institutions and social statuses - are critical to one’s ability to engage in particular types of identity work. Perhaps because of the immediate nature of identity-based distress stemming from an involuntary transition, participants “chose” identity work strategies that could be quickly implemented and easily supported by others’ feedback, which is critical to adopting a new identity or strengthening an existing identity (Burke 1991; Goffman 1959; Stryker 1980; Stryker and Burke 2000). Social institutions and social statuses provided this supportive foundation for successful identity work.

One’s sense of identity depends strongly on the extent and intensity of our connections to *social networks and institutions* (Stryker 1980; Stryker and Burke 2000), as represented by our roles (Stryker 1980). Therefore, social institutions may provide us with roles that could potentially serve as identity magnets. Additionally, because people are highly aware of societal expectations for gender, social class, race, and age (i.e., statuses), roles consistent with our statuses may be easier to adopt as identities. So although we may reorder our identity salience hierarchy when an identity is threatened, some identities may be more “usable” than others as a coping option because they are more or less congruent with other identities (Stryker 1980; Thoits 1985).

Both social institutions and social statuses could increase the likelihood of receiving verification for these identities. The resulting reduction in distress from

identity verification (Burke 1991; Burke and Stets 2009; Thoits 1999) could increase the likelihood of choosing identity work strategies that would quickly provide this verifying feedback. In other words, people would be most likely to emphasize identities based in roles that are embedded in the social institutions of which they are already members and that are congruent with their social statuses.

My findings support this theoretical proposition. Before job loss, *shifters* typically were strongly involved in social institutions that contained status-congruent roles. For example, Charlotte shifted more strongly into the mother identity, despite having always identified primarily as an employee in the past, and she noted that being a woman made it easy for her to get positive feedback for this new identity.

In contrast, *sustainers* were strongly involved in social institutions, but these institutions did not contain status-congruent roles. For example, Paul, the sole financial support for his family, equated his male status with “breadwinner.” The other social institutions with which he was involved (e.g., family) did not provide him with other roles that he could potentially adopt as identities that were congruent with “male” unless he also somehow maintained his identity as a breadwinner.<sup>129</sup> He therefore reconceptualized his hobbyist role as an employee (and breadwinner) identity, and used additional social institutions (e.g., unemployment networking group) to support employee-type identities (e.g., “marketing man”) by getting feedback that verified this identity. This reduced his identity-based distress. Other sustainers used social institutions that, while not containing roles that could serve as *new alternate* identities, were similar enough to their old employee roles to provide settings and feedback that

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<sup>129</sup> Note that this does not necessarily mean he had to continue being a breadwinner in reality. The subjective dimension of identifying as a breadwinner and provider was what was most important here.

made one subjectively feel like they were still employed. For example, Marsha's use of her EMT classes, criminal justice schooling, and volunteer work helped her sustain her old "public safety employee" identity, and her distress level fluctuated with her involvement in these institutions.

Micro-level social institutions - specifically the dyadic romantic relationship – also appeared to support participants' efforts to sustain the employee identity. This institution framed how "risky" it was to lose subjective identification as an employee. When participants were involved in the micro-level social institution of a highly volatile dyadic romantic relationship, they were prone to subjectively sustain the employee identity. For example, Paul's philandering (as well as his hoarding) had culminated in his being relegated to living in his basement prior to his job loss. He was on the verge of losing his husband role, so it may have been too psychologically risky for him to also lose his employee identity, even if he could only sustain it subjectively.

Finally, social institutions influenced the likelihood of being in *identity void*. Most participants who ended up in identity void were only minimally or weakly connected to non-workplace social institutions. This left them without ready-made roles into which they could shift their identities, and without institutions that were similar enough to their old jobs to help them sustain their employee identities. Without social institutions to help facilitate their identity work, identity void and great distress resulted. For example, although Janelle largely discarded her identity as an "SZTV employee" by getting rid of old memorabilia that contained its logo, her efforts to shift were constrained because she was minimally involved in other social institutions. Therefore, she had few ready-made roles that could be emphasized more strongly as identities or that were

similar enough to her employee identity. Her efforts to sustain her employee identity were also constrained because the social institution within which she performed her volunteer work left her doing so at home alone, and she gained no feedback that could verify her employee identity.<sup>130</sup>

My results show that when people incur identity-based distress after job loss, involvement in social institutions is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition to facilitate one type of identity work (e.g., “shifting”), is a necessary and sufficient condition to facilitate another type (e.g., “sustaining”) and, when involvement in social institutions is largely absent, one is unsuccessful in using identity work and often remains highly distressed (e.g., “identity void”) (see Figure 2, next page).

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<sup>130</sup> Janelle’s efforts to shift may have also been constrained because of persistent reminders of her former and highly salient “SZTV employee” identity. According to Janelle, because of her former employer’s prominence, potential employers would call her for “interviews” only to ask her which celebrities she had met. Additionally, ex-co-workers and friends would introduce her to new people by saying “She once worked for SZTV.” Janelle also received a postcard from her old employer that she had “left something behind – her money!” (This was an unfortunately-worded automated mailing to remind her to roll over her retirement fund account to an IRA or another employer’s retirement account.)

FIGURE 2: SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS AND STATUSES AS THEY RELATE TO THREE IDENTITY PATHS AFTER JOB LOSS



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*Temporal Considerations in Identity Work*

This dissertation contributes to existing literature by highlighting the importance of time to identity work. Time functioned in three distinct ways during the identity work process: 1) expanding potential identities into which one could shift beyond the present, and into the past and/or future; 2) maintaining consistency of self across time; and 3) providing a reference point of past “poorly-performed” roles.

I build on literature (Markus and Nurius 1986; Sieber 1974) that hints at the influence of time on identity work and the stress process, including how it relates to mood (Iyer et al. 2009; Manzi et al. 2010; Markus and Nurius 1986). My dissertation shows that past, present, and future identities are all utilized in identity work and can

reduce identity-based distress. For example, Marcus shifted more and more strongly to a possible future identity rooted in the person he had “always wanted to be” in the past – sports coach. The more he shifted toward emphasizing this identity and the more the salience of this identity increased, the more his distress decreased.

My current research also expanded on the idea of how past selves may relate to shifting or sustaining identities. Beyond the idea that one may revert to (or refer to) a past self when shifting, some participants shifted to or sustained identities that could allow them to transform or repair their perceived past “poor role performances.” For example, Charlotte reported that in the past she had been “really stinky at this parenting thing,” then spoke of her current pleasure at being “the kind of parent that I always wanted to be.” Similarly, Paul attempted to repair his past “compulsive shopper and hoarder” role, for which his wife had given him strong disapproval, by reconceptualizing those same behaviors as being an “entrepreneur.” He noted that now his wife would see that he really could make a living with those behaviors and was a provider, not a hoarder.

My dissertation research bolsters the findings of involuntary role loss literature (e.g., Drahota and Eitzen 1998; Duran-Aydintug 1995; Stier 2007; Tosti-Kharas 2010), which shows that some people try to continue to subjectively identify with their former (lost) roles, and that doing so improves mental health (Tosti-Kharas 2010). My current research suggests one reason for this is because it maintains consistency in the self (e.g., Swann 1983; Burke 1991, 1996), which reduces distress (Hockey 2005; Iyer et al. 2009; Manzi et al. 2010). For example, in my research, Marsha noted that her identity-based distress fluctuated with her level of involvement in EMT activities and educational coursework related to her old line of work. She noted that with these activities, she felt

like she was “still working” and without them it would be hard to “not be that person anymore.”

### **Extending the Conclusions: Implications for Sociological Social Psychology**

This dissertation’s results, contributions, and conclusions pose profound questions for research on identity, mental health, and the process of involuntary role loss.

Sociological mental health literature generally focuses on how material and social resources, as well as social status, shape our stressful experiences and ability to cope (e.g., Pearlin 1999; Pearlin et al. 1981). My results advance research on identity work (e.g., Pritchard and Symon 2011; Snow and Anderson 1987) by highlighting the ways in which people may use agency after role loss in order to avoid chronic identity strain and identity-based distress. Sometimes this process is conscious, but also it appears that the tendency to perform identity work may “kick in” quickly, naturally, and unconsciously after role loss. Is having a strong, consistent, and verified identity therefore an “innate” (or very strongly socially constructed) human need, essential to mental health? I propose that it is, and that identity is therefore critical to consider in mental health research.

Involuntary role loss presents a distinct challenge to one’s self-concept and requires unique coping strategies because of its involuntary nature. In the involuntary role loss process, one has no time to proactively search for alternative identities and solicit feedback on each, as is done when changing roles voluntarily (Ebaugh 1988). Instead, one must act quickly, perhaps shifting more strongly or sustaining one’s identity toward a role that they suspect will “work” for them. One option is to move toward identities for which they could receive verifying feedback (Burke 1991), such as

identities rooted in status-congruent roles within their existing social institutions (e.g., a woman shifting to mother within her family). Status-congruent roles within social institutions allow one to quickly re-establish a sense of who one is, reduce distress, and steer clear of identity void. Therefore, these roles act as identity magnets and would likely be the first ones chosen. Perhaps this is a short-term stopgap measure; one may quickly find a new identity to avoid distress and later seek a new identity from there as time passes (potentially moving into a voluntary role transition and identity change). The longer-term identity work process is an area ripe for exploration in future research on involuntary role loss.

This dissertation also suggests that despite conceptual distinction between identity discrepancy types, a great deal of overlap exists between them in lived reality. A man who loses his job may simultaneously experience verification discrepancies (e.g., “People no longer *treat me* as a breadwinner or employee”), status consistency discrepancies (e.g., “I no longer feel like a real *man*”), and temporal consistency discrepancies (e.g., “I no longer feel like the *same person* I was before”). In lived reality, identity discrepancies are interwoven like a patchwork, with each discrepancy type contributing to an overall feeling of identity-based distress. This suggests that one need not resolve each specific identity discrepancy to alleviate identity-based distress. Rather, taking a step to resolve one or two of these discrepancies may do the trick. For example, when an unemployed man shifts to the coach identity, he does not resolve a sense of being the same person across time, but he may re-establish his sense of self as a man and get feedback toward that end, thus relieving some distress. Is there one discrepancy type that is more essential to resolve, or is more effective in reducing distress than others? This is an open

question that would be good to explore in future research, but my findings on the importance of social status to identity work suggests that status consistency discrepancies may be the first discrepancy type that people address when coping with involuntary role loss.

Despite the prevalence of agency documented in this dissertation, two structural factors - social institutions and status – often expanded or constrained agentic efforts. Even if people are more agentic than first assumed, we must always keep in mind that people “choose” within historical, geographical, and personal environmental contexts, and so we cannot assume that all people have access to the same choices. Statuses that may disadvantage one in the world at large may, at times, privilege one in his or her ability to cope (at least in the short term). For example, although being female is disadvantaging overall in society at large, being a woman allows one to more easily shift to emphasize the mother identity and reduce identity-based distress after job loss. In other cases, our choices are constrained by status, as when being African-American leaves one reluctant to take specific types of jobs (and adopt specific types of identities) for fear of confirming stereotypes. The choices that participants made were largely guided by their concerns about what society-at-large (as well as specific others) would think or how others would receive their new identities, regardless of whether anyone had actually given them feedback about these new identities. This supports previous work (Norris 2011) that shows that beliefs about the generalized other may be more powerful than actual feedback in guiding identity work, especially when dealing with status-role mismatch (e.g., older undergraduate).

Because status, such as sex or age, is often visible and non-mutable it may be the first magnet for our identity work (Norris and Milkie 2007). Newly chosen role identities are likely to be congruent with our statuses, perhaps because this makes them easier to verify (as noted by Charlotte in Chapter Five). The results of this dissertation support that idea, as participants typically made attempts first to gravitate toward identities that were status-congruent. Further research should be conducted to flesh out how visibility and mutability of statuses and roles contribute to coping strategies, identity work, and identity discrepancies.

This dissertation shows that identity is not merely a static idea of who we are based on our roles and statuses, but is instead a fluid performance, subjectively conceived and confirmed during interaction, as suggested by Goffman (1959; 1963). This dissertation shows that identity goes beyond being a theoretical concept unrelated to real-life consequences; instead it has the power to affect mental health and life trajectories. Fundamentally, identity may also operate as a coping resource, similar to material resources and social support (Pearlin et al. 1981).

In contrast to the idea of individuals holding a “true identity” or a “real self,” in contrast to the idea of identity as a condition, we may conceptualize identity in more dynamic terms: as a coping strategy, as cognitive and behavioral efforts to feel good about oneself or feel that one is the same person across time. In theory, we are motivated to enhance our self-esteem (Rosenberg 1986 [1979]; Tajfel 1981) and to maintain consistency in the self (Burke 1991; Rosenberg 1986 [1979]; Swann 1983). Snow and Anderson’s (1987) empirical research on homeless people’s identity work supports this idea. Perhaps in the end it does not matter whether one really regains the lost role or

completes an objective entry into (or stronger emphasis on) a new or alternate role; perhaps the process of effort and movement and rethinking oneself *in order to cope with one's social environment* is the whole point.

Conceptualizing identity and mental health as continually changing processes (rather than as conditions) is critical to fully understanding both concepts. Within this dissertation, support for this idea is reflected in the ways that *time* related to identity work. Life is not static, and circumstances (e.g., job loss) change as time progresses. After a change that places one in a new role (e.g., unemployed) other things still continue to change as time goes on. For example, one may find a job, fail to find a job, encounter trouble with one's spouse or family, interact with ex-co-workers, enter a recession, move to a new neighborhood, have a child, etc. It makes sense then that we utilize time itself in identity work. We reflect on our past roles and identities to understand where we are today, consider possible future selves in order to comprehend and motivate our current behavior (Markus and Nurius 1986), and perhaps consider past and future possible roles and identities to discover how we might resolve our distress, who might support us in this, and how they might do so.

In some respects, we head to the familiar, the well-worn path, starting with the aspects of the self that are already "solid," those to which we are accustomed. Can we somehow be the same person across time by remaining "an employee," even if only subjectively, as participants did when sustaining? This would satisfy the self-consistency motive and reduce distress (Burke 1991; Rosenberg 1986 [1979]; Swann 1983, 1986). Can we start with a status (such as female) and increase our identification with a role that "matches" it (such as mother) gaining societal approval and positive feedback for what

women are “supposed” to do? This could make us feel good about ourselves by satisfying our self-esteem motive (Rosenberg 1986 [1979]; Tajfel 1981) and could provide verification that reduces distress (Burke 1991). In the end, it appears that both identity and mental health are processes, not static conditions, and future research would benefit from conceiving them as such.

### **Connections to Sociological Literature on the Self, Broadly Conceived**

Overall, my study’s results support the extensive literature on society and the self. As posited by Berger and Luckmann (1966), people who experienced a disruption of the routines that sustained their “realities” (including their identities) because of job loss tried to reconstruct these realities by interacting with others, face-to-face, in specific and expected ways for their roles and statuses. As predicted (Berger and Luckmann 1966), they also used the (seemingly stable) reality provided by social institutions to ground their efforts. For example, Charlotte salvaged her reality and identities by gravitating to the family and focusing on her daily routines interacting with her children, a socially acceptable focus for a woman.

My results also supported classic theories on the interrelation between self and society (Mead 1934; Rosenberg 1986 [1970]). Despite societal constraints on conceptions of self, my study participants used Mead’s (1934) agentic “I” to creatively respond to identity challenges. They engaged in role-taking (Mead 1934) by considering the ways in which the generalized other (and specific others) might view their unemployment (e.g., “What did he do wrong?”) and their identity work (e.g., approval of woman as mother) as they navigated their job loss. They imagined possible selves to

motivate their action and reduce their distress (Markus and Nurius 1986), sometimes allowing their past anticipatory socialization (Merton 1957) to facilitate the changing salience of their various identities. For example, Marcus had already inhabited the coach role and so knew how to perform it; this prior socialization into it quickly facilitated a shift to coach as a more salient identity after job loss. In Rosenberg's (1986 [1979]) parlance, participants' awareness of and agreement with the perceived judgments of others regarding unemployed people intensified their negative self-evaluations. Rosenberg (1986 [1979]) posited that threats to psychologically central and achieved roles are likely to harm self-esteem. My study's results support this view, and that people make efforts to reduce this distress by shifting their emphasis to another identity or subjectively sustaining the identity connected to the lost role.

## **Study Advantages and Limitations**

### *Study Advantages*

My study offers several advantages over past research on identity and involuntary role loss. First, as suggested by other researchers, I examined identity (including identity discrepancies and identity work), mental health, and job loss in conjunction (Ezzy 1993; Feldman 1996; Kalleberg 2009; Thoits 1999), and did so within the frame of involuntary role loss. This allowed me to discover a greater number of conceptual interconnections than if I had examined each concept separately.

Second, I collected longitudinal data during the process that occurred shortly after job loss and continuing over time. This allowed me to examine identity work processes as they unfolded, and avoid the pitfalls of collecting cross-sectional data after the

transition is complete, as done by most involuntary role loss and identity change researchers (e.g., Drahota and Eitzen 1998; Duran-Aydintug 1995; Riach and Loretto 2009). Taking a longitudinal approach allowed me to more fully examine the identity change process (Thoits 1999:360), gain more accurate estimates of the amount of change experienced, and lessen retrospective bias (Tourangeau, Rips, and Rasinski 2000:125). My research shows that identity work after involuntary job loss is a process that people negotiate over time, adopting or rejecting strategies as they work or fail.<sup>131</sup>

Third, because my study was done shortly after “The Great Recession” in which a very high number of layoffs occurred, I limited the effects of reverse causation. In other words, because so much of the population has experienced job loss, it is unlikely that my sample consisted primarily of people who lost their jobs due to pre-existing mental health conditions. The timing of the study enabled me to more clearly show that identity-based distress after job loss can occur for psychologically healthy people. Because my sample consisted of white-collar workers, many of whom had strong social support and extensive financial resources, I was able to show that distress after job loss is not limited to financial or relational concerns, but rather extends to identity, even when financial and relational aspects of one’s life are strong and stable.

### Study Limitations

There are several limitations to my study. First, because this is qualitative research done with a purposive sample, the results are not generalizable to the unemployed population, nor to people who have involuntarily lost roles.

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<sup>131</sup> Often, specific strategies fail (or are not undertaken) because the structural factors needed to support them, such as social institutions, do not exist in participants’ lives.

Second, reverse causation, as suggested in the rehabilitation approach (Tiffany et al. 1970), may have biased my sample composition toward people who lost their jobs due to pre-existing mental health conditions. I believe this effect was minimized by the timing of my study – just after “The Great Recession” – in which layoffs have been common and widespread. Although some of my participants were fired for cause, the bulk of my sample reported being laid off because of company downsizing. Additionally, I tried to account for pre-existing mental health issues, their resolution, and their potential effects by asking questions on this topic. A related concern is that people who were already considering a job change may have given off signals at work that they were dissatisfied, which led to being fired for cause. This would imply that identity salience hierarchies were changing before job loss. This seems to have been the case for at least two participants. Nevertheless, perhaps because they did not actively choose to leave their jobs, they appeared to go through the same identity work processes as other participants. Once again, because the bulk of my sample experienced layoffs rather than being fired for cause, my overall concern relating to reverse causation is minimal.

Third, participants who volunteered for this study may have been more desirous of telling their story than the average unemployed person, or may have been struggling more to understand their process or to alleviate distress. This could bias the results, making the identity work process appear more elaborate, dramatic, or burdensome than it actually is. Nevertheless, if this were to occur, I believe that theoretical contributions can only be bolstered by extreme manifestations of processes, because it clarifies them by creating a pure “ideal type” (Weber 1904 [1949]). However, I doubt that these selection

effects took place because of the moderate number of participants who appeared to be managing distress fairly well or did not report having identity-based distress.

Fourth, one of the unemployment networking groups from which I recruited my sample often emphasized issues relevant to the older job seeker and, perhaps because it was geared to a middle-class crowd, emphasized the importance of finding work that matched who one is as a person. Therefore, my results could overstate the effects of identity discrepancies, especially those related to age. However, my sample was recruited from a number of other sources and participants from those sources showed similar patterns regarding identity discrepancies (including those involving age). Also, not all participants recruited from the networking group in question suffered identity-based distress, nor did they all mention age as an important dimension in their process.

Finally, my sample is limited to unemployed people who once worked white-collar jobs. It therefore may not be able to speak to identity-based distress and identity work experienced and undertaken by blue-collar, pink-collar, or service workers.

### **Future Research and Applications**

This research may be used by counselors and job seekers' groups to better assist distressed unemployed people. Helping professionals should take into account that distress after job loss goes beyond the already substantial effects of financial strain, relational strain, and loss of routine and interactions; it extends into the realm of identity. Identity discrepancies should be addressed as a potential chronic strain that requires identity work for distress relief. Helping professionals should also note that different approaches may be required for people with different statuses (e.g., women versus men)

or who have varying levels of involvement in social institutions because of the ways in which statuses and social institutions expand or constrain identity work strategies.

Future research should focus on exploring potential identity discrepancies and identity work processes of blue-collar, pink-collar, and service workers. Although some researchers (e.g., Andersen 2009; McFadyen 1995) suggest that middle-class people experience greater shame after job loss, this does not necessarily mean that identity is irrelevant to blue-collar, pink-collar, and service workers. Research on working-class unemployed people (Nixon 2006; Willott and Griffin 2004) suggests that work and identity are interrelated for this group.

Additionally, in the future, research should examine how long the distress relief provided by identity work lasts. For example, is there a point where shifting loses its power? If the distress of financial strain becomes too great over time, do identity-based concerns take a back seat? It is also worth exploring what happens to the shifts and sustaining efforts made by people after they find new jobs.<sup>132</sup>

## **Summary**

In this dissertation, I have established that identity is an important factor to consider in the stress process that occurs after involuntary role loss. Identity discrepancies may be triggered by this loss, resulting in distress, and identity work may be used to reduce this distress. One may shift to (or more strongly emphasize) an alternate identity based in a role that is rooted in the social institutions of their past, present, or future, or one may subjectively sustain his or her employee identity. Without

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<sup>132</sup> Preliminary evidence from the current study suggests that, once people find work, they abandon the identities to which they had shifted when out of work, and that people who subjectively sustain the employee identity may delay or cut back on their job search.

these strategies, one may lose all sense of who one is, and end up in a highly distressing identity void. Finally, identity work options may be expanded or constrained by the extent of one's involvement in social institutions, as well as one's social statuses. In sum, taking identity, structural factors, and time into account together when examining the stress process can provide a much more comprehensive picture of the factors involved in mental health following involuntary role loss.

APPENDIX A: DESCRIPTION OF PARTICIPANT CHARACTERISTICS

<u>Pseudo-nym</u>	<u>Gender</u>	<u>Race</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>Former Occupation/Field</u>	<u>Unemployment Duration in months (Time 1)</u>	<u>Method of Job Loss</u>
Marsha	Female	White	41	Middle manager/public safety	1	Fired
Paul	Male	White	56	General manager/publishing	3	Laid off
Uma	Female	White	62	Systems engineer/government defense contractor	11	Laid off
Ken	Male	White	57	CEO/non-profit organization	1 ½	Fired
Theo	Male	White	60	Senior programmer & software engineer/small private tech company	2 ½	Fired
Minnie	Female	White	63	Staff editor/professional journal	2	Fired
Marcus	Male	African-American	47	Operations director/green technology industry	6	Laid off
Charlotte	Female	White	41	Chief financial officer/non-profit in financial sector	4 ½	Fired
Amber	Female	White	30	Staff editor & reporter/local newspaper	2 weeks	Fired
Saul	Male	African-American	48	Senior mortgage banker/housing lender	6	Laid off
Corey	Female	African-American	46	Director of affirmative action programs/higher education	2 ½	Resigned - anticipated getting fired
Charlie	Male	White	62	Director of training/trade association	3	Laid off
Foluke	Female	African-American (from Liberia)	52	Contracts administrator/pharmaceutical industry	6 ½	Laid off
Connie	Female	African-American	56	Director of human resources/government contractor	3	Fired
Cindy	Female	White	62	Account executive/hotel industry	2 ½	Resigned - anticipated getting fired
Norman	Male	White	51	Senior financial manager/trade association	4 ½	Laid off
Skip	Male	White	53	Vice president & treasury management specialist/large national bank	3	Laid off
Janelle	Female	African-American	39	Online programming manager/media	6	Laid off
Margie	Female	White	57	Director of corporate business communications/ mortgage lender	2	Laid off
Louie	Male	White	60	Area manager/small engineering company	1	Laid off
Ruth	Female	African-American	43	Team lead information analyst/government contractor	6	Laid off
Stanley	Male	African-American	34	Information technology specialist/government contractor	1	Laid off
Nancy	Female	White	49	Director of business marketing & communications/mortgage lender	3	Laid off

<u>Pseudonym</u>	<u>Gender</u>	<u>Race</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>Former Occupation/Field</u>	<u>Unemployment Duration in months (Time 1)</u>	<u>Method of Job Loss</u>
Kaci	Female	White	57	Health insurance manager/health insurance company	5 ½	Laid off
Lorna	Female	African-American	51	Supervisor of quality control/media	6	Laid off

APPENDIX B: PARTICIPANTS' ECONOMIC AND FAMILY SITUATIONS

<b>Pseu- donym</b>	<b><u>Marital/ Family Status</u></b>	<b><u>Sole bread- winner?</u></b>	<b><u>Hh income in past 1 year from intvw dates (Time 1 &amp; Time 2)*</u></b>	<b><u>Duration of severance package (# months worth of past pay)</u></b>	<b><u>Financial strain notes</u></b>
Marsha	Divorced  Has primary custody of, & lives with, her 2 teenage children  Poor relationship with ex-husband	Y	T1 - \$40-50K T2 - \$40-50K  Pays bills by:  Public assistance  Using daughter's college financial aid money  Borrowing from family & friends  Dipping into her minimal retirement funds	3 months	No earned income.  Hard to pay bills.  No money to pay next month's mortgage
Paul	Separated  Lives in basement of house; wife lives upstairs  Has 3 adult children; 1 is severely disabled & lives with them	Y	T1 - \$80-90K T2 - \$80-90K  Pays bills by:  Selling items from basement online  Unemployment checks	4 months	Reported little strain; all bills current.  Makes own lunch at home instead of eating out.  Has new monthly expense - COBRA payment.
Uma	Married  No children of her own  Lives with husband & 2 nieces	Y	T1 - \$100K+ (no second interview)  Pays bills by: using savings	No severance package	Lived in basement to conserve electricity. Turned off air conditioning. Strong cutback on expenses.  Husband also unemployed.

<b><u>Pseu-donym</u></b>	<b><u>Marital/Family Status</u></b>	<b><u>Sole bread-winner?</u></b>	<b><u>Hh income in past 1 year from intvw dates (Time 1 &amp; Time 2)*</u></b>	<b><u>Duration of severance package (# months worth of past pay)</u></b>	<b><u>Financial strain notes</u></b>
Ken	Married  Lives with wife  Has 2 adult daughters	N	T1 - \$100K+ T2 - \$100K+  Pays bills by: wife's income	4 months	Reported no financial strain.  Wife earns about \$250K/year.  Doing so well they spent 5 digits on home remodeling.
Theo	Divorced  Lives alone, but is in & out of romantic relationship  Has minimal contact with 2 adult children	Y	T1 - \$50-60K T2 - \$50-60K  Pays bills by: monthly allowance from wealthy mother	No severance package	Fell behind on some minor bills.  During second interview was offered new job that will pay in the upper \$90Ks
Minnie	Single  No children  Lives alone	Y	T1 - \$50-60K T2 - \$40-50K  Pays bills by: unemployment check  cashing in CD	2 months	Is down to last \$500 of CD she cashed in. Has another CD she's about to cash in.  Owns \$1500 in stocks.
Marcus	Divorced  Lives alone  Has weekend visits with son, age 13	Y	T1 - \$100K+ T2 - \$60-70K  Pays bills by: using savings  very small amount of consulting at Time 2	No severance package	Reported financial strain as minimal  Has cut back sharply on shopping for leisure, & on dinners & movies out

<b><u>Pseu-donym</u></b>	<b><u>Marital/Family Status</u></b>	<b><u>Sole bread-winner?</u></b>	<b><u>Hh income in past 1 year from intvw dates (Time 1 &amp; Time 2)*</u></b>	<b><u>Duration of severance package (# months worth of past pay)</u></b>	<b><u>Financial strain notes</u></b>
Charlotte	Married  Lives with husband & 2 children under age 5  Husband has been stay-at-home father for past 4 years	Y	T1 - \$100K+ T2 - \$100K+  Pays bills by: severance package	8 ½ months	No income by Time 2, but is maintaining past standard of living due to strong severance package  Has not had to dip into savings
Amber	Single (but engaged)  No children  She & fiance' live in her parents' basement; parents are frustrated & gave her a deadline to move out	N	T1- \$20-30K T2 - \$30-40K (employed)  Pays bills by: help from parents at Time 1  employment at Time 2	No severance package	She & fiance both unemployed  Lived in parents' basement; almost got kicked out
Saul	Married  Lives with wife & 3 children – 2 teenagers & 1 toddler	N	T1- \$70-80K (no second interview)  Pays bills by: job as exterminator	No severance package	Home foreclosure; moved into apartment  Lost their business  Removed kids from private school  Cut back sharply on expenses
Corey	Divorced  No children  Lives alone	Y	T1 - \$100K+ T2 – \$100K+  Pays bills by: using savings	Specific length unknown, but < 2 ½ months	Reported little financial strain  Has financial resources to sustain current lifestyle for 1 ½ years

<b><u>Pseu- donym</u></b>	<b><u>Marital/ Family Status</u></b>	<b><u>Sole bread- winner?</u></b>	<b><u>Hh income in past 1 year from intvw dates (Time 1 &amp; Time 2)*</u></b>	<b><u>Duration of severance package (# months worth of past pay)</u></b>	<b><u>Financial strain notes</u></b>
Charlie	Married  Lives with wife & 2 children – 1 pre-teen & 1 teenager	N	T1- \$100K+ T2 – unknown; miscommunication on this question  Pays bills by: wife's income	6 months	Wife increased her work hours  Reported minimal financial strain  Has investments & savings – anticipates using savings soon to pay bills  Has incurred COBRA health care expenses
Foluke	Divorced  Has 3 adult children & lives with 1 of them	Y	T1 - \$50-60K T2 - \$10-20K  Pays bills by: unemployment check (upcoming)  using savings  income from adult daughter who lives with her	8 ½ months	Electricity was cut off  Shares 1 car with daughter  Cut back on discretion- ary spending  Has no outstanding debt  Borrowed against 401k to pay daughter's tuition  Savings & 401k would last her another year at current spending pace

<b><u>Pseu-donym</u></b>	<b><u>Marital/Family Status</u></b>	<b><u>Sole bread-winner?</u></b>	<b><u>Hh income in past 1 year from intvw dates (Time 1 &amp; Time 2)*</u></b>	<b><u>Duration of severance package (# months worth of past pay)</u></b>	<b><u>Financial strain notes</u></b>
Connie	Divorced  No children  Lives alone	Y	T1 - \$90-100K T2 – \$90-100K  Pays bills by: 3 p/t jobs  spending all of 401k  using savings  unemployment check	No severance package	Government program helped her reduce mortgage  Is concerned about how she'll pay next month's mortgage  Inherited very large sum of money – has not used any of it, but likely will need to do so  Has about \$8K in credit card debt  By Time 2 is 1 month away from exhausting all savings (except inheritance)
Cindy	Married  Lives with husband  No children	N	T1 - \$70-80K T2 - \$70-80K  Pays bills by: husband's retirement & Social Security funds  using some savings  new job at Time 2	Has severance package, but amount unknown	Husband just began working as real estate agent  Has postponed travel
Norman	Married  Lives with wife & 2 teenage children	N	T1 - \$100K+ T2 - \$80-90K  Pays bills by: wife's income  p/t job	3 months	Reported minimal financial strain  Has cut back on spending

<b><u>Pseudonym</u></b>	<b><u>Marital/Family Status</u></b>	<b><u>Sole breadwinner?</u></b>	<b><u>Hh income in past 1 year from intvw dates (Time 1 &amp; Time 2)*</u></b>	<b><u>Duration of severance package (# months worth of past pay)</u></b>	<b><u>Financial strain notes</u></b>
Skip	Divorced  Lives with roommates  Wife & children (2 teens, 2 adults) live in a separate state	Y	T1 - \$100K+ T2 - \$80-90K  Pays bills by: p/t work  trading in-kind work for rent reduction  occasional payments from a company to lease owned land	3 months	Could not maintain alimony payments; wife's house in foreclosure as a result  Is behind on rent  Can't afford to fix car so shares friend's car
Janelle	Single  Lives alone  No children  Family of origin & boyfriend live out-of-state	Y	T1 - \$50-60K T2 - \$20-30K  Pays bills by: unemployment check  small amount of food stamps  using savings  occasional small amounts of cash help from mom & boyfriend	1 ½ months	Unemployment covers rent only  Had substantial savings – had been saving to buy a house  Has 401K & has not had to use it
Margie	Single  Lives alone  No children	Y	T1 - \$100K+ T2 - \$100K+  Pays bills by: using savings	4 months	Reported no financial strain  Also got bonus pay at time of separation  Has substantial savings
Louie	Married  Lives with wife  3 biological & 3 stepchildren all live in separate households	N	T1 - \$100K+ T2 - \$100K+  Pays bills by: wife's income	No severance package	Reported minimal financial strain  Has temporarily stopped saving for retirement  Has limited some expenses  Has substantial savings

<b>Pseu-donym</b>	<b><u>Marital/Family Status</u></b>	<b><u>Sole bread-winner?</u></b>	<b><u>Hh income in past 1 year from intvw dates (Time 1 &amp; Time 2)*</u></b>	<b><u>Duration of severance package (# months worth of past pay)</u></b>	<b><u>Financial strain notes</u></b>
Ruth	Married at T1; separated at T2  Lives with husband & his parents – T1; lives with friend – T2  No children	N	T1- \$60-70K T2- \$60-70K  Pays bills by: living with inlaws & friend  husband's income  unemployment check (until it expired)	No severance package	Inlaws wanted them to move out within 2 months of Time 1
Stanley	Married  Lives with wife & toddler daughter	N	T1- \$100K+ T2- \$100K+  Pays bills by: wife's income	No severance package	Cutting back on discretionary expenses  Driving low MPG car less often  Has substantial credit card debt (occurred before job loss)
Nancy	Married  Lives with husband & 2 teenage daughters	N	T1- \$100K+ T2- \$100K+  Pays bills by: husband's business (lucrative)	12 months	Reported minimal financial strain  Has COBRA health coverage but is not causing financial strain
Kaci	Divorced, but engaged – T1; divorced & no longer engaged – T2  Lives alternately with fiance' or by self in separate state – T1; lives alone in apartment – T2  Has 2 adult children who live in separate households	N (T1); Y (T2)	T1- \$100K+ T2- \$20-30K  Pays bills by: unemployment check  fiance's income (despite troubled relationship)  selling house  carrying high credit card balance  new job she is about to start by Time 2 will pay about \$70-80K	No severance package	Break-up with fiancé exacerbated financial problems by Time 2
Lorna	Married  Lives with husband & 2 teenage children	N	T1- \$100K+ T2- \$50-60K  Pays bills by: husband's income  unemployment check	6 months	- Has been behind in mortgage by up to 4 months  -Sent daughter to less prestigious college than originally planned  -Eats out & shops less

\* Many participants' income levels did not appear to drop because of the limited amount of time that many participants had been unemployed. "Annual household income" was calculated as within the last year from the interview date (e.g., if interviewed on Jan. 1, 2011 after 1 month of unemployment, participant reported income from Jan. 1, 2010 to Jan. 1, 2011). This made the financial strain appear less impactful than it often was. Severance checks, part-time income, and spousal income also made financial strain appear to be less than it was.

APPENDIX C: SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

<b>Has experienced job loss before</b>	
Yes	76% (19)
No	24% (6)
<b>Method of job loss</b>	
Laid off	64% (16)
Fired for cause	28% (7)
Resigned because anticipated being fired	8% (2)
<b>Received advance notice of job loss</b>	
Yes	36% (9)
No	56 % (14)
Other (N/A- resigned)	8% (2)
<b>Working for pay by time of second interview</b>	
Yes	28% (7)
No	64% (16)
Unknown (no second interview available)	8% (2)
<b>Underemployed at time of second interview (of the 7 working)</b>	
Yes - underemployed	42.9% (3)
No – working at level appropriate to education	57.1% (4)

## **APPENDIX D - Semi-Structured Interview Schedule, Demographic Form, and Screening Questions**

### **PRE-SCREENING TO DETERMINE ELIGIBILITY TO PARTICIPATE:**

- How old are you?
- How many hours per week did you work in your old job?
- How long ago did you lose your job?
- What was the title of the job you lost?
- For the next question, think of how you would rate yourself on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being the most & 1 being the least. When you were employed in your former job as a [\*autofill: former occupation], how strongly did you think of yourself as a [\*autofill: former occupation]?
- Again, let's use the 1 to 10 scale. Currently, how strongly do you think of yourself as a [\*autofill: former occupation]?
- What is the highest level of schooling you completed? (for use later in the interview, if participant qualifies)

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### **INTERVIEW SCHEDULE**

#### **ESTABLISHING RAPPORT; NATURE OF RECENTLY-LOST JOB/LAST JOB**

*Prelude:* Let's start by talking about your last job. Tell me a little about that job.

*PROBES (if necessary):*

- What was your job title?
- What was your job as a [title of lost job] like?
  - (JOB CONDITIONS):
    - What were your responsibilities? Describe what you did there on a typical day.
    - What was your typical work schedule like?
    - What were the physical working conditions like at this job?
    - How closely were you supervised? Did you supervise anyone?

- How much control did you have over your work schedule? Your deadlines? Your work pace?
- What were your relationships with other people there like? (co-workers; boss; supervisees; clients). Did you make friends at work that you also saw outside of work?

(SUBJECTIVE MEANING OF JOB):

- What did you like/dislike about this job? How stressful was this job? What was stressful about it?
- What did it mean to you to be a [job title]?
- Did you think of this job as a career?/Did you hope to have a job like this or was it “just a job” to you?/How committed did you feel to this job?

(OTHER)

- How long did you have this job?

DETERMINING WORK HISTORY

- Tell me a little about your work history.
  - How many other jobs have you held?
  - What job did you do just before this job?
  - Of all your jobs, which did you like the most?
  - Which of your jobs was closest to the kind of job you hoped to have?
- Let’s talk a little more about your work history. Start with your job as a [title of second most recent job/OR if large # of jobs, the job closest to the job he/she hoped to have]. What was that job like? *PROBES*:
  - What was your job title? What were your responsibilities? Describe what you did on a typical day there.
  - How long did you work there?
  - What was your typical work schedule like?; On a typical week, how many hours did you work there?
  - What did you like/dislike about this job?
  - What did it mean to you to be a [job title]?

- Did you think of this job as a career?/Did you hope to have a job like this or was it “just a job” to you?/How committed did you feel to this job?
- Why did you leave that job?
- What was your next job? How did you find that job? [Probe a little on each job, from most to least recent.]

### JOB LOSS

- Tell me the story of how you lost your job, starting from the beginning.

#### *PROBES:*

##### (JOB LOSS ITSELF & IMMEDIATE REACTIONS/INTERACTIONS)

- How did you find out that you were going to lose your job?
  - Who told you?
  - Where were you?
  - What did you say/do next?
  - What reason did they give you for the job loss?
  - Did you have some warning that you might lose your job or was it a surprise?
- After you found out, did you tell anyone? Who? What did you say? What did they say or do next?

##### (EMOTIONAL/COGNITIVE REACTIONS)

- What was it like for you after you found out you had lost your job? What did you think about?
  - Did your feelings or thoughts change as time passed after losing your job?
    - Next few days
    - Next few weeks
    - After a month/next few months

What is it like for you when you go to [the unemployment/social services office; employment counseling; the One-Stop Center]?

### UNDEREMPLOYMENT [UNDEREMPLOYED PARTICIPANTS ONLY]

(Orientation to participant's underemployment experience is covered earlier in job history section)

- Please tell me a little about the time when you were thinking about taking your current job. *PROBES*:
  - How did you make your decision to take this job?
  - Did you talk to anyone when you were thinking about taking this job? Who? What did they say?
  - Were there other things that influenced your decision to take this job?
- Do you feel like you made the right decision taking this job? Why/why not?

### FINANCIAL STRAIN

- How has losing your job affected your financial situation? *PROBES*: Have you:
  - changed your spending habits? (What have you given up/postponed? NOT given up/postponed? Why?)
  - (or your family) had to go without things you really needed because you were short of money?
  - moved to a different place to live? (Where? – region, apartment/home, etc.; live with anyone?)
  - used credit cards differently than you used to?
  - borrowed money? From whom?
  - eaten meals with family or friends more often?
  - relied on family or friends more often for things?

Has anyone in your family had to start working, change to a new job, or work more hours to help with your financial situation?

### MENTAL HEALTH

*Prelude*: I'd like to change topics a little, & talk about what your moods have been like lately. Different people have different moods. Some people talk about feeling down or nervous or angry; other people's experiences are different. What have your moods been like lately?

- (After initial response, if necessary) Some people [get depressed/ get anxious/ get angry/ increase the amount of alcohol they drink] when they lose job and some

don't. What has it been like for you? (FOCUS IN ON EMOTIONAL REACTIONS THAT SAY THEY HAVE HAD) *PROBES*:

- When do you feel the most/least [depressed; etc.]? Are there things you do that make you feel more/less [depressed; etc.]? What do you think causes you to feel [depressed; etc.]?
- What is the most [depressing; etc.] thing to you about losing your job? When you think about losing your job, are there certain thoughts that make you feel [depressed; etc.]?

## IDENTITY DISCREPANCIES

### Temporal Consistency Discrepancies

- Overall, do you feel like you are the same person today as you were before you lost your job? *PROBES*:
  - In what ways are you [the same as/different from] how you were before?
    - Do you think this is a good thing, a bad thing, or both?
- Are there times you feel like nothing has changed since you lost your job? *PROBES*:
  - Are there things you do that make it feel like nothing has changed?
- Are there things that have become more/less important to you since you lost your job?
- What is it like for you when you compare your old job to [not having a job/your current job]?
  - Do you feel any better/worse about yourself when you make this comparison? [self-esteem]
  - When you make this comparison, do you feel like you have more, less, or the same amount of control over your life than you did before you lost your job? [mastery]
- (If necessary for extra detail) In what ways is [not having a job/working your current job] different from your old job? In what ways is it the same?
- (If necessary for extra detail) When do you feel the least/most like the person you were at your old job?

### Aspiration Discrepancies

*If needed, begin with:* (When you think about employment...):

- Can you describe for me the person you'd ideally like to be?
  - Do you feel like you are that person right now?
  - In what ways are you [like this/not like this]?
- When do you feel the most/least like the person you'd like to be?
- When you think about employment, what is it like for you when you compare the person you are now with the person you'd ideally like to be?
  - When you make this comparison, do you feel good/bad about yourself?
  - When you make this comparison, how much control do you feel like you have over your life?

### Obligation Discrepancies

*Prelude:* For some people, there's a difference between who they are and what society imagines they should be like.

- When you think about work, do you think society would say you are doing what you should be doing? (*If needed*) For example, if Joe Schmo doesn't know you personally, but knows your circumstances, would he say you're doing what you should be doing in relation to work? *PROBES:*
  - In what ways are you (not) the kind of person other people think you should be?
- What is it like for you when you compare what society would say you should be doing with what you are currently doing?
  - When you make this comparison, do you feel good/bad about yourself?
  - When you make this comparison, how much control do you feel like you have over your life?
- When do you feel the least/most like the kind of person society thinks you should be?
- Do you ever compare yourself to other people when you think about work?  
*PROBES:*
  - To whom do you compare yourself?

- Do you feel like you're better than them, worse than them, or both?
  - In what ways are you better/worse than them?
- Do you feel more the same as them, different from them, or both?
  - In what ways are you the same/different from them?

(If time allows and/or if participant indicates it, also ask same Q, probing on specific others, such as spouse, family, friends, kids, former co-workers)

### Verification Discrepancies

Now I'm going to ask you some questions about how you want to be treated by other people, and how those other people treat you.

- Do you want other people to treat you like you have no job, like you're a [old job title], (like you're a [new job title] *if applicable*), or some other way?
- How have other people treated you since you lost your job? [*If underemployed*, also ask "How have other people treated you since you started working as [new job title]?" ] Start w/whoever comes to mind 1<sup>st</sup>. *PROBE, if necessary:*
  - Immediate family members/extended relatives
  - Friends
  - Ex-co-workers
  - Potential employers
  - (If underemployed) Co-workers
  - (If underemployed) Boss
  - (If underemployed, & if relevant) Customers or clients
- Do other people treat you like a [person without a job/new job title] or like a [old job title]? *PROBES:*
  - Are there things you've done to try to show people you are a [old job title/other desired identity]? Are there things you've done to try to get people to treat you a certain way? (Base on Q1; use desired ID)
- What is it like for you when you think about the way other people treat you since you lost your job (and, if underemployed, started working your current

job). (Pay special attn to indications of depression, anxiety, anger, & alcohol use.)

### Status Consistency Discrepancies

Different people think in different ways about what it means to be a man or a woman, and what it means to have a certain level of education. Next, I'm going to ask some questions about what these things mean to you.

[GENDER]

- How would you describe what it means to be a [man/woman]? For example, how do you know that someone is a good [man/woman]? *PROBE:*
  - What are some things you can imagine a good/bad [man/woman] doing/thinking/feeling?

[EDUCATION]

- How would you describe what it means to have completed [participants' education level]? *PROBE:*
  - What are some things you can imagine someone who has completed [insert participant's educ level] doing?
  - What would you imagine that someone who has completed [insert participant's educ level] would NOT be doing?
- What is it like for you as a [man/woman] to be [working current job/unemployed?]
- What is it like for you as someone who has completed [insert participant's educ level] to be [working current job/unemployed?]

(Ask only if not working at all right now):

- Have you thought about taking work that is different from the work you did before? Why/why not?
- I'm going to mention several jobs to you one at a time. I'd like you to imagine that steady work is available in each job, then tell me how you would feel about working each job:
  - General manager in a corporation – (sexless higher prestige – white-collar; non-manl)
  - Auto mechanic – (w/c manl labor – “masculine”)
  - Administrative assistant (w/c non-manl labor – “feminine”)

- City bus driver (w/c mild manl labor; sexless)
- Cashier at the Dollar Store (unskilled manl; svc)
- (Job similar to their old one in terms of field of specialization, but lower in prestige)
- (Job similar to their old one in terms of prestige, but in a different field of specialization) *PROBES*:
  - Would you take this job? Why/why not?
  - Is this job a good fit for you? Why/why not?
  - Would you rather take this job or stay without a job? Why/why not?
  - What would it be like for you if you took this job?

#### SOCIAL SUPPORT

- Since you lost your job, are there people who have been there for you when you've needed help or support? Who are they? Tell me a little about how they have helped you. *PROBE on*:
  - Financial or material support, including "in-kind" resources
  - Emotional support
  - Help with finding work
- Do you feel like you have a friend, relative, or someone else in your life:
  - who really understands you
  - to whom you can confide your deepest secrets
  - whose opinions you trust?

#### MISC

- Are there other major things that have happened recently in your life that have made you feel depressed, anxious, or angry, or have made you feel like drinking more alcohol than you normally would? *PROBES*:
  - Did this happen before or after you lost your job?
  - Has this gotten any worse or better since you lost your job?

- Have you ever been diagnosed with any mental health problems, such as depression, bipolar disorder or manic depression, anxiety, or alcoholism?
  - In what month/year were you diagnosed?
- Is there anything else you'd like to tell me that we haven't discussed yet?

(*PROBE* throughout interview for answers of interest – Can you tell me about a specific time when that happened? Who was there? Where were you? What did that person say/do? What did you do next?

DEMOGRAPHIC DATA SHEET (to be completed by participant at end of interview):

Participant # \_\_\_\_\_ (to be completed by interviewer)      Date \_\_\_\_\_

MOR: \_\_\_\_\_

1) What is your sex? \_\_\_\_\_ Male      \_\_\_\_\_ Female

2) How old are you? \_\_\_\_\_

3) What is your marital status? Select one.

\_\_\_\_\_ Single      \_\_\_\_\_ Married      \_\_\_\_\_ Divorced      \_\_\_\_\_ Separated      \_\_\_\_\_ Widowed

4) How many kids do you have? \_\_\_\_\_

5) How many kids do you have in the following age groups?:

Age 0 to 5 \_\_\_\_\_      Age 6 to 12 \_\_\_\_\_      Age 13 to 18 \_\_\_\_\_      Age 19 or older \_\_\_\_\_

6) What is the highest level of schooling you completed?

\_\_\_\_\_ Less than a high school diploma  
\_\_\_\_\_ High school diploma or GED  
\_\_\_\_\_ Some college  
\_\_\_\_\_ Bachelor's degree  
\_\_\_\_\_ Master's degree  
\_\_\_\_\_ Professional degree (for example, J.D., Ph.D., D.O., M.D.)  
\_\_\_\_\_ Other (please explain) \_\_\_\_\_

7) What is your race? Please select as many as apply.

\_\_\_\_\_ Black/African-American  
\_\_\_\_\_ White  
\_\_\_\_\_ Asian  
\_\_\_\_\_ Hispanic/Latino/Latina  
\_\_\_\_\_ Native American  
\_\_\_\_\_ Other (please describe) \_\_\_\_\_

8) How long ago did you lose your job? \_\_\_\_\_

9) How did you lose your job? Select one.

\_\_\_\_\_ I was laid off (e.g., company downsizing)  
\_\_\_\_\_ I was fired for cause  
\_\_\_\_\_ Other (please explain)  
\_\_\_\_\_

10) Is this the first time you have ever lost a job? \_\_\_\_\_ Yes      \_\_\_\_\_ No

11) What was the total amount of income earned by everyone in your household in the last year? Select one.

- \$0-10,000
- \$10,001-20,000
- \$20,001-30,000
- \$30,001-40,000
- \$40,001-50,000
- \$50,001-60,000
- \$60,001-70,000
- \$70,001-80,000
- \$80,001-90,000
- \$90,001-100,000
- More than \$100,000

**APPENDIX E – Informed Consent Form**

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Initials \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

**CONSENT FORM**

Project Title	“Job Loss Experiences - Interview”
<b>Why is this research being done?</b>	<i>This is a research project being conducted by Melissa Milkie and Dawn Norris at the University of Maryland. We are inviting you to participate in this research project because you lost your job in the past six months. The purpose of this research project is to find out how people who have lost their jobs think and feel about their job loss.</i>

<b>What will I be asked to do?</b>	<p><i>The procedures involve participating in an interview that will last between one and three hours. Questions will be asked about your experiences since losing your job. Specifically, you will be asked about: your job history; how you lost your job; what your old job meant to you; what you thought and felt when you lost your job; what your current work (if you have work now) is like; how you think about yourself since you lost your job; and how others have treated you since you lost your job. This research project involves making audiotapes of you. This is being done to help ensure accuracy when examining the information you have given us. The interview will be held in a private a room at a local library, college, or university, at your home, or in a semi-private area in a coffee shop (if you are comfortable with this). You will be asked to participate in a second interview of the same length in about one month. You may also be asked if the interviewer can spend a day with you as you conduct activities related to your job search or job loss and/or spend time with friends, family, and co-workers (if applicable).</i></p> <p><i>All participants will have an equal chance to win a \$25 Target gift card. Three participants interviewed in Round 1 will be randomly chosen as winners once the first round of interviews are complete (~1 in 9 chance of winning). If you also complete Round 2 of the interviews, you will once again be entered into the drawing; three participants will be randomly chosen as winners once the second round of interviews is complete (~1 in 9 chance of winning). One participant who is observed by the interviewer will also be randomly chosen as a winner once observations are complete (1 in 5 chance</i></p>
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	<i>of winning). Each drawing is conducted separately; chances of winning at each round of interviews/observations are independent of whether you have won in a previous round.</i>
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<p><b>What about confidentiality?</b></p>	<p><i>We will do our best to keep your personal information confidential. To help protect your confidentiality, many steps will be taken:</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>1) Electronic data will be stored on a password-protected computer.</i></li> <li><i>2) Hard copies of data and audiotapes of interviews will be stored in a locked file cabinet.</i></li> <li><i>3) Your name will not be included on collected data. Instead, a code will be placed on the collected data, or you may choose a fake name to be used on all data in place of your real name. Once the interview is complete, any documentation that links the code with your name will be destroyed.</i></li> <li><i>4) All data will be destroyed after ten years. Hard copy data will be shredded. Audiotape recordings and all digital data will be destroyed by deletion, followed by defragmentation of the hard drive.</i></li> <li><i>5) Access to all data will be limited to the faculty advisor, student researcher, and student research assistant(s) (if applicable).</i></li> <li><i>6) If we write a report, article or book about this research project, your identity will be protected to the maximum extent possible. Your information may be shared with representatives of the University or governmental authorities if you or someone else is in danger or if we are required to do so by law.</i></li> </ol> <p><i>_____ I agree to be audiotaped during my participation in this study.</i></p> <p><i>_____ I do not agree to be audiotaped during my participation in this study.</i></p> <p><i>_____ I agree to be observed by the interviewer during my job search activities and while spending time with friends, family, and co-workers.</i></p> <p><i>_____ I do not agree to be observed by the interviewer during my job search activities and while spending time with friends, family, and co-workers.</i></p>
<p><b>What are the risks of this research?</b></p>	<p><i>There are no known risks from participating in this research study.</i></p>
<p><b>What are the benefits of this research?</b></p>	<p><i>This research is not designed to help you personally, but the results may help the investigator learn more about how to help people who have lost their jobs. We hope that, in the future, other people might benefit from this study through improved understanding of what people experience after they lose jobs. This understanding could be</i></p>

	<i>used to improve advising, counseling and other social services for people who have lost jobs.</i>
<b>Do I have to be in this research? May I stop participating at any time?</b>	<i>Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part at all. If you decide to participate in this research, you may stop participating at any time. If you decide not to participate in this study or if you stop participating at any time, you will not be penalized or lose any benefits to which you otherwise qualify.</i>

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Initials \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

<b>What if I have questions?</b>	<i>This research is being conducted by Melissa Milkie and Dawn Norris in the Sociology Department at University of Maryland. If you have any questions about the research study itself, please contact Melissa Milkie at: Department of Sociology, 2112 Art-Sociology Building; 301 405-6428; <a href="mailto:mmilkie@socy.umd.edu">mmilkie@socy.umd.edu</a>. If you have questions about your rights as a research subject or wish to report a research-related injury, please contact: <b>Institutional Review Board Office, University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland, 20742; (e-mail) <a href="mailto:irb@deans.umd.edu">irb@deans.umd.edu</a>; (telephone) 301-405-0678.</b> This research has been reviewed according to the University IRB procedures for research involving human subjects.</i>	
<b>Statement of Age of Subject and Consent</b>	<i>Your signature indicates that: you are at least 18 years of age,; the research has been explained to you; your questions have been fully answered; and you freely and voluntarily choose to participate in this research project.</i>	
<b>Signature and Date</b>	<b>NAME OF SUBJECT</b>	
	<b>SIGNATURE OF SUBJECT</b>	
	<b>DATE</b>	



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