

**Post-unemployment identity in middle-aged professionals**

by

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The reader is reminded of the following:

- The references and the style as prescribed by the Publication Manual (6<sup>th</sup> edition) of the American Psychological Association (APA) were followed. This practice is in line with the policy of the Programme in Industrial Psychology of the North-West University, Vaal Triangle Campus to use APA style in all scientific documents as from January 1999.
- The mini-dissertation is submitted in the form of one research article.

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## DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this research article, 'Post-unemployment identity in middle-aged professionals,' is my original work, has not been submitted for any degree or examination at another institution and that all references used have, to the best of my knowledge, been correctly cited. This mini-dissertation, in the form of research article, is being submitted for the completion of the degree **Masters in Applied Positive Psychology** at the **North-West University**.

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## SUMMARY

**Title:** Post-unemployment identity in middle-aged professionals

**Key terms:** Unemployment, career, positive identity, job loss, retrenchment, success, work

The high rate of unemployment in South Africa is startling. Little research is available in the South African context on how this phenomenon is experienced by middle-aged professionals that become unemployed. It is difficult for them to re-enter the job market at the same level of seniority they held before being unemployed. Many middle-aged professionals need to either accept a position on a junior level or create a business opportunity for themselves. In this study 6 middle-aged professionals who had been affected by unemployment during their careers were interviewed in order to understand their experience.

Work is a universal life domain and provides meaning to most individuals (Carlsen, 2008). Despite the fact that the fundamental notion from psychology has remained consistent in organisational research, the term *positive* has been defined and applied to identities and identity construction processes in a variety of ways (Roberts & Dutton, 2009). As a result, the main purpose of this research is to answer the question: 'How does a middle-aged professional preserve a positive identity after having become unemployed?'

The study explores to what extent middle-aged professional's associate their personal identities with their profession and the impact unemployment has on their self-concept and sense of self-worth and decisions to regain employment. A qualitative methodology was followed, and from the extensive interview data, using qualitative content analysis, themes relating to the unemployed condition emerged. Results support, to a large degree the existing literature and studies on the unemployed. This study offers additional insight into personal

identity, emotions, available support structures, satisfaction with life and new learnings from the unemployed experience during their middle-age period.

Key findings of the study revealed that work is a means of giving expression of own identity. Psychological aspects associated with unemployment are declining self-esteem and self-belief. The results of the study revealed that those who have a good understanding of their own identity are confident with who they are and are satisfied with the role they play. It enables a person to make independent choices without being negatively influenced by the negative views of others, de-coupling their personal identity from their jobs. The ability to remain optimistic and have a positive attitude equipped participants to deal more effectively with the trauma of unemployment. During the middle-age period, unemployment provides an opportunity to reflect on purpose and legacy; resulting in a new strategy for their lives to live a meaningful life and to keep their dreams alive. Most of these findings supported previous studies. From the results recommendations were made to assist middle-aged professionals during unemployment and career transition.

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

This mini-dissertation focuses on the impact of unemployment on the identity of middle-age professionals.

Chapter 1 comprises a problem statement and a literature review based on previous research done on the relevant constructs. The research objectives and significance of the study then follow, and finally the research method and planned division of chapters are given.

#### **1.1 PROBLEM STATEMENT**

##### **Background**

Over two-thirds of people who become unemployed experience identity-related problems (Norris, 2016). For most identity is the most difficult part of dealing with unemployment resulting in feelings of depression, anxiety, and anger. When a person becomes unemployed it can impact a person's mental health regardless of his or her financial situation.

Work is a universal life domain and a prominent source for defining oneself and providing meaning for most individuals (Carlsen, 2008). Despite the fact that the fundamental notion from psychology has remained consistent in organisational research, the term *positive* has been defined and applied to identities and identity construction processes in a variety of ways (Roberts & Dutton, 2009). The main purpose of this research is to answer the following question: 'How does a middle-age professional preserve a positive identity after having become unemployed?'

Personal identity is the self-concept a person develops about him/herself (Serva, 2014). This self-concept is not static and changes over the course of a person's life. This may include a person's belief system that affects the choices a person makes over the course

of his/her life. It may also include aspects that he/she does not have control over such as where they grew up or the colour of their skin. A person may display a portion of his or her identity externally through what he/she wears and how he/she interacts with other people. A person may also decide to keep some elements of his or her personal identity private and hidden from other people (Serva, 2014).

Self-identity is how a person views him or herself. Self-identity is a person's self-assessment, such as personal knowledge of his/her skills and abilities, personality attributes and awareness of his/her physical attributes. The self-identity is not limited to the present identity. It includes the future self-identity and the past self-identity. The future self-identity represents what the individuals would like to become in future, and what they are fearful of becoming. Self-identity corresponds to the individual's goals, standards, hopes and fears. How an individual views his/herself influence the context in which an individual interpret and evaluate his/her own behaviour (Serva, 2014).

Self Esteem is a state of mind. It affects a person's emotional state and feelings. It refers to a person's overall evaluation or appraisal of his/her own worth at any one point in time. There is a relationship between a person's self-esteem and corresponding happiness, success, well-being, self-confidence and self-assurances (Serva, 2014).

Since 2009, various organisations in the public and private sector have been forced to reduce positions due to the economic decline. Many successful professionals who previously had a career and actively participated in the economy are affected as a result of a shrinking job market. Many people are currently in the midst of a life and/or career transition where they need to adapt and downscale in order to survive (Bolles, 2015).

Participants in this study were considered 'professionals' if they have completed at least a Bachelor's degree / Advanced Diploma (NQF level 7) or a Diploma / Advanced

Certificate (NQF level 6) and regarded themselves as having worked in a professional career by agreeing that their careers fitted the following definition:

A disciplined group of individuals who adhere to high ethical standards and hold themselves to, and are accepted by, the public as possessing special knowledge and skills in a widely-recognised, organised body of learning derived from education and training at a high level, and who are prepared to exercise this knowledge and these skills in the interest of others (Professions Australia, 1997, para 1).

Current statistics support the belief that most middle-age people will live another 30 years, as the average life expectancy has increased (Price, 2000). Thus the traditional understanding of retirement will no longer be relevant to a growing population of men and women (Buford, 1997). Due to the increasing life expectancy, older adults of normal retirement age may spend more of their adulthood in retirement (Price, 2000). According to the Collins English Dictionary (middle age, n.d.), middle age is "...usually...considered to occur approximately between the ages of 40 and 60".

In the current market the following options are available for middle-age people who find themselves without work and who want to continue with a career. Some of the available options include emigration to work in another country or accepting work at a lower income level. Financially independent persons can retire or follow a calling and do something meaningful they have always wanted to do (Bolles, 2015).

Very few studies have been conducted with a view to understand the experiences of the retrenched middle-age employee, and qualitative studies are particularly limited. Gevers, Du Toit, and Harilall (1992) have conducted research on the impact the occupational environment has on a person's identity and personal adjustment. The work environment provides a clear and stable perception of their characteristics and goals. Little research, however, has been carried out on maintaining a person's identity when they find themselves unemployed during their middle-ages.

The impact of unemployment includes depression, financial turmoil, marriage and family difficulties, increased sensitivity, anxiety and low self-esteem (Gallo, Bradley, Dubin, Jones, Falba, Teng, Kasl, and Gerontol, 2006). During unemployment, shame is often at an all-time high, while encouragement is at an all-time low (Pritikin, 2013).

This change or transition when people are retrenched can be challenging and stressful. Retrenchment not only impacts the individual but also the dependents (Mouton, 2014). There is evidence that losing a job is more unsettling and painful during middle-age than for younger employees (McFall & Garrington, 2011). Middle-age people are psychologically worst hit by job loss and subsequent unemployment (Andersen, 2009).

The self-worth of middle-age persons is expected to be negatively affected and they also experience the psychological trauma of unemployment. They are also unable to succeed in obtaining employment again which is compatible with their abilities, experiences and previous income levels (Collins, 2011). If a person does not have an alternative plan for a career change by approximately 45 years of age, the chances are that they will find it more difficult to make a career change (Buford, 1997).

The longer a person is unemployed, the less chance they have of finding a new job (Bolles, 2015). The effects of the recent recession on older workers are unprecedented (Farber, 2011). For example, in the US the average duration of unemployment tripled for individuals over the age of 55, rising faster than the unemployment durations of younger adults (United States Government Accountability Office, 2012). Unemployment for individuals of any age is associated with problems such as financial hardship and decreased subjective well-being (McKee-Ryan, Song, Wanberg, & Kinicki, 2005).

The workplace has changed dramatically over the last decade and consequently the job-seeking process and skills required have changed. During economic growth, employers typically strive to accommodate the job-seekers' preference by placing job-ads on their own

site or on job boards for solicitation. During economic recessions there is an oversupply of good candidates available, and employers' therefore then recruit differently. One needs to learn new advanced job-hunting skills if one wishes to survive and obtain a job in the current job market. Having knowledge of getting hired can assist one in being employed again. Many middle-age people have not updated their job-hunting skills (Bolles, 2015). Older workers typically may have less knowledge of modern job-searching methods and explicit and/or implicit employer preferences for hiring younger workers (Ahmed, Andersson, & Hammerstedt, 2012).

A new profession of advising on job search has come to the fore to serve the needs of the unemployed (Bolles, 2015). There is concern that some career coaches and interview counsellors may inspire false hopes, which are likely to be unfulfilled if their clients do not find employment. A person can make simple changes in how they present themselves and their experiences, abilities and accomplishments that may increase their chances of being successful in that specific job. However, clever social marketing cannot change the fact that it is more difficult for older people to obtain employment. Middle-age professionals may find it difficult to remain resilient after numerous rejections during the job-hunting process. A Middle-age professional needs to adjust their career expectations because they may not return to the workforce in their former capacities (Hopkins, 2012).

When a person has lost a job during the middle-age period, it might seem that they feel that they have reached a point beyond which continuation is possible. One writer who personally experienced unemployment said that when he lost his company, he lost a big part of his identity and the vision he had invested into developing the partnership over many years. He also lost friends (Mouton, 2014).

Unemployment causes psychological distress in the unemployed. The factors contributing to a sense of loss of identity during the middle-age period include (Bolles, 2015). Loss of structure and how time is structured can be disorientating.

## **1.2 RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The research study will endeavour to ask the following research questions:

1. What is the relationship between employment status and identity?
2. What is the effect of unemployment on a person's self-concept?
3. What is the effect of unemployment on the perceived sense of self-worth?

## **1.3 EXPECTED CONTRIBUTION OF THE STUDY**

### **1.3.1 Contribution to Industrial Psychology and Positive Psychology**

Limited research is available on how unemployment affects the identity of the middle-age professional. This study will provide a broader perspective, will aid in distinguishing the concept of identity in relation to unemployment from other concepts and give a clearer understanding thereof. Another contribution of this study will be to establish the importance of identity within middle-age professionals when they become unemployed and the role it plays in their human functioning.

### **1.3.2 Contribution to the individual**

When the core contributors to identity when a person becomes unemployed are known, it will be possible to improve these in order to influence and improve well-being of individuals. If the main sources which give identity to the unemployed professional are known, future researchers can develop ways to foster and increase identity to the benefit of the professional.

## **1.4 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

The study aims at investigating whether there is a relationship between employment and the personal identify, for a retrenched group of middle-age professionals, as to whether they experience a negative impact on their identities due to job loss and what the influence of their unemployment is on the perceived self-esteem or sense of self-worth. The researcher's main objective with conducting the study is to understand to what extent middle-age professionals associate their personal identities with their profession and the impact unemployment has on their self-concept and sense of self-worth. .

- 1 The specific objectives are to investigate a group of middle-age professionals to:  
Understand the relationship between persons personal identity and employment status
- 2 Understand the effects of unemployment on the person's self-concept
- 3 Evaluate the effect of unemployment on the perceived sense of self-worth.

## **1.5 RESEARCH DESIGN**

A research design is a strategic framework for action which helps the researcher link the research question with the execution and implementation of physical research (Terre Blanche, Durrheim, & Painter, 2006). Coherence between research questions and the method used is required in order to generate valid and reliable results (Ritchie & Lewis, 2005). The following discussion will examine the most appropriate research approach, strategy and methodology with which to address the current research questions.

### **1.5.1 Research Approach and Strategy**

A qualitative design will be used to understand the perceptions of the participants. According to Leedy (1997), this approach enables the researcher to understand and experience human behaviour better, and to obtain a deeper understanding of the individual's perspective as he/she experiences, understands or perceives the phenomena.

Qualitative research entails interpretive approaches where the researcher studies phenomena in their natural environment, attempting to make sense of and interpret these phenomena in terms of the meanings individuals attach to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Information will be obtained from a group of participants in a manner which attempts to guard against personal judgments.

### **1.5.2 Research Method**

The research method for this research study consists of a literature review and a qualitative study. The results will be presented in the form of a research article.

#### **1.5.2.1 Phase 1: Literature Review**

The literature review will focus on previous research pertaining to the identity of unemployed middle-age professionals.

Article databases such as Google Scholar, SABInet Online, SAePublications, and Science Direct were used. Due to their relevance to the specific topic at hand, the following journals will be studied, *Journal of Positive Psychology*, *The Journal of Gerontology Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences*, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *Journal of Aging Studies*, *South African Journal of Industrial Psychology* and *Academy of Management Journal*. Cross referencing was done when an important source of information was identified whilst studying a specific article citing a reliable source.

#### **1.5.2.2 Phase 2: Empirical Study**

The research will be of a qualitative nature based on semi-structured, face-to-face interviews. Qualitative Research is primarily exploratory research. It is used to gain an understanding of underlying reasons, opinions, and motivations. It provides insights into the problem statement: How does a middle-age professional preserve a positive identity after having become unemployed. To address the research questions semi-structured, face-to-face

interviews will be conducted with middle-age professionals who have gone through the experience of unemployment. The *qualitative research method* allows the researcher to gain insight and describe, in their own words, the experiences of the middle-age professionals who have lost their jobs, thereby allowing the complexities of middle-age professionals to be more fully explored (Price, 2003). In this vein it can be stated that the research concerns the professional's experiences and the discovery of the way in which each individual describes the process of restoring or maintaining a positive identity (Daly, 2007; van Manen, 1990). In this study semi-structured, face-to-face interviews will be used by means of which the middle-age professionals explain how unemployment affected their identities

### **1.5.3 Research Setting**

The interviews will take place in a neutral environment in order to ensure that the respondents are as comfortable as possible. Care will be taken to conduct the interviews in a quiet area, so as to ensure minimal distraction. The objective of the study will be explained to participants, their right to partake in the research or to withdraw at any time they chose to do so.

### **1.5.4 Sampling**

In this regard, participant selection will be limited as participants will be chosen based on volunteering their availability within Mpumalanga area.


This Qualitative research study will be based on non-probability and purposive sampling, meaning that the participants will be selected because they meet defined criteria that make them suitable for the study. Sampling decisions will therefore be made for the specific purpose of obtaining the richest possible source of information with a view to gain answers to the research questions. The sampling will continue until no new themes emerged from the data-collection process, referred to as data saturation. The criteria that will be used to identify the sample included unemployed, middle-age professionals between 40 and 60

years of age, geographically located in Mpumalanga Provinces that have completed a Bachelor's degree / Advanced Diploma (NQF level 7) or a Diploma / Advanced Certificate (NQF level 6) and regarded themselves as having worked in a professional career. Participants that meet this criterion possessed the required experience and insights into answering the questions related to the research topic. The researcher will promote the study in the appropriate community to find people who meet the specific criteria, until the data are saturated (Maree, 2014).

#### **1.5.5 Research Procedure**

Permission will be obtained from participants, where after semi-structured interviews will be conducted with participants based upon voluntary availability. The study, purpose, interview, diary process and duration thereof, as well as ethical considerations, will be explained to all participants prior to data collection. The participants will also be informed of confidentiality and anonymity and be required to give written informed consent. Upon completion of the interview, the participant will be given opportunity to scrutinize and approve the interview report.


#### **1.5.6 Data Collection Method**

Participants included in this study are South African men or women geographical located in Mpumalanga who experienced unemployment or who had been voluntarily or involuntarily retrenched from a full-time professional career. The participants are invited to apply voluntarily to take part in the study by means of  South-Africa. Sample document attached to this mini-dissertation.

Middle-age professionals were invited to participate in the study. The participants need to be within the 40 to 60 year age range. Participants are considered 'professional' if he/she has completed at least a Bachelor's degree / Advanced Diploma (NQF level 7) or a

Diploma / Advanced Certificate (NQF level 6) and regard him/herself as having worked in a professional career by agreeing that his/her career fitted the following definition:

A disciplined group of individuals who adhere to high ethical standards and uphold him/herself to, and are accepted by, the public as possessing special knowledge and skills in a widely-recognised, organised body of learning derived from education and training at a high level, and who are prepared to exercise this knowledge and these skills in the interest of others (Professions Australia, 1997, para 1).

An invitation will be forwarded to professionals registered on the  South-Africa career platform to apply to participate in the research. To avoid biased the invitation will distributed by an independent person.

#### Exclusions

During the duration of the study it is important that volunteers do not undergo therapy with a Counsellor or Psychologist. This is important to protect the individual and to ensure the psychological states of the person are not compromised in any way.

Qualitative data are best suited to address the research question at hand. A semi-structured questionnaire will serve as a form of measure to ensure consistency.

#### *Semi-structured, face-to-face interviews*

Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with the selected participants at the agreed suitable location. The interview will last 90 to 120 minutes each. The interview will focus on each participant's experience to understand to what extent middle-age professionals associated their personal identity with their profession and the impact unemployment has on their self-concept and sense of self-worth and their decisions to regain employment. Sample document attached to this proposal.

### *Researcher Competence*


The researcher is well versed in both qualitative and quantitative research methods. Attached document provides brief curriculum vitae of the knowledge and skills acquired by the researcher, demonstrating competence. The Masters in Applied Positive Psychology training provided by Optentia Research Unit, North-West University (NWU) has prepared the researcher to conduct the relevant research. The research will be conducted under the supervision of North West University. The appointed study leader is well versed in qualitative research to provide the necessary guidance and support.

### *Reliability and credibility of data*

Member checks will be used to ensure credibility of the data (Merriam, 2009; Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers, 2002). Participants will be afforded the opportunity via email to review their individual interview reports to ensure that the information they shared about their experiences are accurately expressed. All participants need to respond either with minor corrections to their case reports or confirmation that the information was accurate.

### *Research budget*

The researcher sponsored her own research. Herewith the cost requirements:

1. The Ad on  South-Africa, invited free participation
2. Transport cost to conduct interviews with participants will be for the researcher's account.
3. The transcribing and language editing cost will be incurred by the researcher.

#### **1.5.6.1 Data Collection Steps**

In the quest to arrive at an adequate description and a clearer understanding to determine how Middle-age professionals restore and/or maintain a positive identity post-unemployment, the following research procedure will be executed:

The semi-structured, face-to-face interviews (in English) will be administered to the professionals that volunteer to form part of the study. The following research steps will be followed:

1. The researcher will make use of an independent person to invite participants to take part in the study. An overview and explanation of the purpose of the study will be provided to all participants. Confidentiality of the research participants will be guaranteed. Sample document attached to this proposal.
2. A cut-off date will be given for selection and evaluation of applications.
3. The successful volunteers to take part in the study will receive an email with a cover letter explaining in detail how the research will be conducted. Applicants will be allowed the choice of withdrawing from the study at any given stage.
4. Informed consent forms will be emailed to participants prior to the scheduled interview.
5. Participants need to complete the informed consent form and returned it to the researcher via email.
6. Appointments and venues will be confirmed telephonically and emailed notifications send to participants.
7. Participants must complete and sign the informed consent forms and return it to the researcher by email prior to the research.
8. Interview schedule will be developed by researcher.
9. Semi-structured, face-to-face interviews will be conducted with participants.
10. Time will be allowed for consolidation of findings and report-writing.
11. The participants will be given the opportunity via email to review their interview reports to ensure that the information they shared about their experiences are accurately expressed.

12. All participants must respond with minor corrections or confirm that the information was accurate.

The aim will be to obtain rich descriptive data that can assist in understanding the participant's construction of knowledge and social reality.

#### **1.5.7 Recording of data**

During the interview process field notes will be made, based on observations and process awareness by the researcher. All interviews will be tape recorded with the informed consent of all participants, and thereafter transcribed into a word document. To ensure that the data are stored safely and confidentially, all documents and recordings will be stored securely and not be accessible to others. Backup copies of electronic files will be made.

#### **1.5.8 Data Analysis**

Qualitative content analysis will be utilised to analyse the transcribed interviews of the participants. This has been defined as “a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns.” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1278), and as a “qualitative data reduction and sense-making effort that takes a volume of qualitative material and attempts to identify core consistencies and meanings” (Patton, 2002, p. 453).

Qualitative content analysis will commence after the conclusion of the first semi-structured face-to-face interview. The researcher will capture the personal accounts of the participants and their personal experiences as unemployed professionals (as suggested by van Manen, 1990).

Interview data will be audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The researcher will receive training and support from her study leader and supervisor, appointed by NWU. During the entire research process the researcher will work under her study leader's mentorship and coaching to ensure the data analysis is done correctly.

The researcher will listen to the individual audio recordings while simultaneously following the written transcriptions. During this research process themes will emerge whereby data will be catalogued into different categories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

For data analysis purposes the data will be captured on a spreadsheet and then coded. From the data analysis on the impact of unemployment on the identity of middle-age professionals themes will emerge: These themes will represent the experiences of the participants experienced due to unemployment. When no new themes emerge further data saturation will occur and therefore no further participants will be sourced.

### **1.5.9 Data Quality**

#### ***1.5.9.1 Reliability and credibility of data***

Member checks will be used to ensure credibility of the data (Merriam, 2009; Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers, 2002). Specifically, participants will be afforded the opportunity via email to review their individual interview reports to ensure that the information they shared about their experiences are accurately expressed. All participants need to either respond with minor corrections to their interview reports or confirm that the information are accurate and that it could be included in the final research study.

#### ***1.5.9.2 Privacy and confidentiality***

While the researcher work on the final report the written records, audiotapes and transcribed records will be stored by her at a private location. Completed research data will be handed over to Optentia. The data will remain the property of the Optentia Research Focus Area and will be kept in the lock-away facilities.

The researcher is well-versed to deal with the interview process, privacy and storage of records. It is agreed that the records will be stored for a minimum of five years.

## **1.6 BENEFITS AND RISKS OF THE RESEARCH**

### *Benefits*

1. The direct benefit for the participant is that the participant will be given the opportunity to openly talk about his / her experience. The process is therapeutic.
2. The direct benefit for those participating in the research interviews will be that each one will receive a complimentary educational pamphlet and DVD for their personal use, free of charge.
3. The indirect benefit will probably include the valuable contribution towards research. The information will be used to develop a research paper that can assist professionals in better understanding the importance of their personal identities in making sound career decisions throughout their lives but especially during middle-age. Being better prepared for a career transitions and possible unemployment later in life can make it less traumatic for all parties involved and lead to a more meaningful life.

The outcome of the research will be the development of an educational pamphlet and DVD to assist professionals through a career transition during the middle-age period in the South African Environment. The material will also be valuable to use as a tool during coaching sessions. Professionals will be able to learn from other middle-age professionals who have gone through similar life experiences. Realizing that one is not alone and that other people may find themselves struggling with similar life experiences can be insightful.

### *Risks*

1. The participants availed 90 to 120 minutes of their personal time for the interview. Time management was important. The researcher arrived on time for each interview. She manage the process in such a manner to ensure that all questions were covered and rich data gathered within the agreed timeframe.

2. The researcher will ask questions about the participant's experiences when they were unemployed. Those who have lost their jobs are vulnerable. Psychological support will be arranged with Life-Line free of charge for participants who might have required counseling after the research interview.
3. During the interview the person could become tired. Provision will be made for a 15- to 20-minute break during which refreshments will be provided. (Sandwiches and coffee/tea or a glass of water).

Being unemployed can be a stressful and vulnerable time for any person. The researcher needs to be aware of this and take care not to cause harm to the person. The researcher is competent and aware of her own professional and ethical conduct during the interview. The researcher must be empathetic and show understanding for the situation in which the participants find themselves. The participants will be informed that they can report unprofessional conduct to the NWU Ethics Committee.

## **1.7 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

“Knowledge production comes with moral responsibility towards research participants” (Ryen, 2011, p. 432). The latter statement will not be disputed by any single researcher. What is imperative though, is the *how-to* of this truth, specifically in qualitative research. Since the research methodology and procedure of a qualitative and quantitative research approach differ, it inevitably follows that the ethical considerations and procedures will also differ. Seen in light of the intuitive, creative and evolving nature of the qualitative inquiry, the ethics surrounding it are more complex and diverse in the challenges and concerns posed by it. It is the moral responsibility of the qualitative researcher not only to uphold the ethical research code of conduct but also to be acutely aware of the added demands.

In the description of the methodology of this research project, the research concerns the individuals’ experiences to better understand to what extent the middle-age professionals associate their personal identity with their professions and the impact unemployment has on their self-concept and sense of self-worth and their decisions to regain employment. (Daly, 2007; van Manen, 1990). The following served as strict guidelines and commitments regarding the ethical conduct in this research project:

### **1.7.1 The responsibility towards science and the specific discipline**

In the first instance it was of the utmost importance for the research to be conducted with the greatest integrity and to the highest scientific standards. The researcher and all involved in data-gathering and analyses ensured that he/she are proficient in the skills required – in this research it was, amongst others, conducting and analysing the unstructured and semi-structured interviews, and being receptive with regard to recording the interviews and compiling field-notes etc. If sufficient competency in these skills is lacking, it can

unintentionally lead to harm. For instance, interviews are very much similar to psychological interventions and it has already been well-documented that interviews leave participants changed after the contact. Hence it was of the utmost importance that crucial consideration had to be given to each and every interview, better still, each question had to be well-deliberated before posing it. Risks of challenges regarding this were curbed to the minimum as: a) the researcher was the main conductor of all the unstructured interviews and oversaw and controlled the process when the co-worker interviewed the individual. All possible avenues were taken to ensure that the co-worker who helped with the semi-structured interviews was well-chosen and extremely well-trained. The anticipation existed that the researcher and the supervisor would work exceptionally closely with one another. The supervisor was also seen to be experts in the context and language and therefore added value to the authenticity of data collected; b) the researcher consulted with colleagues with proven excellence in these skills to monitor progress on a regular basis and she added to her knowledge base and skills on a regular basis and as the need arose she added to her skill gaps in this regard.

Although subjectivity is inevitable due to the nature of this research, bias was not tolerated in the execution of this project. To be subjective is not unethical, but to be biased is unethical because it constitutes a deliberate attempt to hide or exaggerate something in the study and not reflect the true findings (Kumar, 2014). Throughout the research process, the researcher was cognisant of the fact that due to the subjective nature of the data gathering methods and methodology, her own actions, own role, her impact on all the participants and those around them, her perceptions and emotions, were well-documented and examined with a critical eye. On-going reflexive negotiations of ethical dilemmas were conducted in very close collaboration with colleagues who reviewed the process on a regular basis. Constant awareness and action was reported and checked to ensure a balance between procedures that

enhanced the validity of the research and those procedures that maximised the ethical appropriateness of the study (Allan, 2008). To further enhance the ethical accountability of this research, all limitations, unplanned miss-happenings, conflicts, lack of knowledge and experience which might have impacted the research results or, most importantly, might have caused harm or discomfort to participants, formed part of an on-going process of honest acknowledgement and reporting. This process was communicated and discussed on a regular basis with colleagues. The research procedure, data and analysis was for the duration of all the stages of the research transparent and open to peer review.

In qualitative research the researcher is seen as the major data-gathering and research 'tool'; therefore the competency of the researcher is of the utmost importance to make sure the highest ethical standards will be upheld through this competency. The interview was conducted in English. Participants participated in the interview in English. Interview data were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim by a transcription service. A further part of the researcher's ethical responsibility towards science and the specific discipline is to undertake to distribute all the findings and results to all the stakeholders in this research. This included the participants, the sponsors, co-workers in this research, students at North-West University, as well as the broader academic community and the broader public through media and forums. In disseminating these findings and results, recognition was given to each and every person that had contributed to this study. The researcher condones all forms of plagiarism and therefore can give the undertaking that all work done in this study was original, unless duly cited and acknowledged.

The storage of data during as well as after completion of the research project was given considerable and the necessary attention. The researcher gave her full undertaking to make this a due consideration throughout the research process and reported on this for checks

and balances. The data will remain the property of the Optentia Research Focus Area and it has lock-away facilities.

Lastly, with reference to ethical consideration towards science and the specific discipline, it must be stated that the project was evaluated by a scientific committee of NWU.

### **1.7.2 The responsibility towards the community**

Research levies a cost on society and on the participants – even if they only contribute their time. Therefore no research is justified if participants or society as a whole will not benefit from it (Allan, 2008).

The researcher was committed to focus throughout this project in every act and undertaking on what Tracy (2013, p. 249) termed relational ethics. Relational ethics concern the researcher's relationship with the participants and how the former's research and research representations might affect the latter. This relationship must be built on trust and respect. The researcher pledged to put everything in place and to prioritise, as one of the outcomes of this research project, to leave participants empowered through one or more of the following: networking, coaching, skill acquisition, or a better understanding of social dynamics.

Added to the above the researcher, in her conduct throughout the research, endeavoured to comply with the following: a) keep all promises, and if they cannot be kept due to unforeseen circumstances, make sure the situation is adequately dealt with; b) be constantly aware of the vulnerability of most members in the communities involved in this research, especially in terms of what constitutes power and opportunities to these mostly marginalised people.

### **1.7.3 The responsibility towards the participants**

Regarding the researcher's responsibility towards the research participant, the researcher pledged to uphold the ethical code of the Australian Psychological Society's ethical code of conduct of 1997 in that she would protect and safeguard the respect and

dignity of all the participants and that participation would at all times be voluntary. The researcher made perfectly certain that participants understood without a doubt what would be expected of them and where the information would be taken to and what the goal with this would be so that they would be able to end their participation whenever they chose to do so. The researcher was fully aware of the particular at-risk group she would be involved with during this research. Extra care was taken in order to avoid potential harm, discomfort, or inconvenience. These participants are in a precarious position, not only as unemployed individuals, but also as people who mostly feel themselves to be in a powerless, marginalised position, confronted by a world of research which most of them do not know about and with a researcher from another culture and socio-economic world. Therefore great care was taken to be sensitive towards the needs and rights of these participants.

As the culture and customs of potential participants may influence the consent process and the explanation of their right to withdraw, and the right to privacy and confidentiality, considerable attention was given to make this process as clear and appropriate as possible. The help of the co-workers, independent consultants and colleagues was employed throughout the process and was documented and evaluated on a regular basis.

Adequate time was spent on explaining exactly and without confusion to each individual participant, their right not to partake in the research or to withdraw at any time they chose to do so. Care was taken to make it crystal clear that participation would not bring any huge incentive to the participant as an individual and that declining from participation would bring no negative effect or will not exclude them from an advantage of any kind.

Care was also taken to explain to each participant in detail their right to privacy, anonymity and confidentiality. The researcher made sure that any co-worker, translator or administrative assistant involved and would therefore know the identity of the participant, would understand this right of the participant. It is also noted that, as a professional, care

should be taken to not enter in a dual relationship with any participant, but that the researcher will be sensitive and intuitively aware if it is necessary at any point to refer a participant for counselling or therapy. No individual incentives were offered to participants for their participation. It was explained that the research might be advantageous to the broader community over a long period of time. The timeous process of research should be explained very clearly to all participants. The only benefit the researcher might offer is help in terms of networking and information dissemination – if it is available to the researcher. Therefore the individual might not benefit directly and immediately from the research, and this needs to be spelt out very clearly, but the community at large should have the value-added benefit of this research.

## **1.8 CHAPTER LAYOUT**

The chapters in this mini-dissertation are presented as follows:

Chapter 1: Introduction, problem statement and objectives

Chapter 2: Article: Post-unemployment identity in middle-age professionals

Chapter 3: Conclusions, limitations and recommendations

## **1.9 CHAPTER SUMMARY**

This first chapter introduced the background to the problem, providing information and definitions of all the necessary and relevant concepts. This afore-mentioned chapter outlined the research objectives and explained why this study would be significant. This chapter serves as the background to the information and results presented in the rest of this study. The qualitative findings are discussed in Chapter 2, and the limitations and recommendations presented in Chapter 3.

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## **CHAPTER 2**

### **RESEARCH ARTICLE**

## **POST-UNEMPLOYMENT IDENTITY IN MIDDLE-AGE PROFESSIONALS**

### **Abstract**

The rate of unemployment in South Africa is startling high. Little research is available in the South African context on how this phenomenon is experienced by middle-age professionals that become unemployed. It is difficult for them to re-enter the job market at the same level of seniority they held before being unemployed. Many middle-age professionals need to either accept a position on a junior level or create a business opportunity for themselves. In this study 6 middle-age professionals who had been affected by unemployment during their careers were interviewed in order to understand their experience.

Over two-thirds of people who become unemployed experience identity-related problems (Norris, 2016). For most identity is the most difficult part of dealing with unemployment resulting in feelings of depression, anxiety, and anger. When a person becomes unemployed it can impact a person's mental health regardless of his or her financial situation.

The aim of the study is to explore to what extent middle-age professional's associate their personal identities with their profession and the impact unemployment has on their self-concept and sense of self-worth. A qualitative methodology was followed, and from the extensive interview data, using qualitative thematic content analysis, themes relating to the unemployed condition emerged. Results support, to a large degree the existing literature and studies on the unemployed. This study offers additional

insight into personal identity from the unemployed experience during their middle-age period.

Key findings of the study revealed that work is a means of giving expression of identity. Psychological aspects associated with unemployment are declining self-esteem and self-belief. The results of the study indicated that those who have a good understanding of their own identity are confident with who they are and are satisfied with the role they play. A well-established identity enables a person to make independent choices without being influenced by the negative views of others, and also to be able to decoupling their identities from their jobs. The ability to remain optimistic and have a positive attitude equipped participants to deal more effectively with the trauma of unemployment. During the middle-age period, unemployment provides an opportunity to reflect on purpose and legacy; resulting in a new strategy for their lives to live a meaningful life and to keep their dreams alive. Most of these findings are supported by previous studies. From the results recommendations were made to assist middle-age professionals during unemployment.

**Key words**

Unemployment, career, positive identity, job loss, retrenchment, success, work

## Introduction

Work is a universal life domain and a prominent source to define who a person is and provide meaning to most individuals (Carlsen, 2008). Despite the fact that the fundamental notion from psychology has remained consistent in organisational research, the term *positive* has been defined and applied to identities and identity construction processes in a variety of ways (Roberts & Dutton, 2009). The main purpose of this research is to answer the question: ‘How does a middle-age professional preserve a positive identity after having become unemployed?’

Personal identity is the self-concept a person develops about him/herself (Serva, 2014). This self-concept is not static and changes over the course of a person’s life. This may include a person’s belief system that affects the choices a person makes over the course of his/her life. It may also include aspects that he/she does not have control over such as where they grew up or the colour of their skin. A person may display a portion of his or her identity externally through what he/she wears and how he/she interacts with other people. A person may also decide to keep some elements of his or her personal identity private and hidden from other people (Serva, 2014).

Self-identity is how a person views him or herself. Self-identity is a person’s self-assessment, such as personal knowledge of his/her skills and abilities, personality attributes and awareness of his/her physical attributes. The self-identity is not limited to the present identity. It includes the future self-identity and the past self-identity. The future self-identity represents what the individuals would like to become in future, and what they are fearful of becoming. Self-identity corresponds to the individual’s goals, standards, hopes and fears. How an individual views his/herself influence the context in which an individual interpret and evaluate his/her own behaviour (Serva, 2014).

Self Esteem is a state of mind. It affects a person's emotional state and feelings. It refers to a person's overall evaluation or appraisal of his/her own worth at any one point in time. There is a relationship between a person's self-esteem and corresponding happiness, success, well-being, self-confidence and self-assurances (Serva, 2014).

### **Conclusion of the Literature Review**

Due to the economic decline, job loss and subsequent unemployment is a challenge faced by many people today. The research in specific was carried out on middle-age professionals that became unemployed. These professionals find it difficult to return to the workplace in their former capacity, often staying unemployed for considerable time.

In this chapter overview to understand the impact unemployment has on a middle-age professional personal identity is explained. Finally recommendations are provided

### **Effect of Unemployment on Identity**

Since 2009, various organisations in the public and private sector have been forced to reduce positions due to the economic decline. Many successful professionals who previously had a career and actively participated in the economy are affected as a result of a shrinking job market. Many people are currently in the midst of a life and/or career transition where they need to adapt and downscale in order to survive (Bolles, 2015).

Current statistics support the belief that most middle-age people will live another 30 years, as the average life expectancy has increased (Price, 2000). Thus the traditional understanding of retirement will no longer be relevant to a growing population of men and women (Buford, 1997). Due to the increasing life expectancy, older adults of normal retirement age may spend more of their adulthood in retirement (Price, 2000). People are living longer and the demand for their skills in the traditional job market is declining.

Very few studies could be found that endeavour to understand the experiences of the retrenched middle-age employee. Gevers, Du Toit, and Harilall (1992) have done research on

the impact the occupational environment has on a person's identity and personal adjustment. Little research, however, has been carried out on maintaining a person's identity when they find themselves unemployed during the middle-age period.

The impact of unemployment includes depression, financial turmoil, marriage and family difficulties, increased sensitivity, anxiety and low self-esteem (Gallo, Bradley, Dubin, Jones, Falba, Teng, Kasl, and Gerontol, 2006). During unemployment, shame is often at an all-time high, while encouragement is at an all-time low (Pritikin, 2013). This change or transition when people are retrenched can be challenging and stressful. Retrenchment not only impacts the individual but also the dependents (Mouton, 2014). There is evidence that losing a job is more unsettling and painful during the middle-age period than for younger employees (McFall & Garrington, 2011). Middle-age people are psychologically worst hit by unemployment (Andersen, 2009).

The psychological aspects often associated with unemployment are diminishing self-esteem and reduction in the belief of one's self-efficacy (Ribton-Turner & de Bruin, 2006). They are also unable to succeed in obtaining employment again which is compatible with their abilities, experience and previous income levels (Collins, 2011). In the new world of work employees are forced to keep open their career options as a result of the economic recession, for example, long-term employees have to become entrepreneurs or contractors almost overnight. Employees need to keep an open mind as to what will best suit them should they need to make a career change (Gatherer & Craig, 2010).

The longer a person is unemployed, the less chance he/she is likely to find a job (Bolles, 2015). The effects of the recent recession on older workers were unprecedented (Farber, 2011). For example, in the United States of America the average duration of unemployment tripled for individuals over the age of 55, rising faster than the average unemployment durations of younger adults (United States Government Accountability

Office, 2012). Unemployment for individuals at any age is associated with problems such as financial hardship and decreased subjective well-being (McKee-Ryan, Song, Wanberg, & Kinicki, 2005).

The workplace has changed dramatically over the last decade; consequently the job-seeking process has also changed. The skills sets employers require from prospecting employees have changed (Bolles, 2015). During economic growth, employers typically would follow standard recruitment protocol such as to advertise vacancies on the company website or on job sites internally and externally for solicitation. During an economic recession there is an oversupply of suitable candidates and employers recruit accordingly. Professionals require advanced job-searching skills during economic recessions. . Being knowledgeable on job searching methods is advantageous for reemployment. Many middle-age professionals have not updated their job-searching skills in using technology such as social media (Bolles, 2015). Older workers typically may have less knowledge of modern job-searching methods and of explicit and/or implicit employer preferences for hiring younger workers (Ahmed, Andersson, & Hammarstedt, 2012).

A new profession to advise on job-searching has emerged to serve the needs of the unemployed (Bolles, 2015). Concerns arise that some career counsellors may inspire false hopes, which that are likely to be ruined when their clients do not find employment. Candidates can make simple changes to their presentation. Related experience, improved ability and accomplishments are contributing factors to acquire a suitable position. However, clever social marketing cannot change the fact that socio-economic conditions make it more challenging for older people to obtain employment. Middle-age professionals may find it difficult to remain resilient after being unsuccessful for numerous positions for the duration of the job-seeking process. Several middle-age professionals adjust their career expectations

due to unrealistic expectations to return to the workforce in their former capacity (Hopkins, 2012).

Unemployment is one of the top ten traumatic life experiences (Spera, Buhrfeind, & Pennebaker, 1994) and mentally distressing outcomes are reported. One writer who personally this trauma said that when he lost his company, he lost a huge part of his identity and the vision he had invested in to develop the partnership over so many years. He also lost friends (Mouton, 2014).

Unemployment causes psychological distress in the unemployed, resulting in an intensified sense of lost identity during the middle-age period (Bolles, 2015). Loss of time structure and routine can be disorientating. The unemployed appear less organised and less purposeful in their use of time. Symptoms of depression might even appear. Contact with other people sometimes decreases and the unemployed person might become socially more isolated? Does the isolation impact their mental state? To what extent does social support from family members buffer the major causes of stress and increase coping ability? To what extent does the unemployed have social contact with other people other than family members? Work provides a sense of purpose. Does the unemployed feel inadequate when the daily experience and the sense of purpose work brings is taken away? What can the unemployed do to feel they are contributing to society? The specific objectives are to investigate a group of middle-age professionals to:

- 1 Understand the relationship between persons personal identity and employment status
- 2 Understand the effects of unemployment on the person's self-concept
- 3 Evaluate the effect of unemployment on the perceived sense of self-worth.

## **Research objectives**

The following research objectives emerged from the description of the research problem as given above. The study aims at investigating whether a relationship exists between employment and the personal identity, for a retrenched group of middle-age professionals.

The specific objectives are to investigate a group of middle-age professionals.

### **The following research questions emerged from the description of the research problem**

#### **as given above:**

- 1 Understand the relationship between persons personal identity and employment status
- 2 Understand the effects of unemployment on the person's self-concept
- 3 Evaluate the effect of unemployment on the perceived sense of self-worth.

## **Research design**

A research design is a strategic framework for action which helps the researcher to link the research questions with the execution questions with the execution and implementation of physical research (Terre Blanche, Durrheim, & Painter, 2006). Coherence between research questions and the methodology used is required in order to generate valid and reliable data (Ritchie & Lewis, 2005). The following discussion will examine the most appropriate research approach, strategy, and methodology in which the research questions will be addressed.

### **Research Approach and Strategy**

A qualitative research design was used to discover the perceptions of participants'. According to Leedy (1997), this enables the researcher to understand and experience human behaviour better, to focus on phenomena that occur in their natural setting and complexity, and to obtain a deeper understanding of the influence of these experiences on the individual's perspective.

Qualitative research entails interpretive approaches where the researcher attempts to make sense of and interpret these phenomena in terms of the meanings individuals attach to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). The researcher went into the field without any preconceived ideas of what she would like to confirm, but rather approached it as an exploratory investigation.

Qualitative Research is appropriate for exploratory research (Maree, 2014). It is used to gain an understanding of underlying reasons, opinions, and motivations. It provides insights into the problem statement which is to understand how a middle-age professional preserve a positive identity after becoming unemployed. To address the research questions structured, face-to-face interviews were conducted with selected middle-age professionals who have undergone the experience of unemployment. The *qualitative research method* enables middle-age professionals who have lost their jobs, to describe their personal experiences in their own words, thereby allowing the complexities of middle-age professionals to be more fully explored (Price, 2003). In this vein it can be stated that the research concerns the professional's experiences and the discovery of the way in which each individual describes the process of restoring or maintaining a positive identity (Daly, 2007; van Manen, 1990). During an interview these mentioned experiences were recorded and transcribed.

### **Research Method**

The research method for this research study comprised a literature review and an empirical study. This section will discuss the different methodological elements of this research study.

## **Research Setting**

The interviews took place in a neutral environment in order to ensure respondents were as comfortable as possible. Care was taken to conduct the interviews in a quiet area, so as to ensure minimal distraction. The objective of the study was explained to participants, their right to partake in the research or to withdraw at any time they chose to do so.

## **Participants**

Participants invited to take part in the study were South African men or women geographically located in Mpumalanga who have experienced unemployment or who had voluntarily or involuntarily been retrenched from a full-time professional career. The participants had to be between 40 and 60 years of age. Participants were considered 'professional' if they had completed at least a Bachelor's degree/Advanced Diploma (NQF level 7) or a Diploma/Advanced Certificate (NQF level 6) and / or regard themselves as having worked in a professional career by agreeing that their careers fitted the following definition:

A disciplined group of individuals who adhere to high ethical standards and hold themselves to, and are accepted by, the public as possessing special knowledge and skills in a widely recognised, organised body of learning derived from education and training at a high level, and who are prepared to exercise this knowledge and these skills in the interest of others (Professions Australia, 1997, para 1.).

The participants were invited to apply voluntarily to take part in the study. To avoid bias the invitation was distributed by an independent person.

## *Exclusions*

It was verified with the participants to ensure they were not undergoing therapy with a Counsellor or Psychologist during the time the interviews were conducted. This was important to protect the individual and to ensure the psychological state of the person was not compromised in any way.

## **Sampling**

A convenience sample from Mpumalanga was used. The sample included six middle-age professionals who were affected by unemployment during their careers. This Qualitative research study was based on non-probability and purposive sampling, meaning that the participants were selected because they did meet defining characteristic that made them suitable for the study. The participants that finally consented to participation in the interviews were geographically located in Mpumalanga. The researcher did reach data saturation during the analysis of the data while interviewing male participants in Mpumalanga. The researcher came to the conclusion during the sampling that interviewing additional female participants will not lead to more information related to the research question. The interviewing process was therefore concluded with male participants residing in Mpumalanga. All participants had been unemployed during their careers. Most participants had the same experience once or twice during their careers, while one participant lost his job on three different occasions during his career. All six participants were male. Five of the men interviewed were white and one was black. No black or white females agreed to take part in the research. Most of the male participants were unemployed for six months or longer. One individual had been without work for more than thirty months. Five participants previously worked at Senior Management/Middle Management level. The purpose of the qualitative study was to understand how middle-age professionals experience unemployment to determine whether their identities were affected and whether the stressors and support that hindered or helped the unemployed participant to regain employment.

## **Research Procedure**

Permission was obtained from participants, where after semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants based upon voluntary availability. . The study, purpose, interview, diary process and duration thereof were explained to all participants prior to data collection. The participants were informed verbally of confidentiality and anonymity, and that interviews would be audio recorded. All participants were required to give written informed consent by completing the consent form. (see Appendix A). The one-to-one interviews produced quality data which align well with the study's goal. Upon completion of the interview process, the participant was given opportunity to scrutinize and approve the final interview report.

## **Data Collection Method**

The research problem was clearly defined and the research question developed to qualify the specific research problem. Semi-structured questions were developed to ensure consistency during the interview process.

After permission to carry out the research was granted, quiet premises were sought where which the interviews would be conducted. Participants were contacted telephonically to request an interview.

### *Semi-structured, face-to-face interviews*

A third party invited participants to take part in the research study. Participants that met the criteria to take part in the research each received a formal consent letter to take part in the research study. Face-to-face interviews were arranged with participants that signed the consent letters.

During the interviews the participants were asked to tell their stories about being unemployed and of sharing their most critical experiences. The interview method was a one-on-one, face-to-face interview, using the semi-structured questionnaire.

Before the interview we agreed on a suitable, private venue. The duration of the interviews was 90 to 120 minutes each. The interview focused on each participant's experience with a view to understand to what extent middle-age professionals associate their personal identities with their professions and the impact unemployment has on their self-concept and sense of self-worth and their decisions to regain employment. A sample document of the questionnaire is attached (see Appendix A). The content of each participant's interview transcript was confirmed with them.

### **Data Collection Steps**

The following data collection steps were executed

1. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed.
2. The interview analysis process proceeded with the coding of data.
3. Prior to the coding process the researcher attended a training session with her Study leader on the methods for coding and categorising:
  - The data was captured on a spreadsheet line by line using thematic analysis.
  - Sub-themes and then the main themes of the study emerged from the data.
  - To ensure data integrity, the co-researcher independently analysed the interviews
  - Saturation of the data had been reached after the sixth participant's transcript had been analysed. Inter-coder consistency was determined.
4. The data was reduced and reformatted:
  - Data was interpreted, and it moved from the field (interview) to the text to the reader – each step involving a reflexive process.
  - The interviews and the analysis of the data resulted in sub-themes.
  - These were looked at for duplication and overlap and then reduced to sub-themes and major themes emerged.

## **Data Analysis**

A qualitative content analysis and data representation structures was followed. Based on the research at hand, this proved to be a very practical and useful approach. The researcher first conducted a full literature review and then wrote a description of her own understanding of identity according to the literature review. Willig (2008) explained that all interviews should be transcribed and initial main thoughts written down separately during the interview process and data analysis. The researcher read through all the transcribed interviews several times to get an overall understanding of them (Cresswell, 2007). One important data analysis strategy which was used was making field notes or memos throughout the interview process. Memos support all activities of qualitative data analysis suggests Miles and Huberman (1994); guiding the researcher from data reduction (extracting the essence), data display and drawing conclusions (Suter, 2012).

During the qualitative content analysis procedure all text was coded and then the significant statements found in either the interviews or diary entries were listed. (Each statement was treated as having equal value and the list was expanded, until there were no new or overlapping statements, grouped together, and then labelled according to common themes by the researcher. Trustworthiness was ensured by means of comparing the findings of the researcher with those of the experienced study leader, analysing the raw data by creating categories via themes and identifying patterns in a similar manner as the researcher.

### *Reliability and credibility of data*

Reliability and validity remain appropriate for attaining rigor in qualitative research. The researcher implemented a verification strategy to ensure trustworthiness and reliability and validity are implemented. To ensure the attainment of rigor the responsibility for incorporating and maintaining reliability and validity for judgment was moved to the investigator (Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers, 2002). Member checks were used to

ensure credibility of the data (Merriam, 2009); All participants were afforded the opportunity to formal review their individual transcriptions. After the interview each participant were provided with a copy of the transcript to signoff. Each participant was prompted to review the transcript and ensure the content was a correct reflection of their individual responses. Each participant were provided with a hard or softcopy of the transcript depending on their geographic availability. Each participants were given the opportunity of responding and making minor corrections, if required, to their case reports and in so doing confirm that the information had been accurately captured.

In an effort to maintain data, security, interview recordings were saved on the researcher's personal computer, external hard drive and on a CD. The personal computers, as well as the interview folders on the external hard drive and CD require passwords in order to access the research data. The transcripts and CD are kept in a lockable drawer.

## Results of the study

In this section, the results of the study will be reported and discussed. The results will be discussed by focusing on the themes that emerged from the interviews. From the data analysis on the impact of unemployment on the identity of middle-age professionals, five themes emerged: Personal identity, severe emotional reaction, supporting factors, satisfaction with life and learnings taken from this study. These five factors represent the experiences of the participants experienced due to unemployment. The five themes are discussed next.

### *Theme 1: Personal Identity*

All the participants referred to personal identity as a concept of themselves that evolved during the courses of their lives. This included aspects of their lives over which they have had no control, such as being retrenched or being unemployed, as well as choices they made in life, such as choosing a profession. How their personal identity affected the choice of their professions, how unemployment effects identity, and the impact of personal identity when regaining employment, form part of this theme.

The participants acknowledge that work forms an integral part of their identity and play a significant role in their lives. They acknowledged that they devote a significant amount of time to their work and find work fulfilling, giving meaning to their lives. They stated: *My business is a central part to who I am and what I am because I put so much effort into it...* (Participant 1); *Work – I just love it. I do what I love and it is not difficult for me to do because there is just so much enjoyment* (Participant 2). Bergh (2000) says that people are satisfied when they can express their talents. Work is a means of giving expression to a person's own identity. Carlsen (2008) remarks that work is a universal life domain and a prominent source to define a person and provide meaning for most individuals.

The participants (50%) stated that a good relationship exists between their personal identities and their chosen professions, demonstrating a deeper understanding of themselves, knowledge of what they are good at and matching their personalities to an environment that fits them. Most participants had a good understanding of their identities from a relatively early age and knew what they wanted to do. They stated: *So where we are now I am very comfortable with and I feel I have slotted myself into the right role* (Participant 1); *It was true to who I was. There were indications from early on that a career ... would be a good fit for me* (Participant 2). Bergh (2000) states that the more self-awareness and self-insight people demonstrate the better they can align their jobs with their personal goals, purpose and personal aspirations. Those who have a good understanding of their own identities are confident with who they are and are satisfied with the roles they play in life. It enables a person to make independent choices without being negatively influenced by the negative influence of other people's stereotypes and perceptions.

One participant reported poor identity fit with his work and stated that he did not enjoy his work. He said that he put his own personal dreams aside when he decided to follow a career that was not aligned with his personal identity. He said for him, marrying the right life partner outweighed his career choice. This created internal conflict and in his own words he 'consciously took a decision to suppress (his) own dreams' in order to provide stability and financial security for his family: *'During the time I was made the offer ..., I was also considering to get married. I wanted to set up a family and I needed some stability. Thinking back I should have said no to the offer at that stage and become an artist and carried on and see what happened. But I said yes ....* (Participant 4); *That decision was a big split in my life where I consciously took the decision to suppress or to put my art and dreams aside* (Participant 4); *But many times I tell my wife I would like to make a 90 degrees shift* (Participant 4). Bergh (2000) maintains that people lose a sense of self when they change

who they really are, in order to be accepted or to belong. People develop a false identity which creates internal stress, resulting in losing a sense of direction, purpose and motivation over time. Bergh (2000) poses the questions: Who are we listening to? The media, significant others ... or are we listening to our own inner voice? After participant 4 was retrenched the first time he experienced relief for no longer working at that organisation. *That is why when I left it was a big burden off me. I was not part of that any more – because it was starting to swallow me* (Participant 4). During the interview this participant shared that if it had not been for his creative outlet he would in his own words ‘lose [his] mind’: *I need a creative outlet. And also through the church choir. That is what keeps me sane; otherwise I would lose my mind* (Participant 4). The research of Wagner and Harter (2006) found that socially meaningful work enhances self-esteem and overall mental health, whilst labouring in an unchallenging, undesirable job, reduces self-esteem and correlates with many physical and mental disorders. Meaningful work is an ego-strengthening experience, while meaningless work can be soul-deadening. A person who is voluntarily unemployed and has the resources to maintain a good quality life can despite being unemployed still have a good quality life (Bergh, 2000). Whereas an unfulfilling job or enforced unemployment or involuntary unemployment may be harmful. The theoretical framework of Furnham (1999) states that, based on personality predispositions, some jobs are more suitable for a particular individuals than others. Roberts & Dutton (2009) refer to the work of Holland; it measure accurately the degree of fit (which is desirable) or misfit (undesirable).

The effect of unemployment on personal identity is discussed next. Most participants (80%) reported that their self-esteem and self-worth were negatively affected when they became unemployed. They stated: *...Incompetent, inadequate, not worthy, very negative emotions* (Participant 3); *Self-esteem basically, and self-belief all of those that is affected* (Participant 3); *It is almost if you are unemployed you feel worthless* (Participant 6).

Haywood and Ghail (2003) concurred that stress 'goes up' and self-esteem 'comes down' when a person is unemployed. Both expected and unexpected job loss resulting in unemployment was emotionally traumatising for people. In agreement with the findings of Ribton-Turner and de Bruin (2006) the study found that the psychological aspects of unemployment referred to most frequently by participants were declining self-esteem and decline in the belief of their self-efficacy. It was reported by some participants that the feeling of worthlessness related to their value as a husband or father being the provider for his family. They experienced losing that ability as devastating, especially those who has traditionally seen their roles as being the provider or 'breadwinner'. In their own words: *I think it is instilled in us (him/her) that the men are supposed to be the providers, and to lose that ability, it was bad. It was very bad (Participant 3); And then also I would be at home there and she will be out working. It was wrong you know, that type of thing (Participant 6)*. Haywood and Ghail (2003) found that in some cultures the man's self-worth is highly tied to his job. When working, a man sees himself as being self-sufficient and capable of at least taking care of himself, being accepted as a contributing member of society, contributing to the well-being of his family. Bergh (2000) says the advantage of work to the employee is that it provides a sense of self-worth through occupational prestige and fulfilment of a culturally valued 'breadwinner' role. The research done by Haywood and Ghail (2003) on masculinity supports that being employed gives social status. Being unemployed are frowned upon.

The consequences of loss of employment often include different emotional states that can result in divorce, suicide, strained relationships, and depression. Lakes, (2014) say when a man is out of work, the most distressing element for many is seeing the negative impact on his wife. It is stressful for some spouses too, especially when they then have to carry the full financial burden of providing for the family. She sometimes has to increase her work hours,

worry about money, wonder about her husband's health, and interact with a husband who is not a lot of fun to be around; which in turn could result in strain on the marriage. All the above aspects negatively impact the sense of a man's masculinity (Lakes, 2014). Whether one holds to traditional or modern definitions of marriage or relationships, being unemployed requires a re-structuring of a person's reality to cope with changed circumstances. The more flexible a person is the faster he/she will be able to adapt. If the man holds an inflexible definition of masculinity it can be particularly strenuous for him. Lakes (2014) say that decoupling identity from the job would be a first step in managing unemployment. The second would be separating unemployment from masculinity. One way to do this is to reframe the situation and see the potential upsides of unemployment.

The results showed that participant 2's identity was temporarily affected due to his imminent retrenchment, exiting from his insolvent business. From what he explained, the biggest change was in his thoughts, personal feelings and emotions. Although he did feel anxious and insecure it was mostly for him a subjective experience. He said: *The process ... left me floating and for a while anxious and insecure. My daily routine was disrupted, the relationships and processes all changed overnight. There was a vacuum, a slight insecurity on how I was going to use my time, my energy and my resources effectively. I discovered that in actual fact very little internally had changed...very little externally had changed. One aspect, one important aspect, had changed and this for a moment had impacted on my subjective experience. This emotional energy and experience, I found, was a poor predictor of the reality....both internal and external* (Participant 2). The study revealed that unemployment had a temporary effect on the person's identity. The person revealed that his emotions fluctuated and that the experience left him shaken, but for him it was a subjective experience, for people will continue normally with their lives when the experience is over. Participant 4 reported that the unemployment experience had a semi-permanent effect on his

identity, resulting in him being diagnosed with General Anxiety Disorder (GAD). They stated: *At that stage I became physical ill. At first I thought it was my heart but then I realized it was panic attacks. ... The fear creeps up and it becomes a physical thing, not just a mental thing... General anxiety disorder (GAD). And you know I have lived with it. I can feel when I do have a lot of issue building up. About a year or two ago I had another attack coming down the hill and I stopped* (Participant 4). This debilitating disorder GAD is now a lasting feature of his life.

### *Theme 2: Severe emotional reaction*

The results indicated that the impact of unemployment reverberates across all the levels of human functioning. All the participants experienced severe emotional reaction to a larger or lesser extent. One participant described how his emotions fluctuated: *My situation was very complex causing the emotions to fluctuate. Change is not a 'straight-line' process* (Participant 2). Another participant explained that the fear of the unknown created both apprehension (anxiety) and anticipation (hope): *There was a lot of anticipation or the better word is apprehension as well...* (Participant 1). Some experienced uncertainty and confusion, as illustrated by the following quote of a participant: *Not knowing what is going on (confusion), not knowing what to do* (Participant 4). Some experienced anger: Results reported varying degrees of anger. *You get angry with why is it you, it's a natural reaction* (Participant 1). Depressive feelings were also reported: *Experienced suicidal thoughts. Used anti-depressants during that period* (Participant 3). Some experienced sadness and grief. In their own words: *The first things that jump out are sadness and grief. ... it was sad to see it go* (Participant 1); *I find myself longing back to .. moments of meaning, the camaraderie* (Participant 2). Some reported regret and guilt: *You know regret. For putting my son and my wife through that. That I did not make a different decision* (Participant 4). Some experienced relief: One participant reported relief: *That is why when I left it was a big burden off me. I*

was not part of that any more (Participant 4). Others reported withdrawal: *I never discussed my emotions with anybody else. I had the opportunity to resolve the pain / difficulty of the retrenchments. Almost a question of life goes on ..... Did go through a time of heavy drinking and partying was my means to cope – promiscuous behaviour during this time to try and deal with things* (Participant 3). The theory of Wollheim (1990) supports the idea that the ego activates a defence mechanism to protect the person from anxiety. ‘Some ego defence mechanisms are adaptive and become coping strategies... humour, anticipation, affiliation, altruism, self-observation, suppression, sublimation’ and ‘some are maladaptive and self-defeating.’ They also include action-level defence: acting out, regression, apathy, withdrawal, rejecting assistance, complaining and passive aggression (Wollheim, 1990). Results reflected that some participants accepted their situation after unemployment: *This thing is running the right way, what’s to stop us (him/her) from trying something else* (Participant 1). The study did find that all participants did go through a grieving process to deal with unemployment. *Thus concurring with the ‘five stages of dealing with loss model’* that was introduced by psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross in 1969. The stages are: Initial shock, Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, and finally moving on to Acceptance. Dealing with loss or letting go is unique to each person (Kübler-Ross & Byock, 2011).

The results indicated that positive emotions helped participants to deal with the traumatic experience of unemployment, empowering them to regain employment. The most prevalent positive emotions participants displayed were optimism and a positive attitude. Some participants took a conscious decision to manage themselves, making a decision not to harbour negative emotions because it is destructive and damaging and does not contribute to a positive outcome. This resulted in participants regaining employment and proceeding with personal life goals in a shorter timeframe. The effects of positive emotions are subsequently discussed in more detail. **Optimism:** One participant explained that even during the difficult

time of unemployment he had a dominant emotion of Optimism. ...*my dominant emotion ... It's Optimism. ..., this has influenced the direction I have taken with all my decisions when I have engage with all the big stakeholders* (Participant 2). **Positive attitude:** *I kept a positive attitude ... this is the only way I am going to survive this thing* (Participant 1); **Careful with self:** *I occasionally did experience moments of anger. But you know the things is this... I needed to be quite careful with myself. You don't want to be too hard on yourself. You also don't want to be too soft on yourself* (Participant 2). **Not allowing self to harbour negative emotions:** *The reality is that I could not afford to give myself the indulgence of being angry or harbouring negative emotions. It would lead nowhere. It would be destructive & damaging* (Participant 2). **Not allowing self-pity:** *So I never, never ever allowed myself to wallow in self-pity. I made a decision to be empowered...and that was that* (Participant 2). Fredrickson (2013) has done ground-breaking research on positivity. Negative emotions release a surge of cortisol from the adrenal glands. The urge to flee that comes from the fear does not simply come from your mind. It infuses the body and entire being. Bergh (2000) states that the anxiety associated with unemployment results in poor cognitive functioning leading to dizziness, lack of concentration and absent mindedness. Performance drop due to scattered fuzzy thinking, increase in mistakes, inaccuracy, problems in deciding and racing thoughts. This can have a negative effect and hamper efforts in regaining employment because of declining performance levels physically and emotionally. Baumgardner and Crothers (2010) refer to the effects of positive emotions. Independent of their detoxifying effects they are good for the human body. Opposite to negativity, positivity (Fredrickson, 2013) has a subtle effect on a person's mind-set and outlook, heart rhythms and body chemistry, muscle tension and facial expressions, and your resources and relationships, resulting in improved performance levels physically and conceptually, as the research in this study supports a more positive outcome in terms of problem solving, establishing positive relationships and

regaining employment. **Courage:** The attribute of courage helped participants to overcome the trauma of unemployment and recover. *One must remain a fighter and come up. Not be scared of the unforeseen and what may happen* (Participant 3). The effect of certain personality dispositions which relate to personal control, such as optimism or positivity or self-efficacy contribute to how stress is appraised and what coping mechanisms people will use. Strong personality dispositions, such as optimism and self-efficacy, have been found to influence the body's immune system (Scheier & Carver, 1985). The strength of courage entails the exercise of will to accomplish goals in the face of opposition. The following four strengths in the classification handbook satisfy the criteria for character strength: Bravery, persistence, integrity and vitality (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Participants who demonstrated a positive attitude and optimism and who manage their personal emotions reported better levels of adjustment following unemployment – a strong sense of self-efficacy and not allowing self-pity, not harbouring negative emotions because it is destructive.

### *Theme 3: Supporting factors*

The results supported that all the participants to a lesser or larger extent received support from their faith/religious activities, including family and friends.

**Support from faith/religious activities.** All six individuals indicated that their faith and spirituality were pivotal, helping them cope on a day to day basis and in retaining hope. All participants reported that they draw comfort from their faith/religious activities at church. This supports the results of the study of Ribton-Turner and de Bruin (2006), indicating that all participants relied on their faith in God to weather the storm of unemployment. The results indicated that some participants played religious music, prayed, and trusted God on a daily basis for direction. Involvement in religious activity such as the church choir and going to church on a regular basis helped them during this stressful period. *Without God I don't*

*know what I will be right now* (Participant 6); *Faith: I start everything with prayer. When you stay in a place I am now you need to have faith every day* (Participant 5). The consensual definition provided in the theory is that faith and spirituality (religiousness) refer to beliefs and practices that are grounded in the conviction that there is a divine or transcendent dimension of life. The following statement is a good example of an individual who is spiritual or religious: 'I believe in life after death; I look at God for support, guidance, and strength' (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Participants reported that **support from the family** was an important mediating factor to being able to cope while being unemployed. Participants reporting family support experienced a more positive environment in which to cope with their stress compared to those that did not have a supporting family. *My family was something to come home to – a safe space. I need not reduce myself. I could be myself.* (Participant 6); *For me when I see my wife and children happy, eating, talking, and laughing in the house around me it makes me happy. Then I don't mind about the unemployment. It makes my heart bounce* (Participant 5). An interesting fact that emerged from this study was that the participants did not always have to interact and talk with the family. Simply for the mere fact of coming home to a safe place, being surrounded by the family members, provided emotional support. **Support from a friend / mentor:** One participant reported that he had received support from a friend / mentor. The support and advice helped him stabilize the crisis. *One foundation of my successful management of this crisis was that I brought some 'big players' close to me because I knew I needed to rely on their wisdom, insight, experience and positive sentiment toward me benefit of big stabilizing factors to whom I owed a measure of accountability* (Participant 2). Seligman (2013) found that if one has a friend they are likely to live longer. There is no denying that positive relationships or the absence thereof has a profound influence on man's well-being. Bolles (2015) refers to networking as a weapon. The internet can be a valuable resource for obtaining information and contacts if a person

does not already have a network. This study is supported by the research Ribton-Turner and de Bruin (2006) indicating that a mentor or friend was a source of strength for all the participants – sharing their fears and concerns.

*Theme 4: Satisfaction with life*

Results revealed that during the study two of the participants were still unemployed, two were still in transition; setting up new business ventures and two were reemployed. When participants were confronted with the question as to whether they were satisfied with their lives, most participants rated their satisfaction levels as being somewhat satisfied. One participant said that he is slightly satisfied with his life, three of the participants interviewed rated themselves as satisfied, and one participant said he is extremely satisfied with his life. Only one candidate said he is slightly dissatisfied with his life. This means that most participants viewed their circumstances to be reasonably positive and indicated that they were happy. This study corresponds with hundreds of thousands of data sets, namely that most people are indeed happy (Myers, 2015).

Most of the participants agreed that if they could relive their lives, they would change almost nothing, despite the unemployment and associated challenging life experiences. In their own words: *I will agree with that, which probably does not make sense, I think everything prepared me for the next chapter, which I have in my final chapter that started 3 months ago. I can't take anything out of my life. It is like a book with chapters. If I take any chapter out, the book will lose its meaning. So yes, I agree all of this was necessary. It needed to prepare me* (Participant 3).

### *Unexpected findings*

The study resulted in two unexpected findings. The first unexpected finding was the effect on children. Two participants explained that their children are better people as a direct result of the unemployment experience. Noticing an improvement in problem-solving ability, ability to act independently from parents and manage personal resources such as money more effectively. He said: *But looking back, my son has grown to be this amazing child. If we would have stayed there and continued that life – he was a spoilt little brat. There if he cried for something he got it. Here his life changed. Now he is the type of kid who does not ask for nothing. He has grown up knowing the value of stuff* (Participant 4); *But what happened is that my children have learned good things out of this experience* (Participant 6); *I know my kids did go through difficulties. She will not go and spend the most money on a branded item* (Participant 6). This study contradicted the finding of Ribton-Turner and de Bruin (2006) that children challenged their father for not securing work, which led to the questions of identity as the ‘father figure’ or the role of provider. In fact this study revealed was that the unemployment experience had a positive effect on the children, resulting in them better managing money as a resource – not buying branded clothing. The children in this study also demonstrated better problem-solving skills and ability to act independently from their parents, whereas previously, the children were ‘spoilt’ and more dependent on their parents to solve every need they had.

The second unexpected finding was to keep the dream alive after unemployment. One participant re-evaluated his life goals: *I changed my goals, changed what I wanted. .... And that was when we finally sat down and said we need to make a decision now. .... And we both agreed it is time to get out of Jo’burg for health reasons but also for quality of life* (Participant 1). Bolles (2015) indicated that for many people, especially during their middle-age period, the job-search offers an opportunity for making some fundamental changes to

their lives. It marks a turning point in our life to think and reflect about purpose and legacy. Buford (1997) explains that unemployment can be experienced as part of a midlife crisis but it can also be a time for positive change. For 80% of participants in the study it was a practical way of reviewing and creating a new strategy for their lives to live with purpose and leave a legacy.

Two participants confirmed that their abilities to remain dreaming resulted in creative solutions to rebuild their lives following unemployment: *Suppose I am a bit of a dreamer. I had to rebuild myself. Until I got or actually got to a point where I am not scared at things like that anymore (Participant 3). I am 52 right now... I don't know how much time I have...hope to live my life with maximum impact. I think I would like to create a leadership trust (Participant 2).* Post unemployment 50% of the participants dreamt about matters related to their personal goals. Typically as people grow older, although they have more experience, they tend to dream less. The act of dreaming can actually become highly stimulating. Dreaming can help rebuild life after unemployment.

## Conclusion

The main purpose of the current study was to understand how unemployment affect the personal identity of middle-age professionals. The main findings were extracted and discussed in the previous section with quotations from the participants supporting each finding. Existing literature on meaning was explored and compared to the finding in order to determine how well this study relates to other research, but also to make it clear what sets the research apart through highlighting the contribution of this research study.

From the data analysis on the impact of unemployment on the identity of middle-age professionals, five themes emerged: Personal identity, severe emotional reaction, supporting factors, satisfaction with life and learnings taken from this study. These five themes represent the experiences of the participants experienced due to unemployment.

The study revealed that identity as a concept evolved over time. Some aspects that impact identity cannot be controlled, such as being retrenched or being unemployed, as well as choosing a profession. Participants acknowledged that work formed an integral part of their identities and plays a significant role in their lives. People in general devote a significant amount of time to their work and find work fulfilling, giving meaning to their lives (Robbins, 1996). The study revealed that most people's personal identities reinforces their chosen professions, demonstrating understanding of selves, knowledge of what they are good at and matching their personalities to an environment that fits them. Most participants had a good understanding of their identities from a relatively early age and knew what they wanted to do. The study revealed that a person can lose their own identities of sense of self when they suppress who they are, rather than do what they deem necessary. A false identity creates internal stress, resulting in losing a sense of self that negatively impact the personal identity. The study did find that most participants (80%) reported that their self-esteem and self-worth

were negatively affected due to unemployed. The study revealed that unemployment temporarily affect the identity, leaving a person shaken by the experience and emotions to fluctuate. In some case the identity can be affected on a semi-permanent basis for example when a person is diagnosed with a more debilitating disorder like General Anxiety Disorder.

The study revealed that unemployment reverberates across all the levels of participants' functioning. All the participants experienced fluctuating emotional reaction to a larger or lesser extent like for example initial shock, anger, regret and guilt. The study revealed that the emotional reactions experienced due to unemployment are unique to each person. The study indicated that positive emotions helped participants deal with the traumatic experience of unemployment, empowering them to regain employment. The most prevalent positive emotions participants displayed were optimism and positive attitude. Half of the participants took a conscious decision to manage themselves, being careful with self and making a decision not to harbour negative emotions because it is destructive and damaging and does not contribute to a positive outcome. This resulted in participants regaining employment and proceeding with personal life goals in a shorter timeframe.

The study supported that all the participants to a lesser or larger extent received support from their faith, religious activities and family. Most participants viewed their circumstances to be reasonably positive and indicated that they were happy. Most of the participants agreed that if they could relive their lives, they would change almost nothing. This study corresponds with many data sets, namely that most people are indeed happy (Myers, 2015). One participant compared his life to a book with chapters. He said if you take one chapter out of the book it would lose its meaning. Thus finding that the trauma of unemployment is indeed temporary and life does go on when a person established the new normal for themselves.

The study resulted in two unexpected findings. The first finding was the effect on children. Participants explained that their children were better people as a direct result of the unemployment experience. Noticing an improvement in problem-solving ability, ability to act independently from parents and manage personal resources such as money more effectively.

The second finding was to keep the dream alive after unemployment. For 80% of the participants in the study it was a practical way of reviewing and creating a new strategy for their lives to live with purpose and a legacy. Two participants confirmed that their ability to remain dreaming resulted in creative solutions to rebuild their lives following unemployment.

The findings (both the unique contributions and the findings endorsing previous literature) prove that identity of the middle-age professional is affected by unemployment. The discussion challenged the reader to think in a more abstract manner about the findings when taking into account the specific context as well as what has been found in previous research. In conclusion, the research article captured the perceptions and experiences of 6 professional participants with regards to identity and how it is affected by unemployment.

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## **CHAPTER 3**

### **CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The purpose of this research study was to investigate to what extent middle-age professionals associate their personal identities with their professions and the impact unemployment has on one's self-concept and sense of self-worth and their decisions to regain employment.

The following section describes all the findings and the conclusions drawn. Thereafter, the acknowledged limitations of the research, recommendations, and a reflection of the researcher's overall experience whilst conducting the research study are given.

#### **3.1 CONCLUSION**

The concept *identity* has been explored extensively; definitions of identity have varied among different authors (Robbins, 1996). Personal identity can be defined as the self-esteem or self-efficacy people believe about themselves. Bergh (2000) suggests that people are satisfied when they find they can express their talents. It is therefore not surprising when the study concluded that 80% of participants reported a diminishing self-esteem and self-worth as a result of being unemployed. Unemployment can destabilize a person, resulting in anxiety and fluctuating emotions that can temporarily affect the personal identity (Collins, 2011). From the study it was concluded that that the effect on personal identity was mostly a subjective experience influencing the thoughts, mood and emotions of the person. The study supported that unemployment is especially devastating for a man. Haywood and Ghail (2003) uphold that culturally a man's self-worth is highly tied to his job and the ability to

provide as breadwinner. Lakes (2014) say for most men being unemployed is more distressing than for women; seeing the negative impact on his wife and family, resulting in significant strain on the marriage. All these aspects come together and negatively impact the sense of a man's masculinity. Whether one holds to traditional or modern definitions of relationships or marriage, being unemployed requires a re-structuring of a person's reality to cope with changed circumstances. Haywood and Ghail (2003) maintain that the more flexible they are the more rapidly they will adapt. If the man holds a strong traditional definition of masculinity it can be particularly strenuous for him. Lakes (2014) advised that de-coupling identity from the job would be a first step in coping with unemployment. The second would be separating unemployment from masculinity. One way of doing this is by reframing the situation and seeing the potential upsides of unemployment for example starting a new career.

It can be concluded from the study that most people who become unemployed during the middle-age period grasp the opportunity of making fundamental changes to their lives, viewing it as a turning point in their lives to think about and reflect on purpose and legacy. For 80% of the participants in the study it was a practical way to review and create a new strategy for their lives to live with purpose. Bergh (2000) suggests that as people grow older they tend to dream less or spend less time on creative ideas. Peterson and Seligman (2004) suggest that creativity varies across individuals. On one extreme there are individuals that never dream and do not use their creative thoughts to come up with new ideas. On the other extreme are those that employ the art of dreaming to develop creative solutions to the problems they encounter. The study revealed that a participant who had no support structure had the ability to rebuild his life using the power of dreaming to identify and develop creative solutions to problems he encountered during unemployment.

The severe emotional reactions associated with being unemployed most frequently referred to by the participants during the study were anxiety, uncertainty, confusion, anger, depression, sadness and grief, regret, guilt. From the explanations provided, all participants in the study indicated that they did experience different emotional stages. In the study participants revealed that their emotions fluctuated and that the change process was not a straight-line one. This corresponds with the five stages of the Dealing with loss model introduced by the psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross in 1969 (Kübler-Ross & Byock, 2011). These stages include shock/denial, anger, bargaining, and depression, finally moving on to acceptance. The study concurred with the findings of the research of Kübler-Ross and Byock (2011) that each person deals with loss or letting go in their own unique manner.

The study revealed that positive emotions helped participants to deal with the trauma of unemployment, empowering them to regain employment. The most prevalent positive emotions are optimism and positive attitudes. Other positive factors reported by participants included a conscious decision to manage themselves and; being careful not to harbour negative emotions due to it not being of benefit. Participants who portrayed positive emotions while they were unemployed reported that they regained employment more rapidly and proceeded with their personal life goals within a shorter timeframe. Thus participants demonstrating a positive attitude and optimism and managing their personal emotions successfully reported better levels of adjustment following unemployment. Participants, who harboured negative emotions such as anger and blame and who withdrew from support structures reported taking longer to get their personal lives and careers back on track. Negative emotions release a surge of cortisol from the adrenal glands (Nakazawa, 2015). The urge to flee that comes from fear does not simply come from one's mind. It infuses the body and entire being. Bergh (2000) states that the anxiety associated with unemployment results in poor cognitive functioning leading to dizziness, lack of concentration and absent

mindedness. Performance drop due to scattered fuzzy thinking, increase in mistakes, inaccuracy, problems in deciding and racing thoughts. This can have a negative effect and hamper efforts in regaining employment because of declining performance levels physically and conceptually. The study revealed that participants who displayed optimism and positive thoughts took a wilful decision not to be defeated by negative self-talk: *I kept a positive attitude ... this is the only way I am going to survive this thing.* These positive thoughts contributed to a positive believe system and self-efficacy that resulted in behaviour that demonstrated a strong personal identity that was not dependant on the situation.

Participants also reported receiving emotional support from faith/religion and support system. All participants reported drawing comfort from their faith and/or religious activities at church, for example singing in the church choir and playing gospel music to relax. This was pivotal to maintaining hope. Support from family was seen as an important mediating factor with regard to coping during unemployment. This study revealed that it was not always about interacting with the family but viewing the family as a safe place to come home to and be surrounded by the family members. Seligman (2013) found that positive relationships or the absence thereof have a profound influence on our well-being.

The study corresponds with the study conducted by Myers (2015) in which it was found that most people are happy irrespective of circumstances. (Myers, 2015). Despite the trauma of unemployment where people were devastated and experienced strong emotional reactions, being unhappy was found to be temporary. Most people reported that they were satisfied with their lives. Most of the participants agreed that if they could relive their lives, they would change almost nothing, despite the unemployment and the associated challenging of traumatic life experiences. As one participant said: *It is like a book with chapters. If I take any chapter out the book it will lose its meaning. So yes, I agree all of this was necessary. It needed to prepare me.*

It can be concluded that personal identity is people's self-believe, their self-esteem or self-efficacy. Bergh (2000) suggests that work is a means to give expression to one's identity. The study revealed that 80% of the participants reported a diminishing self-esteem and self-worth as a result of being unemployed. De-coupling identity from the job would be the first step to deal with unemployment. Haywood and Ghail (2003) reported that culturally a man's self-worth is highly tied to his job and the ability to provide as breadwinner. For most men being unemployed is more distressing than for a women. All these aspects come together and negatively impact the sense of a man's masculinity. Unemployment can be separated from masculinity by reframing the situation and seeing the potential upsides of unemployment. Unemployment during the middle age period can be an opportunity to make fundamental changes to a person's life, viewing it as a turning point and taking time to reflect about purpose and legacy. Severe emotional reactions are associated with unemployment but participants who manage their emotions were more optimistic with a positive attitude; reported regaining employment more rapidly and proceeding with their life goals within a shorter timeframe. Supporting structures like faith/religion and family ties alleviated the impact of unemployment. In this study severed emotional reactions were reported but irrespective of the circumstances the trauma of unemployment was in generally short-lived. Most people reported that they were satisfied with their lives on the medium term following the experience. Relationships with the spouse took significant strain with some relationships ending in divorce. It was reported that the experience had a positive effect on the values system and behaviour of the children involved.

### **Unexpected findings**

Although very little research could be found on the effect of unemployment on children, it was found in this study that the unemployment experience of their parents had a positive effect on the children involved. The parents shared that a privileged life where every need of a child was met, resulted in undesirable behaviour such as being ungrateful, unappreciative, wasting money on branded clothing and being more dependent on parents to solve problems for them. Two participants shared that their children were better as a result of the negative experience: being more independent, valuing money, not wasting money and doing chores around the home. In the one scenario the family moved to the 'village' (squatter camp) as a result of the unemployment and lost the family car during an armed robbery. Previously the family stayed in an affluent middle-class suburb. These children then problem-solve when they needed transport, not wanting to put an extra burden on their fathers. For example, if the child did not have money for a bus ticket they would ask a friend for a lift.

### **3.2 LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH**

A potential area for further research would be to explore if the unemployed persons emotional and mental state is restored when they eventually regain employment. It is not evident whether they recover completely following the financial loss and psychological disintegration.

This qualitative study generated rich data on the experience of the unemployed middle-age professionals. However, the limitations of this study need to be considered when assessing the findings. The most obvious omission in a study conducted in South Africa Mpumalanga is that of female participants. In purposely selecting the sample the researcher

attempted to find female individuals and it was a difficult task. It may be that females are underrepresented in this category or not willing to take part in the study. The sample is, however, representative of professional middle-age South African men. The variable of race, gender and occupational group could have been better addressed; in terms of gender, no women were used in the sample. In as far as occupation is concerned, the participants were not drawn from the same industry; the sample is representative of the broader industry segments resulting in a wider range of findings.

### **3.3 RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the results of the study, the following recommendations can be made.

In terms of further research arising from this study, to the role of supporting structures for the unemployed needs to be further investigated. During the interviews all the participants indicated the value of faith and spirituality, indicating that it was pivotal in providing personal support during the traumatic times of unemployment; thus providing an opportunity to re-examine the current literature on the role of the church during a personal crisis such as unemployment. The church is central to some communities so is thus easily accessible to people that find themselves isolated and in distress.

The findings indicated that none of the participants returned to their former positions at Senior or Middle management post-retrenchment. Most participants started their own businesses and created opportunities for themselves. One participant has at the time of the study been unemployed for three years. With corporates dismantling and a shrinking economy that grows fewer jobs, a potential area for further research would be to explore opportunities to develop an entrepreneurial mind-set and put in place relevant support structures.

The study revealed that typically, as people grow older, they tend to dream less, especially when people are traumatized and depressed as a result of unemployment and financial pressures. The research study reaffirmed that dreaming contributed to creative solutions to rebuild a life following unemployment. Further research is required on the use of dreaming and visualizing as a coping mechanism during stressful times. The act of dreaming can be highly stimulating and can result in new life goals. Dreaming can actually make a person smarter and help a person rebuild their lives, especially during unemployment. It is important for the middle-age to keep the dream alive because the positive thoughts can become ideas. The ideas can result in action plans to take a person's life into a completely new direction. Given the startling high unemployment rate we need creative ideas where the unemployed can manage self and create new opportunities for themselves in a world where entrepreneurship combined with a simpler but happy life becomes the new normal.

This research indicated that the unemployment experience had a positive effect on the children. As a result of the traumatic and difficult experience the children became more independent, their problem-solving ability improved and they learned to value their resources or money more. Further research can be conducted on how the unemployment experience helps in shaping a child's values system, instilling gratitude, promoting the ability to act independently from parents and developing their problem-solving abilities.

The research revealed that positive emotions such as optimism and a positive attitude assisted the participants in coping with the trauma of unemployment and in retaining employment. Taking cognisance of the high unemployment rate in South Africa; this provides an opportunity for doing further research in order to possibly assist the unemployed to cultivate positive emotions, manage self and not harbour negative emotions in the interest of improving the possibility of gaining reemployment.

### **3.4 RESEARCHER'S PERSONAL REFLECTIONS**

As this research study draws to an end, I would like to share some key thoughts that have developed throughout the research period. A vast amount of literature is available on identity and unemployment, with many variations of the same key themes. Unemployment has been researched from a different array of angles internationally with little research available at this stage on the experiences of the middle-age in particular within the South Africa context. There is also limited research available on maintaining personal identity while unemployed.

This research supports international findings and will hopefully be used to broaden and guide South African studies on unemployment and identity of the middle-age professionals, as I feel that insightful and valuable findings and connections were obtained from it. I thoroughly appreciate becoming part of the participants' personal life stories. Most of the stories were very personal and touched me deeply, contemplating the hurt associated with unemployment: the feelings of worthlessness, being excluded from society, the shame, personal and financial turmoil, lost self-belief, strain on relationships which per occasion escalate in divorce, depression, and people contemplating suicide. But with the bitter comes the sweet. The part of the research that leaves an enduring impression on me was the personal stories of hope, courage, optimism, positive attitude, not giving up, exploring new dreams, setting new goals, continuing to live with impact to leave a legacy. It is pivotal that the learnings be shared with professionals of all ages and it is my hope that it will make a difference in the life of others.

Upon completion of the research, I am of the opinion that identity and unemployment is a subjective matter that can be personalised, but that it has certain similarities across gender, age, race and ethnicity boundaries. Through my interviews with participants I further

realized that identity and unemployment is an abstract, yet important, part of most of their lives, with or without them being aware of it. People either seemed to have to be aware of their own identity, or were searching to understand their own identities, as it is not static but evolving. Identity has been defined as the concept people have of themselves that evolves in the course of a lifetime (Robbins, 1996). This may include aspects of their lives over which they have no control, such as retrenchment or unemployment, as well as choices they make in life, such as choosing a career or making a career change later in their lives.

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## **PARTICIPANT INFORMATION LEAFLET AND CONSENT FORM – SONJA STADLER**

**TITLE OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT: POST-UNEMPLOYMENT IDENTITY IN MIDDLE-AGE PROFESSIONALS**

**REFERENCE NUMBERS: NWU-HS-2015-0254**

**PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: SONJA STADLER**

**CONTACT NUMBER: 082 372 2728**

You are invited to participate in a research project which forms part of a Master's Degree research study for Applied Positive Psychology. Please take time to read the information presented here, which will explain the details of this project. Please ask the researcher any questions about any part of this project which you do not fully understand. It is very important that you be fully satisfied that you clearly understand what this research is about and how you could be involved. Also, your participation is **entirely voluntary**, and you are free to decline participation. If you say no, this will not affect you negatively in any way

whatsoever. You are also free to withdraw from the study at any point, even if you do agree to take part.

This study has been approved by the **Humanities and Health Research Ethics Committee (HHREC) of the Faculty of Humanities of the North-West University (NWU–HS-2015-0254)** and will be conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines and principles of the international Declaration of Helsinki and the ethical guidelines of the National Health Research Ethics Council. It might be necessary for the research ethics committee members or relevant authorities to inspect the research records to make sure that the researcher, Sonja Stadler, is conducting research in an ethical manner.

#### **What is this research study all about?**

4. *This study will be conducted among middle-age professionals to examine to what extent; if at all, unemployment affects a person's identity. The process will involve semi-structured, face-to-face interviews for which the researcher has been trained. She is well versed in the professional conduct to do qualitative research. . She will conduct the research under the supervision of Dr Danie du Toit who has been appointed by NWU as her study leader. He is well versed in qualitative research methods and will provide the necessary support during the research.*
5. The objective of this research is to determine to what extent middle-age professionals associate personal identities with profession and the impact unemployment has on their personal identities and their decisions to regain employment.

#### **Why have you been invited to participate?**

1. *You have been invited to participate because you volunteered to take part in the study.*
2. *You have also complied with the following inclusion criteria:*
  1. *Middle-age professionals between ages forty(40) and sixty (60)*
  2. *Regarded as having worked in a professional career*
  3. *Holding a Bachelor's degree / Advanced Diploma (NQF level 7) or a Diploma / Advanced Certificate (NQF Level 6) and higher.*
  4. *Regional geographic location in Mpumalanga.*
3. *Exclusion criteria:*

*Middle-age professionals between 40 and 60 years of age will be excluded if he/she is undergoing therapy.*

#### **What will your responsibilities be?**

4. *You are being asked to take part in one semi-structured, face-to-face interview at a place and time suitable for you and me. The interview is planned to last 90 to 120 minutes. The interview will be conducted by me, Sonja Stadler.*
5. *After the interview you will be granted the opportunity of reviewing your individual interview report. The report will be forwarded to you via email. You will be given time to critique the content to ensure that the information you shared is accurately reflected. You will be granted the opportunity of making minor corrections to your interview report where required before sending it back to the researcher Sonja Stadler via email. Only after you have confirmed electronically that the information stated is accurate and you give consent that it may be used will it be included in the research study.*

**Will you benefit from taking part in this research?**

- 6. *The direct benefits for you as a participant will probably be that the interview process will grant you the opportunity of openly talking about your experience. The process can be potentially therapeutic.*
- 7. *The indirect benefit will probably include the valuable contribution towards research. The information will be used to develop material for professionals to help them better understand the importance of their personal identities in making sound career decisions throughout their lives but especially during their middle-ages. Being better prepared for a career transition and possible unemployment later in life can make it less traumatic for all parties involved and lead to a more meaningful life.*

The research will be used to develop an educational pamphlet and DVD to assist professionals through a career transition during middle age in the South African Environment. The material will also be valuable to use as a tool during coaching sessions. Professionals will be able to learn from other middle-age professionals who have gone through similar life experiences. Realising that one is not alone and that other people may find themselves struggling with similar life experiences can be insightful. I would however like to emphasise that the identity and information of all participants will be protected, ensuring their confidentiality. Nowhere will their names be mentioned.

**Are there risks involved in their participation in this research and how will these be manage?**

- 8. *The risks in this study, and how these will be manage, are summarised in the table below:*

<b><i>Probable/possible risks/discomforts</i></b>	<b><i>Strategies to minimize risk/discomfort</i></b>
You will spend about an hour and a half in a semi-structured interview reflecting on your life and answering questions, it is possible that you may become tired.	The researcher conducting the interviews will make provision for a 15-minute break, with something to drink and eat (a sandwich and coffee/tea or a glass of water) during the interview.
The researcher will ask questions about your experiences while being unemployed. This could make you feel uncomfortable.	The researcher has arranged with Life-Line should participants need, and wish to receive, psychological support following the interview. The contact details of the Life-Line counsellor closest to your proximity will be given to you during the scheduled interview. In case of an emergency you can contact <a href="mailto:Thompson@lifelinejhb.org.za">Thompson@lifelinejhb.org.za</a> or Thompson at 084 239 4198.
You are making an hour and a half of your personal time available for the interview. Your time is important. You may feel you could have spent your time more productively elsewhere. .	Time management is important. The researcher will promptly arrive on the agreed time. The interview process will be manage in such a manner to ensure all questions are covered within the allowable time frame.
Being unemployed can be a stressful and vulnerable time for any person. If the interview is not conducted with the	Before, after and during the interview process the researcher must be competent as well as aware of her professional and

necessary care it may impact negatively on you as a person, others and the research outcome.	ethical conduct. The researcher must be empathetic and show understanding for the situation the participants finds him/herself in. Unprofessional conduct can be reported to the Humanities and Health Research Ethics Committee.
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9. *However, the benefits (as noted above) outweigh the risks.*

**Who will have access to the data?**

- 10. *Anonymity: Your participation in the study is anonymous. In no way will your results be linked to your identity. The personal information provided by you during the research will be kept confidential. I can assure you that I will protect the information we have about you. Reporting of findings will be kept anonymous*
- 11. *Only the researcher and the appointed study leader at Optentia will have access to the data. The data will be kept safe and secure by locking up hard copies in cupboards in the researcher’s office and electronic data will be password protected.*
- 12. *Audio-recorded data will be sent to a transcriber who will sign a confidentiality clause (i.e., she will not be allowed to talk to anyone about any aspect of the data). As soon as data has been transcribed it will be deleted from the recorders. The transcripts will be stored on a password-protected computer. The transcriber will sign confidentiality clauses.*
- 13. *Data will be stored for 5 years at a private location.*

**What will happen to the data?**

The data from this study will be reported in the following ways: The research article will be publicised in a Journal and or book and/or in DVD format. In all of this reporting, you will not be personally identified. This means that the reporting will not include your name or details that will help others in identifying you as a participant.

This is a once-off study; hence the data will not be re-used.

**Will you be paid to take part in this study and are there any costs involved?**

The researcher will conduct the interview conveniently close to you so that you don’t incur any travelling costs.

- 14. You will not be paid to take part in the study. The researcher will ensure that participants do not incur any additional cost and effort. She will travel to the location closest to the participant where the interview will be conducted.
- 15. Should it be required that the participant needs to travel to the venue he/she will be compensated for short distance travelling using AA rates.
- 16. The coffee / tea and sandwiches will be for the account of the researcher.

### **Biographical information and Interview questions?**

The biographical information and interview questions are included for your perusal. If you find the questions too sensitive you are welcome to decline participation.

#### **17. Biographical information to be gathered for the study:**

**Please fill in the appropriate answer or mark the appropriate box with an “X”.**

18. Name & Surname: \_\_\_\_\_

19. Age during interview: \_\_\_\_\_

20. Marital Status: \_\_\_\_\_

21. Race: \_\_\_\_\_

22. Sex: \_\_\_\_\_

23. Highest formal education: \_\_\_\_\_

24. Number of years in professional employment: \_\_\_\_\_

25. Professional job title: \_\_\_\_\_

26. Unemployment period? \_\_\_\_\_

27. Are you currently undergoing therapy? YES / NO

#### **28. Interview questions to be posed to the participants during the interview**

29. In a nutshell, tell me about yourself. Why did you decide on your given profession?

30. Is there a relationship between your personal identity and chosen profession? Please explain

31. Was your personal identity affected when you became unemployed? Please explain

32. What emotions did you typically experience when you became unemployed?

33. Who or what is currently most important and central to your life, compared to before you became unemployed?

34. The Satisfaction with Life Scale:

On a 1 to 7 scale, indicate how much you currently agree or disagree with the statements below:

7 = Strongly agree, 6 = Agree, 5 = Slightly agree, 4 = Neither agree nor disagree, 3 = Slightly disagree, 2 = Disagree. 1 = Strongly disagree

1. \_\_\_\_\_ In most ways my life is close to my ideal
2. \_\_\_\_\_ The conditions of my life are excellent
3. \_\_\_\_\_ I am satisfied with my life
4. \_\_\_\_\_ So far I have received the important things I want in my life
5. \_\_\_\_\_ If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing

Please explain:

35. Which domain/s in your life helped you to maintain your identity and remain positive?

Home / family		Religion / spirituality	
Work		Exercise	
Further studies		Social relationships	
Civic engagement		Arts / music	
Hobbies		Romantic relationships	
Animals / Nature		Other	
Other		Other	

Please elaborate:

36. What values could you take from the experience and how did you grow as a person?

Authenticity		Creativity	
Love and humanity		Wisdom & knowledge	
Humility		Forgiveness	
Humour		Gratitude	
Hope		Courage	
Temperance(Self-restraint)		Spirituality	
Faith / Belief		Other	

Please explain

37. Given the challenging experience. What strengths or talents did you or can you develop?

38. Considering your unique set of talents, skills and temperament, what future work and life goals would you still like to achieve?

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**How will you know what the findings of the research were?**

39. The general findings of the research will be shared with you via email.

40. Your personal interview report will be sent to you for scrutiny and minor changes. You need to give written consent before the data is used in the final research report.

**Is there anything else you should know or do?**

41. You can contact Sonja Stadler at 0823722728 or [Sonja.Stadler@Reldats.co.za](mailto:Sonja.Stadler@Reldats.co.za) if you have any further queries or encounter any problems.

42. You can contact the chair of the Humanities and Health Research Ethics Committee (Prof Tumi Khumalo) at 016 910 3397 or [Tumi.khumalo@nwu.ac.za](mailto:Tumi.khumalo@nwu.ac.za). If you have any concerns or complaints that have not been adequately addressed by the researcher. You can also contact the co-chair, Prof Werner Nell (016 910 3427 or [Werner.Nell@nwu.ac.za](mailto:Werner.Nell@nwu.ac.za)). You can leave a message for either Tumi or Werner with Ms Daleen Claasens (016 910 3441)

43. You will receive a copy of this information and consent form for your own records.

**Declaration by participant**

By signing below, I ..... agree to take part in the research study: Post-unemployment identity in middle-age professionals

I declare that:

- 44.I have read and understood this information and consent form and it is written in a language in which I am fluent and comfortable with.
- 45.I have had an opportunity of asking questions to both the person obtaining consent, as well as the researcher (if this is a different person), and all my questions have been adequately answered.
- 46.I understand that taking part in this study is **voluntary** and I have not been pressurised to take part.
- 47.I understand that what I contribute by what I say could be reproduced publically and/or quoted, but without reference to my personal identity.
- 48.I may choose to leave the study at any stage and will not be penalised or prejudiced in any way for doing so.
- 49.I may be asked to leave the study before it is complete if the researcher feels it is in my best interest or if I do not follow the study plan, as agreed to.

Signed at (*place*) ..... on (*date*) ..... 20....

.....  
**Signature of participant**

.....  
**Signature of witness**

- 50. You may contact me again  Yes  No
- 51. I would like a summary of the findings of this research  Yes  No

The best way to reach me is:

Name & Surname: \_\_\_\_\_

Postal Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Email Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Contact Number: \_\_\_\_\_

In case the above details change, please contact the following person who knows me well and who does not live with me and who will help you to contact me:

Name & Surname:\_\_\_\_\_

Phone/ Cell Phone Number /Email:\_\_\_\_\_

**Declaration by person obtaining consent**

I (*name*) ..... declare that:

- 52. I explained the information in this document to .....
- 53. I encourage the participant to ask questions and took adequate time answering them.
- 54. I am satisfied that they adequately understand all aspects of the research, as discussed above
- 55. I did/did not use an interpreter.

Signed at (*place*) ..... on (*date*) ..... 20....

.....  
**Signature of person obtaining consent**

.....  
**Signature of witness**

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**Declaration by researcher**

I (*name*) ..... declare that:

- 1. I explained the information in this document to .....
- 2. I encourage the participant to ask questions and took adequate time answering them.
- 3. I am satisfied that they adequately understand all aspects of the research, as discussed above
- 4. I did/did not use an interpreter.

Signed at (*place*) ..... on (*date*) ..... 20....

.....  
**Signature of researcher**

.....  
**Signature of witness**

## RESEARCH QUESTIONNAIRE

### TITLE OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT: POST-UNEMPLOYMENT IDENTITY IN MIDDLE-AGE PROFESSIONALS

#### 56. Biographical information to be gathered for the study:

**Please fill in the appropriate.**

1. Name & Surname: \_\_\_\_\_
2. Age during interview: \_\_\_\_\_
3. Marital Status: \_\_\_\_\_
4. Race: \_\_\_\_\_
5. Sex: \_\_\_\_\_
6. Highest formal education: \_\_\_\_\_
7. Number years prior in professional employment: \_\_\_\_\_
8. Last professional job title: \_\_\_\_\_
9. Period unemployment: \_\_\_\_\_

**A. Interview questions to be posed to the participants during the interview**

5. In a nutshell, tell me about yourself. Why did you decide on your given profession?

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6. Is there a relationship between your personal identity and chosen profession?  
Please explain

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7. Was your personal identity affected when you became unemployed?  
Please explain

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8. What emotions did you typically experience when you became unemployed?

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9. Who or what is currently most important and central to your life, compared to before you became unemployed?

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10. The Satisfaction with Life Scale:

On a 1 to 7 scale, indicate how much you currently agree or disagree with the statements below:

7 = Strongly agree, 6 = Agree, 5 = Slightly agree, 4 = Neither agree nor disagree, 3 = Slightly disagree, 2 = Disagree. 1 = Strongly disagree

- a. \_\_\_\_\_ In most ways my life is close to my ideal
- b. \_\_\_\_\_ The conditions of my life are excellent
- c. \_\_\_\_\_ I am satisfied with my life
- d. \_\_\_\_\_ So far I have received the important things I want in my life
- e. \_\_\_\_\_ If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing

Please explain:

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11. Which domain/s in your life helped you to maintain your identity and remain positive?

Home / family		Religion / spirituality	
Work		Exercise	
Further studies		Social relationships	
Civic engagement		Arts / music	
Hobbies		Romantic relationships	
Animals / Nature		Other	
Other		Other	

Please elaborate:

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12. What values could you take from the experience and how did you grow as a person?

Authenticity		Creativity	
Love and humanity		Wisdom & knowledge	
Humility		Forgiveness	
Humour		Gratitude	
Hope		Courage	
Temperance(Self-restraint)		Spirituality	
Faith / Belief		Other	

Please explain:

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13. Given the challenging experience. What strengths or talents did you or can you develop?

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14. Considering your unique set of talents, skills and temperament, what future work and life goals would you still like to achieve?

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Thank you!