Introduction

Current estimates place the number of “older workers” in the U.S. – those aged 55 and over — at 18.4 million, a figure representing 13% of the labor force. By 2015, that number will increase to 31.9 million older workers, or 20% of the labor force (United States General Accounting Office, 2001). Despite these shifts, and despite the overall acknowledgement that the traditional work-to-retirement trajectory has changed dramatically (Farr, Tesluk, & Klein, 1998; Greller & Stroh, 1995; Sterns, 1998; Sterns & Gray, 1999), we know relatively little about the work-related concerns and experiences of adults 55 years of age and older (Greller & Stroh, 1995; Schooler, Caplan, & Oates, 1998). This qualitative study addresses that gap by examining the current employment situations of a purposive sample of older workers.

Over the past decade, we have learned a great deal about older adults’ withdrawal from the labor force, through our focus on pre-retirement, attitudes towards retirement, retirement planning and decision-making, and post-retirement adjustment (Adams, Prescher, Beehr, & Lepisto, 2002; Ekerdt & DeViney, 1993; Ekerdt, Hackney, Kosloski, & DeViney, 2001; Ekerdt, Kosloski, & DeViney, 2002; Mutran, Reitzes, & Fernandez, 1997; Reitzes, Mutran, and Fernandez, 1998). In particular, we have developed a deeper appreciation of the complexity of the retirement process and its intertwined financial, social, personal, workplace-contextual, and larger structural components (Hoyer, 1998; Kosloski, Ekerdt, & DeViney, 2001; Reitzes, Mutran, & Fernandez, 1998). Such findings have been complimented by research of a more phenomenological nature showing the retirement process to be much more intricate than suggested by the “dichotomous explanatory categories” of “health versus wealth,” “push versus pull,” or “voluntary versus involuntary” (Robertson, 2000, p. 63). Further, the work of Phyllis Moen and others on the “gendered life course” and “linked lives” aspects of work and retirement decisions has detailed the different work/life trajectories of men and women and the influences of spouses and others (e.g., adult children and aging parents) on those decisions (Kim & Moen, 2002; Moen, 2001).

However, even with sound evidence that many older workers are engaged in a preretirement process (Ekerdt & DeViney, 1993; Ekerdt, Kosloski, & DeViney, 2000), it is increasingly the case that many will either have to and/or wish to continue working past “retirement age” (Bass, 1995; Sterns, 1998). It is acknowledged that, because these statuses of older worker and “preretiree” are so intricately linked, research on retirement does shed light on older adults’ actual work lives, for example, how rewards from work and attachment to the work role impact retirement planning (Adams et al., 2002; Kosloski et al., 2001). However, it is likely that there is additional knowledge to be gained by a simple shift in focus, that is, by placing older workers’ “here and now” work experiences at the center of our investigations rather than as sidebars in our quest to understand retirement behavior.

For example, how do older workers describe where they are now in their work lives or in their career development? We know that Donald Super’s (1980) classic career development stages play out differently for the current cohort of older workers. The traditional linear progression from establishing and maintaining one career in early adulthood to disengaging and retiring from it in later adulthood has given way to the possibility of
several such progressions over the course of a work life (Howard, 1998). Further, we now recognize that contemporary older workers may be engaged in any of these stages in later life, or as Harvey Sterns (1998) so succinctly put it, “in late career, a person may continue a career, start a new career, modify a career, or retire” (p. 140).

Another question centers on the meaning of work for older adults. Taking Robert Havighurst’s (1982) “principle meanings of work” as a starting point (i.e., money, structure, identity and status, social interaction, and meaningful activity/ accomplishment), how do older workers describe the meaning of paid employment for them, and how do they locate these meanings within their own adult development? Do they describe a shift in these meanings over time? For example, Harvey Sterns (1998) has suggested that older workers may have more interest in work’s intrinsic rewards (such as social relations with co-workers) than extrinsic rewards (such as salary). While such a shift is plausible from a developmental point of view (e.g., Carstensen, 1993; Carstensen, Isaacowitz, & Charles, 1999), it remains unclear how applicable this is for all older workers, for example, those experiencing job instability or those in lower-status occupations.

In fact, given that many older workers no longer have the option to retire from organizations for which they have worked most of their adult lives, it becomes increasingly important to examine the lives of older workers in these less stable (but increasingly common) later-life work situations. The present study does so by exploring the current work experiences of a purposive sample of older workers recruited from an employment services agency. Research questions include: How do older workers describe their current work situations and their desired situations? How are they experiencing the current “chapter” of their work-life stories? Do these participants wish to retire, modify their current work situations, continue in their lines of work, or start a new line of work and why? How do they describe their current employment situations against the backdrop of their work-life histories and their own development?

**Methods**

**Recruitment**

Participants were recruited from a single employment services agency located in a large urban area. In order to be eligible for the study, participants had to be 55 years of age or older, proficient in reading and speaking English, and, consistent with Bureau of Labor Statistics definitions of the labor force, employed or actively seeking employment (United States General Accounting Office 2001). Letters describing the study were sent to all agency clients aged 55+ (n = 459), and interested recipients were encouraged to contact the Principal Investigator (PI) by telephone or via a postage-paid card enclosed in the mailing. Informational flyers were also made available in the agency’s front lobby. Of the 68 people who responded within the first several weeks of recruitment, 45 individuals were eligible and chose to participate in the study. Of the 23 who did not participate, three were deemed ineligible, three were no longer interested after receiving more information, three could not be reached with the contact information they provided, six were unable to schedule an appointment within the data collection time frame, and eight could not be reached within the data collection time frame.