

Working Paper Series

*“At This Point Now”:
Older Workers’ Reflections
on Their Current
Employment Experiences*

Anne E. Noonan, Ph.D.

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“At This Point Now”: Older Workers’ Reflections on Their Current Employment Experiences

Anne E. Noonan, Ph.D.
Center for Research on Women

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Abstract

Despite the frequently referenced graying of the U.S. workforce and a sizeable literature on retirement decision-making, we know relatively little about the work-related concerns and experiences of older workers – those aged 55+. This qualitative study addresses that gap by examining the current employment situations of a purposive sample of 37 older workers. Thematic content analysis revealed a vast diversity in the concerns and experiences of contemporary older workers, with participants being actively involved in all of the traditional stages of work-life development. Findings suggest a deepened or more nuanced view of the principal meanings of work — in particular, identity and social interaction — and highlight several negative aspects of later-life employment such as pension insecurity, unemployment, age discrimination, not having found one’s “niche,” and chronic interpersonal difficulties with co-workers. Findings are discussed against the backdrops of a rapidly changing workplace and dramatically shifting work-retirement trajectories in which job stability and predictable retirement are less common. The findings also call into question areas of workplace practice and policy that may be based on outdated assumptions about older workers.

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.

Procedures

Audiotaped interviews were conducted with 45 participants and written transcripts were prepared from the audiotapes. Interview appointments were made during a scheduling call and confirmation letters and informed consent documents were mailed to participants immediately after the call. All interviews were conducted by the PI at a location of the participants' choosing.

Due to the open-ended nature of much of the interview protocol, interview duration ranged from 30 minutes to two hours, with an average of 1.9 hours. The protocol consisted of five sections: Informed consent, participation in the Work-Life Story Interview (adapted from McAdams et al.'s Life-Story Interview (2001), administration of items pertaining to beliefs about social relations at work (described in Noonan, 2003), participant elaboration on their responses to the relational beliefs items, and completion of a written questionnaire assessing various demographic and descriptive variables. There were two parts to the Work-Life Story segment of the interview: Major Chapters (in which participants organized the major parts of their paid work lives into "chapters" and described each chapter) and Significant Scenes (work life high points, low points, and turning points). The data for the present study come primarily from 37 participants' accounts of the current chapters of their work lives.

Analysis

Data were analyzed via thematic content analysis using a method described by Robert Weiss (1994) and based upon established grounded theory

techniques (e.g., Strauss & Corbin, 1994). Transcripts were coded for any topic arising in participants' accounts of their current work experiences (e.g., works part time due to health concerns), and a master list of topics was produced. Similar topics were then combined into themes (e.g., desire for part-time work), and "excerpt files" were created for each theme.

Sample Characteristics

Table 1 provides sample characteristics. Some 54% of the sample was made up of women and 68% were White. Age ranged from 55 to 77, with a mean of 62, and 73% had historically been involved in professional-level careers. Over half of the sample, 57%, was currently employed, although some described themselves as underemployed, that is, in positions for which they felt overqualified. With regard to their career or work trajectories, and using Bronte's (1993) categories (described in Sterns, 1998), 65% were "explorers," 22% were "homesteaders," and 15% were "transformers."¹ Over half of the sample (62%) was married or living with a partner. Average annual family income was around \$50,000, and average education level was slightly over a Bachelor's degree. With regard to subjective socioeconomic status (Adler, Epel, Castellazzo, and Ickovics 2000) in which participants were asked to rate their job, income, and education on a scale of one to 10, the average rating was 6.71.

Results

Interview data from the older workers in this study are organized here into the several thematic categories that emerged from the content analysis. Demographic information about the participants is also provided for descriptive purposes.

Table 1. Sample Characteristics (n = 37)

<u>Variable</u>	<u>Coding</u>	<u>Sample Characteristics</u> (n, %)
Gender	0 = male 1 = female	17 (45.9%) 20 (54.1%)
Race/Ethnicity	0 = White 1 = Nonwhite ¹	25 (67.6%) 12 (32.4%)
Age	range 55 – 77	<u>M</u> = 62.33, <u>SD</u> = 5.28
Historical Occupational Category	1 = admin/sales supp. 2 = professional 3 = admin/managment	6 (16.2%) 27 (73%) 4 (10.8%)
Employment Status	0 = not employed 1 = employed	16 (43.5%) 21 (56.8%)
Marital Status	0 = single, divorced, widowed 1 = married or living with partner	14 (38%) 23 (62%)
Highest Education Level	1 = some high school 2 = high school 3 = some college 4 = bachelor’s 5 = master’s 6 = doctorate	1 (2.7%) 1 (2.7%) 7 (18.9%) 11 (29.7%) 15 (40.5%) 2 (5.4%) <u>M</u> = 4.19, <u>SD</u> = 1.08
Annual Family Income	1 = < \$10,000 2 = \$10,001 - \$30,000 3 = \$30,001 - \$50,000 4 = \$50,001 - \$70,000 5 = \$70,001 - \$90,000 6 = \$90,001 - \$110,000 7 = \$110,001 - \$130,000 8 = \$130,001 - \$150,000 9 = > \$150,000	3 (8.1%) 12 (32.4%) 5 (13.5%) 3 (8.1%) 3 (8.1%) 3 (8.1%) 2 (5.4%) 3 (8.1%) 3 (8.1%) <u>M</u> = 3.76, <u>SD</u> = 2.38
Subjective SES	scale 1 (low) - 10 (high)	<u>M</u> = 6.71, <u>SD</u> = 1.79
Health for Gender	1 = poor 2 = good 3 = fair 4 = excellent	0 (0%) 5 (13.5%) 17 (45.9%) 14 (37.8%)

¹ 9 African-Americans, 2 Asian-Americans, 1 Latino

“It’s Crazy Out There Right Now”: Age Discrimination and Economic Recession

Although age discrimination, either at work or in the job search, was not an explicit focus of this study, several participants spontaneously raised the topic, frequently alongside references to economic recession.² One underemployed White woman, age 65, who has worked as a paralegal, in human services administration, and in government said: “My situation now is I really have to find a job. And it’s hard ... older workers have hard times. . . .Especially in a recession. They’re not nice to older workers ... they can say, ‘I want somebody 40.’” Another underemployed participant, a 58-year-old Latino male, left a highly stressful job in corporate-community relations and has been looking for full-time work ever since.

*I’ve been looking for a job. ...Really hard.
Nobody wants you when you’re older. ...
Either I’m overqualified or under. ...I found
a part-time job. That’s what most people like
me do, I guess, part-time. ...But right now
this is not enough.*

A 58-year old White man who would like to change jobs, realizing that his current job with a large-scale public works project is both demoralizing and fairly dead-end, described his situation this way:

*It’s kind of a horizontal line right now. . .
I’m at the point now where I’ve probably had
enough of [current job] ... but it’s not easy
... at age 58. . . .Getting a little tired. You
know, 12 years pretty much doing the same
thing. . . .Seeing a project which initially
had ... a high degree of motivation and
excitement.... You hear the headlines and
the criticism and things that are happening*

*at the top level, it does tend to demoralize
the worker, the person who’s just trying to
do [the] best he can ... trying to get some
fulfillment out of it. ...The problem is one
does become a little burnt out looking for
jobs. ...And once you’ve stopped doing that
it’s very difficult to take a deep breath and go
ahead and do it again.*

Another participant, a 61-year old White man who was recently laid off from a position in corporate management said:

*Where I am today, I got all these fantastic
skills, and I’m ... frustrated, because I’m
being discriminated against. ...Now that
I’m ...61, and everyone that I know... is
telling me, ‘Forget about it, nobody is going
to hire you, you might as well just retire.’ I
say, ‘How the hell can I retire? I’ve got
more energy than 35- year-old guys.’*

An African-American woman, age 60, reports that a layoff from her most recent job as a clinical social work supervisor coincided with her mother’s illness and eventual death. At first, the layoff “was okay with me” because it provided her with some “quality time” with her mother. However:

*I never expected to have the problem of
procuring a position later this long and I
have been actively interviewing ... But I’m
finding that ... people ... end up not even
hiring for that position after they’ve
interviewed Or they’re in the red. Or
the direction is changing. . . . And I’m
interviewing where people ... because I’m a
senior clinician, they [would] have a lot of
trouble paying me if they can get someone
... three years out of school. ...So it’s really
very crazy out there right now and ... even
though I tell them ... I’m willing to take a*

cut, I’m not getting it. So I’m really, because of my age, I’m having a lot of trouble with this. I had expected to be able to work later than 60 years old.

Layoff and caregiving are also parts of the story of a White male participant, aged 57, whose career has taken him from accounting and sales to investment management and banking. A few years ago, he relocated to provide care for his ill mother. After her death, he took a job in hospital finance, was laid off and:

Since then ... I’ve been out there, just looking. Basically, I may find that I’ll just do temp work. But I find ... discrimination and ... they’d rather have two 25-year-old people. . . I’ve got some resources and something will come up, things are picking up. I seem to get more hits every day ... I’m confident. It’s just ... the way I look at things. Life goes on, and there will be new opportunities.

“That’s Not Enough”: Financial Concerns

The financial concerns voiced by the older workers in this study took a variety of forms. Several talked about pension insecurity. One 55-year old White woman who has worked a variety of jobs from technical assistant to stress management consultant said:

I’d love to retire now, but there’s no way. I have no money to retire and I’m certainly hoping that there’s going to be some sort of social security when I’m 62 1/2 because I’m going to take it, whatever there is, and then work part-time because that’s not enough.

Similar thoughts were voiced by another participant, a 61-year old African-American man,

who is working part-time and studying to be a computer technician after a recent history in telemarketing and an earlier career in fashion design.

I’m hoping that my health will remain good right up until I’m 70, because the way things are today, I’m not even entertaining the idea that I could live on social security. I would like to collect social security at 65 and ... hopefully, I can continue to work right up until 70.

A 61-year old White woman described pension concerns alongside a more immediate need for health benefits. Throughout her work life, she has been employed as a teacher, an education administrator, and in grant-funded education research positions, the last of which expired five years ago. She has been unemployed or has done “odds and ends” evaluation work ever since.

I’ve had some issues with ... fairly major depression. . . .So ... I can’t afford to take a job unless it has the full benefits, number one, looks like it will last for awhile, number two, and . . . it has to be a job that I am confident that I can start and stay with. . . .And that’s not an easy package. . . . it makes it a very difficult situation ... particularly in today’s employment scene ... people are just glad to get a job no less have all these requirements for a job. So I am basically paying my expenses out of money that I’d been saving during my work life towards retirement. But I’m not retiring. And I don’t expect to retire until, at the earliest ... about 7 years from now. . . .If for no other reason than to save and increase my social security, I need to be working.

Another participant, a 64-year old White man,

was currently not employed after a career as a hospital administrator. He reported being “very much in a management job search at this point,” looking for a “full-time ... job that pays a reasonable salary ... and ... benefits.” He described his situation this way:

I can't afford to retire ... I am recovering in ... Alcoholics Anonymous ... and I lost everything ... and I mean everything. I don't have any insurance policies that I can tap for income. My social security, I lost almost 20 years of the best earning time. . . .The only income I have ... if I retired is social security. And that's not going to do anything at my level because I lost all those years. So there is no way I could retire. And that's the main reason why I want to keep going. I would like to retire at some point, but I can't afford to do it right now.

Due to the socioeconomic diversity of this sample, some participants described their financial concerns less in terms of actual strain and more in terms of wanting to retire in a certain way. A 61-year old White man, said:

I look back at this career. I've done very well. ...I rationalize that I made it to 61 anyway, with income, you gotta think about the positives. And now, my question is, how do I go from 61 to 65? And that's going to be very difficult. From what I'm experiencing now, I strongly feel ... that the only jobs I'm going to get are at Home Depot. ...I've got to work something out, because this is driving me bananas. And I gotta start using retirement money now to get by?

Another participant, a 60-year old African-

American woman, described her plan to work “another three years or so,” pay off some bills and get on her “financial feet” so she can re-establish her private practice in clinical social work, work she referred to as “really solid and important. . . .So that's really how I thought about ending my career anyway, but I do need some seed money to establish that in a comfortable way.”

“Really, Really Tired”: Concerns About Energy and Health

Although, as reported in Table 1, the older workers in this study reported relatively good health, some participants did describe some issues with health and energy. One participant, a 67-year old White woman, had to leave her decades-long career as a travel agent to address some serious health concerns and post-surgical complications.

I had to decide to stop working full-time altogether. I was forced to do that. It was hard. ...It was difficult to let go ...but on the other hand I'd say, 'Yes it's difficult but ... look what you're going through. What's happening to you, physically? Can you stand this? Do you want to stand this anymore?' And my answer was 'No, I don't want to and I can't.'

A 64-year old White man said “I realize I'm not as energetic ... a little overweight ...as I used to be. But I still have fair amount of faculties and fair amount of energy.” Another participant, a 55-year old White woman, connected being tired to issues of pension insecurity:

I'm tired. I'm really, really tired. I have been struggling my whole life. I've never really made quite enough money. I've always had to have a second job. ...I can't

wait to get my bills paid because I am tired of struggling and when I think of retirement, it's like I'm still struggling.... I need a time in my life when I'm not going to struggle. ...I [would] have a great deal of difficulty right now working full time and doing anything else in my life and I don't want to just work and sleep, I want to have a life.

Another participant, a White woman aged 61, linked her struggle with depression with her difficulties finding a job.

I'm having a really difficult time now with being able to feel like I can make a commitment to doing a piece of work and then ... really do it. And I don't know that my skills or abilities have diminished any, but one of the most insidious things about depression is that it...gets in the way of you using all of the abilities that you have and all the experience that you have...You just don't have access to your own abilities...The lower level jobs require more of the things that I'm not good at. And the higher level jobs require more confidence than I'm feeling at the moment.

Desire for Part-Time Work

For some participants, health and energy concerns were tied to a desire for part-time employment. A 68-year old White religious sister who works as an English-as-a-Second-Language teacher, reported that she would “like to be retired since I was 65,” but her religious order requires her to work 20 hours per week.

The reason I want to be retired is so I can do whatever kind of work I feel like doing. ...your energy ... doesn't always last. So if

I was working 40 hours a week I could not be involved in anything else that interests me... .And that's why I'm glad that I only [have] to work 20 hours so I could also get involved in the [community] organizing work.

Other participants described part-time work as a way to achieve balance in their lives. One, a 57-year old African-American woman, who works part-time as an usher after years of sales and administrative support positions said:

I don't like to be busy where I'm [working] all day long, and every single day. So many times, I've put in extra hours for jobs and done the things that other people wouldn't do, and ... it doesn't ... add to me. I mean, it just keeps me from doing the things that I'm supposed to do for myself ... and then I'm not taking care of myself. And that's not good. ...So I guess I have learned that you have to have a balance.

Sometimes, part-time work allows time for volunteering. One older worker, a White woman aged 67, had recently come to the realization that:

I want to [work] three or four days because I want to leave a day for volunteering. Since I don't have lots of money to pass along, I'd like to give my time. And you spend your whole life just to live and the fun of it is to give back and to enjoy what comes from that. But I do like to work so I'd like ... to put both of them together.

Part-time work was also described as a relief from the pressures of full-time work. One participant, a 62-year old Asian-American woman, worked full-time for decades as a teacher, school media specialist, and bookkeeper, and left full-time work to provide care for her aging

mother. After her mother's death, she suffered from depression and worked part-time for a few years, before being laid off. Although she is nearing the age at which she can collect her teacher's pension, she intends to work part-time. She said:

To be retired early is not my choice. ...I would still like to work. ...I'm going to find another part-time job. ...I want to be a social worker. ...What I want to do is take a course, whenever I feel like it. Not anybody push me. ... I may just take some courses ...volunteer first. ...Being a bookkeeper so long, I had so many deadlines in my work. I don't need any more. ...I don't want to [have] pressure.

However, for some participants the decision or option to reduce from full-time to part-time presents a major challenge. One White female participant, aged 58 and a career architect, described a recent termination after which she felt too old to be hired again as an architect, ("at this point I'm getting on") and wondered whether to continue working. She did take another full-time job, was laid off, and was recently rehired by that firm on a part-time basis: "I've been going back for two to three days a week. . . .I don't know why I'm going back to them. They don't really need me. . . . It's sort of like I'm on retainer." She spoke about the tension between having a lower-stress flexible job and having a job that provides meaningful work.

Am I going to agree to stay peripheral because it's wonderful not having responsibility, it's wonderful being able to tell them I can't come in today? ...I don't know if that's either going to force me out or force saying, 'Okay this is going to be my part-time ... job. ...The only reason I think I feel like continuing is ... for money [to help

daughters through graduate school]. ...Do I really want to get a better job?. ...Do I want to try to feel that my life is worthwhile? I don't feel my job right now has any [social] value.

"I Wouldn't Know What Else To Do": Structure and Meaningful Activity

Several older workers described the structure provided by work as important. One, a 57-year old African-American woman, said, "I don't think about retirement because I like being busy. I like to have something to do. . . . something to look forward to during the week." Another, a 67-year old White woman, said: "I wouldn't know what else to do with my life. I think I would say 'shoot me.'"

For some participants, the structure provided by work was combined with the opportunity to make a meaningful contribution. One older worker, a 65-year old White female who was underemployed and looking for "a real job," extended this to her thinking about retirement.

There are plenty of people out there who ... once they retire they might as well dry up. Well, what would I do? I mean, I might travel, or I might...be a volunteer. I would not do nothing. I would not get up every day without a purpose ... [I'd] go into a hospital or a non-profit or an organization that could use some help. I don't know, there's a lot of stuff. But I wouldn't stay idle. I'd have to be pretty sick to stay idle. It's unhealthy.

On the flip side of the coin, the loss of structure provided by work was making unemployment extremely frustrating for some participants. A Latino man, aged 58, said:

I have to do something. ...I cannot sit and vegetate, I will die. ...I've been lucky in the sense that I've been busy all the time ... I don't have enough time. And I'm thankful for that because I'm one of those persons that has to be busy all the time. ...Otherwise I go crazy.

Other unemployed participants voiced less frustration but still spoke of the need to do something meaningful. One White woman (age not disclosed) who has worked as a realtor, designer, and corporate executive assistant, said:

The right job will come along, and it will be right for them and right for me. That's kind of where I am. ...I'm open and flexible to what's coming. I need to make a living for myself and so I'm using the skills I've had before. But I don't know what's coming. ...I will never retire. I will change positions. I might be in a different country, in a different town. I will always be doing something ... to serve. ...Because I think that's what we're here for. So the idea of retiring and playing golf or tennis all day just makes me throw up.

“The Type of Thing I Seek:” Desire for Specific Work Environments

Several of the older worker participants described a desire for certain kinds of work environments. A 59-year old White woman detailed how at age 50, after a career in various administrative support and service industry positions, she came to the realization that:

I spent so much of my work life as a round peg in a square hole and that so-called default ...office skills ... doesn't hold up

anymore. I don't have the mindset, I don't have the wardrobe, I don't have the computer literacy.

She has done some very strategic thinking about finding a new job that would be comfortable for her. As she put it, “I pinpointed three jobs that I have had in which the characteristics were very attractive... that I would like to be able to duplicate in my job search and find.” However, she was not optimistic.

I'm just not in the situation of hoping for the best. . . . You ... can't go back. You can't reassemble the cast of characters. ...Maybe the atmosphere and the environment, the mindset is possible... At this point in my life I want [work relationships] as good as they can be, but ... I've already been called every nasty name in the book. ...And as long as they don't start throwing rocks and the paycheck doesn't bounce, that's really all I care [about].

Another older worker, a 55-year old White man, tied wanting a certain work environment to his development as an adult.

As I get older, I know perfectly well why I like smaller organizations. Because people in smaller organizations care about each other. ...I think that's the type of thing I seek in organizations... And I think as you grow older you accumulate values, and you hope that at the end you have something called wisdom. Maybe I'm getting there ...I think that's what happening to me. I hope so. ...I now have got enough wisdom, kind of pick and choose not only with whom I work, but also the types of organizations I work with.

Another participant, a 61-year old White woman, stated: “Who I work with and the conditions I work under matter a lot to me.” She described wanting a work environment that would allow her to bring people together to solve problems and improve the work, to “give me the opportunity to do what I do well.”

Making connections is something that I liked doing throughout my life, I still like doing. ... Because you need to be within an environment where you can see what's needed and do something about it. ...I'd love to have a job where I was the fly on the wall and I could give attention where I thought it was needed ... and I wouldn't be detracting from the reason they hired me.

“A Betrayal Thing”: The Impact of Relational Disruptions at Work

In addition to the information these participants provided about the negative consequences of unemployment and age discrimination, several of the older workers described the impact of terminations that were not handled well, using words such as “really tough,” “demoralizing,” “devastating,” and “humiliating.” These terminations were described as especially difficult when they involved a break in relationships. One participant, a 58-year old White woman, was currently employed part-time, after a “bitter work experience” in which a friend from graduate school recruited her to join him in a major project which was to culminate in her becoming a partner in his firm. However, when the project ended, her job was terminated. For this participant, this relational disruption was connected to an acute lack of confidence and major questions about her career, identity, and future.

I was miserable. That really shook me up a

lot. ...He was somebody I thought I could trust. ... I've had a real difficult time ...dealing with it...I really thought I would take it much more lightly, but I haven't ... because it stirred up some feelings of inadequacy. . . .Since then I've really started questioning my ... ability. ...I sort of feel my career's behind me. I'm not really interested in the money anymore. . . .I don't do it as well anymore. ...I used to think I could do anything that I wanted to. Now, I'm not sure I can do anything. ... I feel really downgraded.

Another participant, a 68-year old White woman who worked as an independent communications consultant, was just recovering from a similar disruption involving a prematurely terminated contract. However, unlike the participant who was unsure about her return to full-time career employment, this participant was deeply committed to “getting back on track.” She described the disruption this way:

This [was] a women's group, supporting women, and I thought it was a betrayal thing. . . .They treated me very poorly and I had a very difficult time with that. I had to get some help on analyzing how I work with people ... and I have ... identified some areas in my own work or professional approach that I feel could be corrected, and I've worked to do that. ...And I've been really thoughtful about that and also at my age I just can't just go out and be hired by somebody. And I'm not sure that I want to be because of all of the issues happening in corporations and so forth. There's no loyalty. But that made me really think through. It made me feel that I had I lost my value and that my standards weren't appreciated and so forth. ...So I would say that I'm almost out of the swamp on that one, but it did leave a scar. ...It was the way that they

terminated me which was very disappointing. It wasn't done by the book... So I would not want to be in that situation again.

“Move Into What I Really Want To Do”: Repositioning Oneself

Several of the older worker participants described efforts to reposition themselves in the work of work. One 55-year old White man had just recently secured a position after a lengthy and difficult layoff. While he was continuing in a familiar industry, he found himself in a new role.

I like it. It's different ... I'm working every day but it's ... a different role, it's like an elder statesman role or something like that. . . .Part of it is me ... part of it is my attitude because I really know this stuff, I can really help.

One unemployed participant, a 57-year old White man, described his repositioning in terms of tradeoffs.

I'm confident. It's just ... the way I look at things. Life goes on, and there will be new opportunities. ... And at this point of life where I am now, I'm in a position where I can trade off some things. I'm not going to climb the corporate ladder, I'm not going to be a vice president of a bank. How much money do I really need, as opposed to what I want? I just look at life differently.

Sometimes the repositioning involved seeking an entirely new line of work. Another unemployed participant, a White woman, said she was “beginning a career transition at this ripe old age of 60.” She described her work history as failing at jobs and “wandering” until her forties, at which

point she became an “immensely successful” technical writer in the high tech industry.” However, she now feels that “after twenty years in one job, I think it's time to move on,” and would like to move from being an “informational specialist” to more of a generalist and project consultant. She described her situation this way:

I have ... a lot of skill in getting people's cooperation because I'm trustworthy and decisive and people seem to think those are good leadership qualities.... So the trick, and I do use that word, is to sell myself as this other kind of contributor.

For other participants, the desire for a new line of work was couched in terms of integrating one's passions with paid employment. One, a 61-year old White woman, who had held a variety of administrative support positions and had never felt any real attachment to paid employment: “I tend to change positions if it gets dull. And I haven't found my niche in life.” She was currently unemployed, describing herself “at the crossroads” and is considering setting up a tutorial service. She describes her current situation this way:

I have enjoyed office work, clerical work, I've enjoyed doing all kinds of industries. ...I've done some tutoring... And that's an avenue I might pursue ...establishing my own little tutoring service. . . .But I think I'll continue in clerical work for another three years and try to develop [that] on the side.

While this plan is in the works, there is another one, stated in more vague terms, lurking in the background.

My real love is forensics. ...I'm fascinated

with DNA and that sort of stuff. And I'm thinking ... maybe in a couple of years getting some sort of scholarship ... to study criminology. . . .But of course I have to make sure I can get some sort of position or do it in some sort of consulting way.

A similar idea is voiced by another older worker, a 61-year old White woman, who worked for many years doing "handwork" in the electronics industry and now works full-time as a security guard.

Now, I want to see if I can ... move into what I really want to do. And that's ... toy designing. Or ... designing kits that people make of animals, animal kits. . . .That's what I'd really like to do. . . .Also, I'm taking a jewelry-making course right now. Trying to find out how I can ... be self-employed ... never ... on a fixed income until it's absolutely necessary.

Another participant, a 58-year old White female, described a work history involving two careers: one as a teacher and another as in-house trainer in the high tech field. Her current situation involves substitute teaching ("to earn a little money"), doing some volunteer work, and looking for a new line of work.

Maybe the bigger transition was ... when I decided just this past summer ... to take this leap and it really does feel like a leap because at this point in my life I guess some part of me says, it isn't possible for me to do that. . . .I think for a long time I've been looking at the whole ... idea of what you do, how well is it connected and integrated to what you're really ... interested in, the work is passion and that kind of thing. I have a whole library

of those kinds of books and I'm still reading them, trying to figure out what I really ... want to be doing and hoping to integrate to something that actually provides a living.

"Who I Am": Work and Identity

Somewhat similar to the accounts of older workers who described wanting to integrate their passions with paid employment, a few of the participants described their current work situations less in terms of *what they did* than *who they were*. One participant, a 59-year old White man, who worked early in his career as a professor and then in various business settings in Asia, has just returned to a job in academia. While he is in an administrative position for which he is overqualified, he described his return as a "coming back to myself. . . .the leaf falls back to the root ... it's a saying the Chinese have. . . .It's sort of a cycle that's completed." Of being overqualified he said: "Here I am back [where] I was 30 years ago. Barely making ends meet, and terrifically interested. I wake up each morning thinking, 'Oh, I'd better get into work because I have so much to do.'"

A similar story was told by another participant, a 55-year old White man, who, after many years as a manager in the chemical industry and what he calls a "crash and burn" period of "personal problems," currently works part-time editing a community newspaper while he establishes an acting career.

[I] always had a dream to become an actor, and so that's what I'm doing now. ... I've always had this ambition. So I'm studying like hell, I realize how little I know about the craft. But I'm doing it....So I'm a struggling artist now, and I love it.

He described this major career transition as an “epiphany” in which “it all of a sudden occurred to me, hey, there’s a multitude of lifestyles, you can pick your own.”

Shortly after the crash and burn, the epiphany occurred when I realized what it meant to ... do real work again... So, that’s where the wisdom is coming from. I don’t know why, a switch clicked somewhere. ... Many get depleted by the chase for money. One of the reasons I crashed and burned ... six figures, well to do.I was working six days a week out of necessity.And I wondered why I never had the time to read a book. ...I’m blaming myself for this entirely, nobody told me to do this ... but that’s the ... phoniness we get into.

The final older worker profiled, a 57-year old African-American woman, depicted herself as a “late bloomer.” For decades, this participant worked in a variety of office jobs in which she experienced and re-experienced difficulties getting along with co-workers and:

...just couldn’t seem to hold a job. I always felt like people were either too hard on me or didn’t like me. I’m going to very honest with you, it was more like a race issue. I always felt that White people didn’t like me, and then I developed an animosity.

When she reached her early fifties, she was unemployed and then became ill and “went on disability.” Realizing, however, that “this is not me,” she entered an older worker training program “where my life really started to change.” She is currently in her final internship with the program, working as a receptionist in a

mental health facility, and hopes to continue this line of work. With regard to her continuing development vis-à-vis paid employment she said:

What I can say ...is that I’m still growing. ...I’m learning to find out who I am.... And so that’s the point I am in my life right now in the work force, developing at a late age. I would call myself a late bloomer. ...Developing my skills. ...I wish I had found these things out earlier in my life, but I realize that ... we all have our season. ...There’s a chance for us to change our lives and grow.... That’s where I am right now...I have a few more years to be in the workforce ...even though it’s part-time because of my disability ... I plan to work and always be useful....Anybody can sit back and collect a check. It just doesn’t feel good. But when you’re working, and I know I’m paying taxes now ... I feel that I’m putting back into the system what they’ve given me, and that makes me feel more like a person. I don’t have to stay home and dwell on my illness.... Now I’m giving back....I really ... am grateful that in being a late bloomer I can still be [making] a contribution to my country.

Discussion

This study provides some needed qualitative and phenomenological data about the frequently referenced but little-understood demographic group of older workers. Above all, these data underscore the vast diversity in the work-related concerns and experiences of contemporary older workers, even within a relatively small purposive sample. It is clear that there is no “typical older worker.” This diversity, and the additional richness that would be tapped with larger, more

representative samples, suggests a critical starting point for research, interventions, workplace practices, and overall employment policy for the 55+ members of the labor force. Perhaps most important, this study takes us into adult work lives that are actively being constructed and into identities that are being re-formed, confirmed, and renegotiated. This dynamism takes several different forms: construction of part-time work experiences for reasons of health, balance, or generative desires; identification of specific work environments and conditions that are a better fit with later-life development; attempts to “get back on track” after disruptions; acceptance of being a “late bloomer,” and efforts to integrate one’s passion with paid employment.

These data make clear that Donald Super’s (1980) stages of career development (e.g., establishing, maintaining, and disengaging) continue to reflect accurately the types of work-life activities in which older adults are engaged. However, the results lend support to the emerging view of these activities less as stages along a linear work-life trajectory, and more as categories of activity that adults may engage with more than once in their lives. Indeed, it is possible for older adults to be involved in any of these stages of work-life development (Sterns, 1998), even simultaneously. The older workers portrayed here are disengaging from their careers or lines of work, maintaining their work-lives in the face of age discrimination and difficult economic times, and/or beginning work lives that are entirely new for them. Thus, it appears that the most fruitful approach to understanding later-adulthood work lives appears to be not classifying people according to Super’s stages, but rather asking critical sub-questions about those stages: Disengaging from what and why? Establishing or maintaining what and why? Disengaging from what in order to maintain or establish what? These sub-questions are very much consistent with the recognized

need to examine work lives (later-life and otherwise) as part-and-parcel of the larger lives in which they are embedded (Clausen, 1995; Moen, 2001).

Similarly, the principle meanings of work identified by Robert Havighurst (1982) (i.e., money, structure, identity and status, social interaction, and meaningful activity/ accomplishment), are very much evident in these qualitative data, yet the data do suggest a deepened or more nuanced approach to some of the categories. For example, these data indicate that paid employment in later-life does more than maintain work identities formed earlier. It also provides opportunities to confirm one’s identity after breaks in work relationships, to return to one’s true identity, or to redefine oneself via the world of work. Likewise, several older workers talked about the fundamental importance of connection in the workplace and the impact of relational disruptions on one’s identity, self-worth, and place in the world of work. This finding speaks to a higher-level meaning of work than captured by the terms social contact or social interaction and is consistent with evidence of development-linked trends towards generativity (Stewart, Ostrove, & Helson, 2001), “emotionally meaningful” relationships in later life (Carestensen et al., 1999), and a need for intimacy (James, Lewkowicz, Libhaber, & Lachman, 1995).

It is interesting to note that in this study, the impact of relational disruption is voiced primarily by women, which is consistent with work suggesting the primacy of relationships to women, at work (Fletcher, 1999) and overall (Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, & Surrey, 1991). However, it is important to note that relational concerns have been shown salient for women and men in later life (James et al., Noonan, 2003). While an in-depth gender analysis is beyond the scope of this paper, this is clearly a fruitful

the graying of the workforce.

direction for future research, consistent with “gendered life course” work highlighting women’s later entry into paid employment, higher levels of pension insecurity, and increased caregiving responsibilities (Moen, 2001). Similarly, future research could also probe how the experience of later-life employment might differ for Whites and members of ethnic and racial minority groups.

On the flip side of the positive meanings of work, this study highlights some of the negative aspects of later-life employment such as pension insecurity, involuntary job loss, unemployment, and age discrimination. It also outlines negative aspects that have received less attention: a sense of not having found one’s “niche in life,” a history of feeling out of place at work, fears that one’s career is prematurely over, the impact of breaks in work relationships, and chronic interpersonal difficulties with co-workers. Another focus for future research would be to investigate how these negative experiences relate to older workers’ physical and emotional well-being, job satisfaction, job performance, and work/retirement decisions, especially since these challenges are being played out amidst economic recession, rapid technological advances, and shifts into an information and service economy (Greller & Stroh, 1995). These challenges are also being played out in workplaces not quite equipped for

Conclusion

The diversity of concerns and experiences voiced in this paper, coupled with the realities of the rapidly changing workplace, call into question many of our traditional models and assumptions about older workers – and the workplace practices and larger policy conversations which they inform. For example, the developmental task of generativity has been discussed in the older worker literature, with suggestions that older workers may lean towards more generative positions or roles at work such as teaching and mentoring (Farr et al., 1998; Pratt, Norris, Arnold, & Filyer, 1999). However, recommendations to link generative older workers with jobs allowing them to pass expertise on to the next generation (e.g., Mor-Barak, 1995) may not be feasible in occupational sectors (e.g., high technology) in which younger workers may hold the expertise. Likewise, suggestions that older workers may value the intrinsic rewards of work more highly than extrinsic rewards (Sterns, 1998) may be true only for a shrinking sector of society who can count on later-life job stability and predictable retirement trajectories. Similarly, conversations about reconsidering the age at which workers become eligible for social security benefits must move away from notions of a typical older worker.

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(Endnotes)

¹ Bronte defines “homesteaders” as those with the same job/line of work for their entire work lives; “transformers” as those who change jobs/lines of work once, and “explorers” as those who change jobs or lines of work several times.

² Interviews were conducted in late 2001 – early 2002 during the post-September 11 economic downturn.