

Kormanik, M. B. (2005). *White males in transition: Describing the experience of a stalled career*. Alexandria, VA: Organizational Development Systems.

White Males in Transition: Describing the Experience of a Stalled Career

By

Martin B. Kormanik

B.S., 1982, The Ohio State University

M.G.A., 1995, The University of Maryland

A Dissertation Submitted to

The Faculty of

The Graduate School of Education and Human Development of

The George Washington University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

August, 31 2005

Dissertation Chair:

Dr. Richard P. Lanthier, Associate Professor of Human Development

Dissertation Committee Members:

Dr. Maria Cseh, Assistant Professor of Human Resource Development

Dr. Sharon J. Confessore, Senior Director of Learning and Organizational Effectiveness,

Kaiser Permanente Mid-Atlantic

“When a man does not understand a thing, he feels discord with himself: he seeks causes for his dissonance not in himself, but outside himself, and the result is war with something he does not understand.” (Chekhov, 1973, p. 278)

Abstract of Dissertation

White Males in Transition: Describing the Experience of a Stalled Career

Conditions of the contemporary United States workplace have created a social phenomenon in which some middle age white males perceive they are experiencing a stalled career; they perceive they have plateaued in their career progression while at the same time perceive that women and minorities in their professional cohort continue advancing. This study uses phenomenological research methods to investigate the phenomenon by asking individuals who have experienced a stalled career to describe the experience and its impact.

The primary finding from the phenomenological reduction is the description of the essence of the stalled career experience. Five conclusions emerge from the analysis. First, the contemporary environment plays a substantial role in precipitating the stalled career. Second, the stalled career is about some white males comparing their situation to women and minorities, while not blaming women and minorities for the situation. Third, the stalled career experience includes a substantial shift toward externality, both from the perceived lack of control over the situation and the white male's choice to relinquish control as a coping strategy. Fourth, the undiscussable nature of the experience impedes making sense of the situation. Fifth, the experience has a negative impact on the organization, as well as the white male having the experience.

Secondary evidence to enhance understanding of the stalled career experience comes from analysis of the data using transitions theory. Three conclusions emerge. First, the data confirms that the nature of the stalled career is a non-event work transition. Second, while support systems are used as a coping resource, the primary form of support is other white males whose support tends to reinforce being in the transition rather than encouraging successful navigation through the transition. Third, the stalled career provides an example of a transition in which the duration may be sustained or the outcome uncertain due to the balance in coping assets and liabilities being in a state of equilibrium.

The discussion includes implications for theory, practice, and further research.

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to Ron Riddell and Annette Sturdevant for the continuous support, challenge, and faith that helped me through this learning journey. You remain my beacons of light and sources of strength and renewal.

Acknowledgements

The process of composing a descriptive, meaningful narrative is not easy, and this dissertation provided ample challenge.

There is often a point at which it simply falls apart. And you think, “Oh, it’s failed; this little idea of mine wasn’t enough.” . . . But it may be, too, that the story is in fact shedding your idea and taking on its own life, which is deeper and broader and stranger than anything you could have come up with out of the squirrel cage of your conscious mind. (Drukman, 1999, p. 63)

I owe a debt of gratitude to the many individuals who supported me on this endeavor, with reassurance that the product of “the squirrel cage of my conscious mind” was a worthy pursuit.

First, I want to acknowledge the five participants who had experienced a stalled career. To each of you, I extend my thanks and gratitude for willingly and honestly sharing your stories. I also thank the numerous others who acknowledged the stalled career phenomenon, informed my critical reflection on the phenomenon, and challenged me to tell a credible story. This exploration provided a connection to white males who perceive that they experienced a stalled career. I have gained new insights and a deeper understanding of the meaning of their experience.

Special thanks go to my committee, Rich Lanthier, Sharon Confessore, and Maria Cseh, whose exceptional diversity of knowledge in adult development and learning enriched this study substantially. Special thanks also go to Debbie Augustin and Phil Graham for their contributions in serving as outside readers. Thanks to David Christian, Dave Schwandt, Neal Chalofsky, Nancy Schlossberg, Margaret Gorman, and Jamie Callahan for their scholarly support; to Dianne Altman Dautoff for her professional insights and challenge to be critically reflective during the epoche process; and, to Nancy Gilmore, E. Caroline Palmer, Lee Templeman, and Elizabeth Gaffney for their technical support. Thanks to my colleagues at the George Washington University. In particular, I commend

the students in the Executive Leadership Program (ELP) who offered encouragement, advice, and review. Particular thanks go to Pam Barrett, Karen Fisher, Dan Krieger, Brad Lafferty, Chris Lafferty, Bob Richer, John Sherlock, Pat Sherod, Karen Speight, the ELP administrative staff, and the Virginia Campus library staff. I thank the manuscript reviewers and session participants for the feedback and insights they provided when preliminary versions of this study and supporting exploratory studies were accepted for presentation at conferences for the Academy of Management, the Academy of Human Resource Development, the Conference on Human & Organizational Studies, and the Society for Applied Sociology.

I also wish to thank my colleagues at O.D. Systems for their ongoing support and personal insights, including Kim Apperson, Tina Chindgren, Peggy Donnelly, John Doyle, Lisa Dragoni, Amanda Graves, Hank Heflin, Carmen O'Brien, Loretta Randolph, Alvin Rosser, and Joyce Taylor.

Lastly, I wish to thank my family for instilling my desire for and sustaining my pursuit of life long learning.

Table of Contents

	page
Abstract of Dissertation	iii
Dedication.....	iv
Acknowledgements	v
List of Tables	xi
List of Figures	xii
Chapter One: Nature of the Study.....	1
Chapter Overview	1
Background.....	1
Statement of the Problem.....	4
Purpose of the Study.....	7
Research Question.....	8
Significance of the Study.....	8
Assumptions Inherent in the Study.....	11
Definition of Terms	11
Chapter Two: Literature Review	14
Chapter Overview	14
Transitions Theory Conceptual Framework.....	15
The Transition Process.....	17
Response to Work Transitions.....	20
Work Transitions and Coping.....	22
Locus of Control	23
Changes in Locus of Control Orientation.....	26
Support Systems	29
Awareness Development.....	31
Social Learning Theory	32

Social Dominance Theory	34
Social Identity Theory	35
White Male Backlash	36
Chapter Three: Research Design.....	42
Chapter Overview	42
Paradigmatic Lens	42
The Process of Inquiry	43
The Researcher's World View	44
Personal Significance of the Study	45
Research Methods.....	47
Phenomenological Research Tradition.....	47
Ethical Considerations and Confidentiality	48
Research Setting.....	49
Unit of Analysis	49
Research Participants.....	50
Data Collection	54
Data Analysis	57
Data Representation.....	61
Trustworthiness.....	62
Delimitations	63
Limitations.....	63
Chapter Four: Findings.....	65
Chapter Overview	65
Findings from the Phenomenological Analysis	65
Individual Horizontalization.....	66
Invariant Constituents.....	73
Core Themes of the Stalled Career Experience	73

Textural Descriptions	74
Structural Descriptions	81
Individual Textural-Structural Descriptions	86
Composite Textural-Structural Description	90
Additional Aspects of the Stalled Career Experience	94
Analysis using Transitions Theory Conceptual Framework	95
“Situation” Themes of the Stalled Career Experience	96
“Self” Themes of the Stalled Career Experience	97
“Strategies” Themes of the Stalled Career Experience	98
“Support” Themes of the Stalled Career Experience	100
Chapter Summary	101
Chapter Five: Conclusions and Implications	103
Chapter Overview	103
Conclusions about the Stalled Career Experience	103
Conclusions from the Phenomenological Analysis	105
Conclusions from the Analysis using the Transitions Conceptual Framework	117
Implications for Theory	124
Implications for Practice	125
Implications for the Organization	126
Implications for Functional Practitioners	126
Implications for Supervisors	128
Implications for White Males	129
Recommendations for Further Research	129
Chapter Summary	131
References	134
Appendix A. Personal Significance of the Phenomenon	153
Appendix B. Information Sheet for Participants	158

Appendix C. Standard Informed Consent Form	159
Appendix D. Initial Interview Protocol.....	160
First Interview.....	160
Second Interview	161
Third Interview	161
Appendix E. Revised Interview Protocol.....	163
First Interview.....	163
Second Interview	164
Third Interview	165
Appendix F. Textural-Structural Descriptions for Each Participant	168
Mel’s Textural-Structural Description.....	168
Robert’s Textural-Structural Description	172
Martin’s Textural-Structural Description	173
Jeff’s Textural-Structural Description.....	175
George’s Textural-Structural Description	178

List of Tables

1. Matrix of Participant Information	94
2. Participants' Scoring on the Transitions Coping Questionnaire	95
3. Matrix of Participants' Social Support Systems	100

List of Figures

1. Phenomenology of a Stalled Career	14
2. Model for Analyzing the Individual in Transition	16
3. Model for Analyzing the Non-event Work Transition of a Stalled Career	56
4. Stalled Career and White Male Backlash.....	104
5. Depiction of the Non-event Work Transition of a Stalled Career.....	121

Chapter One: Nature of the Study

Chapter Overview

The conditions of the contemporary United States (U.S.) workplace have created a social phenomenon in which some middle age white males perceive they are experiencing a stalled career; they perceive they have plateaued in their career progression while at the same time they perceive that women and minorities in their professional cohort continue to advance. This qualitative study utilizes phenomenological research methods to investigate the stalled career phenomenon by asking individuals who have experienced the non-event work transition of a stalled career to describe their experience. The analytical framework for this exploration into adult development is transitions theory. This chapter includes background information on the genesis of the phenomenon, a statement of the problem, the purpose of the study, the research question, the social significance of the study, significance of the study to the researcher, researcher assumptions, and definitions of terms used in the study.

Background

The U.S. experienced substantial change during the last decades of the 20th Century. In discussing the impact of societal change on the workplace, authors promote the anticipation of rapid change as the norm (LaBarre, 2003; Patel, 2002). The world of downsizing, increased globalization, deregulation, outsourcing, technological change, mergers, and acquisitions has created an environmental context for work transition (Gysbers, Heppner, & Johnston, 1998). The events of 9/11 exacerbated the sense of vulnerability already felt by many Americans (Caudron, 2002). This rapidly changing environment ensures that workplace and job changes are inevitable (Sullivan, Martin, Carden, & Mainiero, 2003). All indicators suggest that anxiety over job loss due to corporate restructuring (Eby & Buch, 1995) and offshoring of white-collar jobs (Babcock, 2004) is likely to continue.

This era of unprecedented change requires a reassessment of longstanding factors and strategies related to midlife work transition and the facilitation of that transition (Engels, 1995; Sullivan, Martin, Carden, & Mainiero, 2003). Downsizing and a tendency for flatter organizations in the U.S. have meant there are fewer middle management positions, leaving diminished opportunities for steady career progression. The popular press has boldly proclaimed “the end of jobs” (Barnet, 1993; Bridges, 1994), with white-collar workers disproportionately experiencing involuntary work transitions (Cameron, Freeman, & Mishra, 1991). Competition for the limited number of advancement opportunities has intensified (Yang, 1996). Career development literature uses the term *plateaued* to describe “the point in a career where the likelihood of additional hierarchical positions is very low” (Stoner, 1980, p.1). Many organizations have considerable numbers of employees who have plateaued in their careers, leaving a group of employees who have no headroom for advancement (Leibowitz, Farren, & Kaye, 1986; Sullivan, Martin, Carden, & Mainiero, 2003).

Concurrently, the U.S. workplace has been affected by substantial demographic shifts (Judy & D’Amico, 1997). Their *Workforce 2020* study suggests that 60% of new entrants to the workplace will be minorities. Minority participation rate in the U.S. workforce has grown from 18% in 1982 to 29% in 2002, and is expected to increase to 35% by 2012 (Toossi, 2004). The workforce is also growing older, with the majority of baby boomers entering middle age. Later retirement has caused career progression bottlenecks in organizations, thereby increasing the number of plateaued employees (Leibowitz, Farren, & Kaye, 1986; Nachbagauer & Riedl, 2002; Trembley & Roger, 1993). Almost 60% of American women work outside the home, representing a 50% increase above 1964 figures, and 25% earn more money than their husbands (Ali & Miller, 2004). The annual rate of growth in the women’s labor force has outpaced that of men for the last two decades, and is forecast to continue (Toossi, 2004).

These demographic changes have heightened the societal shifts noted previously. The increasing numbers of women and minorities entering the workplace and advancing to mid- and senior-level management positions has altered workplace social dynamics (Judy & D'Amico, 1997). This increased representation of women in the workplace has marked a shift in workplace power dynamics and challenged the traditional patriarchal hierarchy (Rifkin, 1994). The increased presence of women in the workplace has altered the conventional role of males as the primary household breadwinners and upset traditional workplace gender-based power dynamics (Towery, 1998). These overall societal changes reflected in the workplace have caused many employees to reassess conventional workplace “rules” (Kotter, 1995).

These changed environmental conditions have created a crisis in society and, particularly, in the contemporary U.S. workplace, by forcing numerous employees into an involuntary work transition. Some individuals have experienced this transition as a non-event—an occasion where expected career advancement did not occur. These individuals' careers have leveled off or plateaued. Howard and Bray (1980) describe as plateaued those individuals whose career expectations and desire for advancement have faded “gradually and gracefully” (p. 5), suggesting some self-initiation of the non-event work transition. The social crisis in this study, however, lies with the involuntary nature of a work transition created by the changed environmental conditions of the contemporary workplace.

Some individuals have successfully navigated a positive outcome to the non-event work transition of a plateaued career (Fierman, 1993; Nachbagauer & Riedl, 2002). While some individuals have coped effectively, many others have not (Boyle, 2002; Jaffe & Scott, 1998). Stroh and Reilly (1999) note that reaching a career plateau may be associated with a middle age crisis. With a critical mass of individuals experiencing the involuntary work transition of a plateaued career, the potential is high for a macro-level workplace crisis. Thus, there is a substantial need to enhance understanding of middle age work transitions

and to identify strategies for promoting a positive midlife work transition outcome (Heppner, 1998).

Statement of the Problem

While workplace, societal, and demographic changes in the U.S. during the last two decades have affected all individuals, they have particularly affected males (Faludi, 1999a). A new social phenomenon has emerged. Faludi (1999b) describes the phenomenon as a “male crisis” (p. 50). Birkenstein (1999) narrows the population to white males by noting that “we have a parade of white males who appear to feel that simply being a white male should still entitle them to certain benefits This is the true and sick sense of disenfranchisement some men feel, which we must deal with if we are to begin to understand this ongoing problem” (p. 18). An exploratory study shows this new social phenomenon is sometimes referred to as “white male backlash” (WMB) and the individuals referred to as “worried” or “angry” white males (Kormanik, 2000). Astrachan (1986) foresaw the phenomenon, finding that race has been a mediating factor in males’ experience with the gender revolution of the late twentieth century. Although backlash from white males has a long history, it has emerged as a discrete phenomenon at this point in time as a reaction to the forces of change in the workplace (Burke & Black, 1997). More than mere nostalgia for an earlier time, some suggest that the phenomenon is part of the culture of complaint that is fraying and fragmenting American society (Hughes, 1993).

Although a male crisis due to the “feminization” of the workplace was identified nearly 40 years ago (Brenton, 1966), this current WMB phenomenon appears connected to aspects of workplace change specific to the last two decades of the 20th century. There is some suggestion that this backlash has surfaced in response to the 1978 Federal mandate to increase the representation of women and minorities in the U.S. workforce through affirmative action (AA) programs (Hoppe, 1996; Reeves, 1995; Yang, 1996). Astrachan (1986) describes an early example of WMB with an anecdote of some white male managers tearing up and discarding a corporate memorandum on AA mandating the hiring of women

and minorities. The anti-affirmative action movement in the U.S. is well recognized (Klineberg & Kravitz, 2003). Studies on differences in the attitudes of specific demographic groups consistently show white males' attitudes toward AA and diversity programs are significantly lower than that of other groups (Konrad & Linnehan, 1999; Lobel, 1999).

An exploratory study of EEO/AA and human resources practitioner perspectives on WMB shows that the backlash is a manifestation of some white males' negative reaction (i.e., attitudes, beliefs, feelings, behaviors) toward factors that are upsetting the traditional social dominance of white males, and that the reaction is at least partly negative (Kormanik, 2000). The factors that are changing the taken-for-granted social hierarchy and power structure are varied. The three factors cited most consistently by informants were equal employment opportunity (EEO) legislation, Federally-mandated AA efforts, and organizationally-mandated workplace diversity programs. Other researchers echo the finding that backlash from some white males may be a reaction to the initiation of formalized corporate diversity programs (Galen & Palmer, 1994; Rifkin, 1994; Whittenburg, 1999). The undercurrent of patronizing skepticism that often pervades discussions on sexual harassment (Uggen & Blackstone, 2004) is another example of societal change, and reflects the way that political correctness in the workplace has been met with increased derision and resistance.

Men's reactions to the increased presence of women in the workplace and specifically in management roles are shaped by economic, sociological, and psychological forces (Astrachan, 1986; Towery, 1998). Research has shown that white males' commitment, self-esteem, and attachment to work has diminished as the workplace has become more diverse in terms of race and gender (Rifkin, 1994). Add to this the white males' perception that women and minorities are getting ahead due to AA programs and the situation is primed for a reaction from those white males who feel disenfranchised. Perceiving AA programs as unfair, some white males feel frustrated, alienated, and angry.

The exploratory study of WMB shows that, “To be a white male in this organization means that I can kiss any chance of promotion good-bye,” is an oft heard lament, regardless of the statement’s validity (Kormanik, 2000). The research shows that WMB appears to be more an issue of self-interest, rather than stratification ideology or racism. White males have counted on the traditional expectation that hard work pays off in steady career path progression. In the tournament of promotion, males’ early career successes have traditionally paved the way for continual movement up the career ladder (Rosenbaum, 1979). Traditional career assumptions, however, no longer hold true in the contemporary work environment (Hall, 1992). The diminished headroom and increased competition for fewer positions has intensified the situation.

At the nexus of the backlash phenomenon and the changed workplace, some white males perceive themselves as *stalled*. In essence, such individuals consider their career to be involuntarily plateaued while at the same time perceiving women and minorities in their professional cohort as continuing to advance in their career objectives. The verb *stall* means “to force to a standstill: hinder from going on” and “to divert or delay by evasion or deception” (Gove, 1986, p. 2221). The term *stalled career* is used in this study to describe the negative perception of some white males that they are involuntarily being forced to a standstill. These white males perceive that their career progression has been negatively diverted or delayed. These specific conditions for this specific population make white males out of sync with their female and minority colleagues.

Although the popular press has covered the WMB phenomenon (Reeves, 1995; Yang, 1996), and there is some empirical evidence of WMB (Burke and Black, 1997; Kormanik, 2000), the phenomenon of a stalled career has not been studied. The general lack of understanding of this phenomenon and its psycho-social impact on white males is problematic. Rifkin (1994) suggests that if we do not help white males adjust to a diverse workforce, they will disengage, thereby compromising the desired benefit of diversity. Anecdotal information and personal communications strongly suggest the stalled career

phenomenon is occurring and producing a negative impact on individuals and work groups. Unfortunately, there is a paucity of empirical evidence documenting the phenomenon and its impact. In particular, there has been no research describing the experience of middle age white males who perceive themselves as having a stalled career.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to describe the experience of middle age white males who perceive themselves as having a stalled career. The focus is on the particular experience rather than the general idea of the organizational “system” no longer working the way it is supposed to. One way to understand the experience of those going through a stalled career is to apply transitions theory. Transitions occur when “an event or non-event results in a change in assumptions about oneself and the world and thus requires a corresponding change in one’s behavior and relationships” (Schlossberg, 1981, p. 5). Transitions generally occur in three contexts throughout our lives: individual life transitions, relationship transitions, and work transitions (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995). Within all three contexts, transitions can be anticipated (e.g., high school graduation, job entry, marriage), unanticipated (e.g., death of a loved one, job layoff), or non-events (e.g., non-occurrence of an expected promotion, non-achievement of a life goal, gradual separation from a friendship). A white male who perceives himself as stalled—who feels he is not moving in his career—is in fact experiencing a non-event work transition. Transitions theory provides a way to examine the stalled career work transition experience in depth.

Non-event transitions and coping resources are the two constructs for this study. Transitions theory assumes that individuals in transition use their coping resources, such as social support systems, to get beyond the crisis created by the transition (Schlossberg, 1981). Individuals experiencing change due to a work transition, such as a stalled career, often “require a new network of relationships and a new way of seeing oneself” (p. 2). The utilization of such mechanisms enhances the individual’s ability to navigate the stalled career transition. Where this is the case, the effect would be a coping asset balance and

result in a positive transition outcome. Adult development would occur. Transitions theory suggests that middle age white males who experience the non-event work transition of a stalled career will use their social support systems to ensure a positive transition outcome.

Research Question

The research question for this study was: How do middle age white males who perceive themselves as having a stalled career experience this non-event work transition? The conceptual framework was Schlossberg's (1981) model for analyzing adults in transition, as adapted in Schlossberg, Waters, and Goodman (1995). The participants for the study were middle age white males who perceived themselves as having a stalled career; a non-event work transition.

Significance of the Study

Levinson (1978) and Sheehy (1976, 1981) have given attention to the importance of transitions and growth that occurs in middle age. The panic of the middle age is reflected in the abundance of books and popular magazine features on the subject. In spite of this attention, we still know relatively little about work transitions occurring at midlife (Heppner, 1998). By incorporating an adult development conceptual framework (i.e., transitions theory) into this phenomenological study of the stalled career experience, this study informs both theory and practice. This study of the non-event work transition experience of a stalled career is significant for six reasons.

First, this study generates theory on the phenomenon of a stalled career. Since 1978 when AA programs were mandated, focus has been on the hiring, promotion, and retention of women and minorities in the workforce (Patterson & Sturdevant, 1980). While there is extensive research documenting white males' attitudes toward AA programs, there is little research on the *effects* that AA programs have had on work transitions of middle age white males within the context of the changed work environment. Levinson's (1978) groundbreaking study of middle age males is more than 25 years old. There is a general lack of recent empirical research on midlife work transitions of white males. Also,

Schlossberg and Robinson (1996) suggest that research on non-event transitions, such as a stalled career, has been scarce. This study provides empirical research specifically focusing on the transition of middle age white males experiencing a stalled career, and in particular, describing how they experience this non-event transition within the context of the contemporary work environment.

Second, this study provides empirical research on Schlossberg's (1981) transitions theory within the context of the contemporary workplace. Although there is an abundance of literature on transitions, research calls for more empirical studies on midlife transitions and, in particular, midlife work transitions (Heppner, 1998). Schlossberg's (1981) conceptual frame for transitions has been applied to various populations since its development 25 years ago. The existing literature on work transitions, however, does not readily take into consideration the rapidly changing conditions of the contemporary workplace. While work transition research has examined anticipated work entry (e.g., voluntarily starting a job after college) and unanticipated work exit (e.g., corporate layoff), research on non-event transitions is limited (Schlossberg & Robinson, 1996). Also, the career literature has traditionally assumed steady progress toward a career (Super, 1957), and these old career models are now outdated (Hall, 1992). What remained to be explored with Schlossberg's conceptual framework were non-event transitions within the new environment of changed workplace circumstances and mutable career development. This study contributes empirical evidence of how middle age white American males experience the non-event transition of a stalled career within the context of the contemporary work environment.

Third, the results of this study have benefit to white males experiencing a stalled career, as well as any other individuals who experience the work transition of a plateaued career at midlife. Engels (1995) calls out for the "identification of general and specific implications for theory and practice working with humans of all ages and stages of career development, especially in terms of preventive strategies for career education" (p. 84). A

stalled career has cognitive and psycho-social implications. In particular, Eby and Buch (1995) underscore that both problem-focused and emotion-focused interventions are important for men experiencing a work transition. Traditionally, interventions have been problem-focused, without sufficiently addressing affective (i.e., emotional, psycho-social) issues of those in transition. The results of this study help address affective issues.

Fourth, the results of this study are useful for HR practitioners who must address the collective and individual needs of white males in the workplace by assisting in the successful navigation of this work transition and by ensuring that any dysfunctional aspects of the transition are minimized. In these times of rapid change, promoting career growth is crucial for organizations, as well as individuals (Engels, 1995). “As Americans deal with the reality of the shortened corporate ladder and organizations grapple with ethical and logistical issues in downsizing, the identification of factors that foster career growth . . . are critical for individual and organizational survival” (Eby & Buch, 1995, p. 41).

Fifth, the results of this study have implications for counselors and therapists. These practitioners are often called on to help adults navigate life transition changes. There is a critical need for the design of services, development of counseling strategies, and intervention planning to facilitate the work transitions of adults (Eby & Buch, 1995; Jepsen, 1992). Engels (1995) emphasizes the need to provide “a foothold, some specific pathways, and many insights and possibilities for counselors and paraprofessionals to consciously shape our own destiny and help clients do the same” (p. 87). Empirical research on factors that support and factors that impede individuals’ ability to navigate the work transition of a stalled career provide insights for counselors and therapists in their helping role.

Sixth, the results of this study provide insights to supervisors who must select employees for limited advancement opportunities and who are charged with creating other developmental opportunities for their subordinates. “Career theories and assessment measures have tended to focus primarily on career choice and adjustment to initial employment, with considerably less focus on how applicable and useful these measures and

theories may be for adults who are middle age and . . . experiencing career transition” (Heppner, 1998, p. 136). The results of this study provide guidance to supervisors—those in the workplace with the most direct opportunity to influence individuals experiencing a stalled career.

Assumptions Inherent in the Study

This study makes several assumptions regarding transitions, the individuals who participated in the study, and the research methods. Specifically, transitions involve change. Individuals can identify critical, transforming, or life changing events and non-events which induce transition in their lives. Individuals react to change differently, and not all individuals like change. Individuals experiencing a transition use their social support systems to cope with the transition. Individuals experiencing a transition, however, do not always want to make the changes necessary to move through the transition to a positive transition outcome. Also, individuals do not always want a positive transition outcome. Individuals experiencing a transition can best describe the experience using their own words, and will be open and forthright in describing their transition experience. Middle age white males who perceive themselves as experiencing a stalled career are best suited to describe the meaning of their transition experience. The study also assumes that Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman’s (1995) conceptual framework for transitions is a comprehensive and useful theory to analyze adults in transition. Lastly, the assumptions for a qualitative research design following the phenomenology tradition hold true (Merriam, 1988).

Definition of Terms

This section provides definitions for terms used throughout this study.

Coping: “any response to external life strains that serves to prevent, avoid, or control emotional distress” (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978, p. 3).

Coping assets: surplus in coping resources and responses, with respect to a transition (Schlossberg, 1984).

Coping liabilities: shortfall in coping resources and responses, with respect to a transition (Schlossberg, 1984).

Coping resources: social (e.g., family, friends, neighbors, coworkers) and psychological (e.g., self-esteem, self-denigration, mastery) resources that reflect what individuals *are* (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978).

Coping responses: represent what individuals *do* (e.g., change the situation, change the *meaning* of the situation, control the stress itself) (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978).

Midlife; middle age: 40-60 years old, based on a synthesis of adult development literature showing this as the middle age bracket (Chiriboga, 1989; Erikson, 1950; Levinson, 1978; Neugarten, 1972).

Non-event transition: marked by the non-occurrence of an anticipated life event (e.g., expected promotion, non-achievement of the Levinsonian “dream”) (Schlossberg, 1981); the non-critical life event or “chronic hassle” (e.g., concern with weight and physical appearance, home maintenance, crime) (Schlossberg, 1984).

Peer cohort: natural human group whose “social clock” and “psychological timing” are in sync; being off-time with one’s cohort carries a certain social stigma (Neugarten, 1976).

Professional cohort: male and female coworkers of all races who are doing similar work at the same organizational level; workplace peer cohort.

Support systems: intimate family relationships, network of friends (e.g., “best friends,” coworkers, acquaintances), and institutional support (e.g., formal programs, rituals, ceremonies) (Schlossberg & Leibowitz, 1980).

Stalled career: the perception of a white male that he is out of sync in terms of career progression with women and minorities in his professional cohort (i.e., plateaued, detained, delayed, slowed); represents a non-event work transition.

Transition: phenomenon when “an event or non-event results in a change in assumptions about oneself and the world and thus requires a corresponding change in

one's behavior and relationships" (Schlossberg, 1981, p. 5); has cognitive and psychosocial effects.

Transition outcome: positive or negative result of the transition process, assessed by the balance of the individual's coping assets and liabilities; a positive transition outcome results in "a new network of relationships and a new way of seeing oneself" (Schlossberg, 1981, p. 3).

Work transition: a situation where a task change, position change, or occupation change is being considered (Heppner, 1998).

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Chapter Overview

Chapter One asserted that societal and demographic changes in the context of the contemporary workplace may negatively influence some white males' sense of their career progression, creating the perception of a stalled career. The chapter also asserted the existence of a lack of understanding of the stalled career experience. These assertions are now explored within the relevant literature. The initial literature review in developing the proposal for this study included transitions theory, response to work transitions, transitions and coping, and support systems. Given the iterative nature of qualitative research, additional topics that enhanced understanding of the stalled career phenomenon emerged during data collection and analysis. Further topics included locus of control, social learning theory, awareness development, social dominance theory, social identity theory, and white male backlash (see Figure 1).

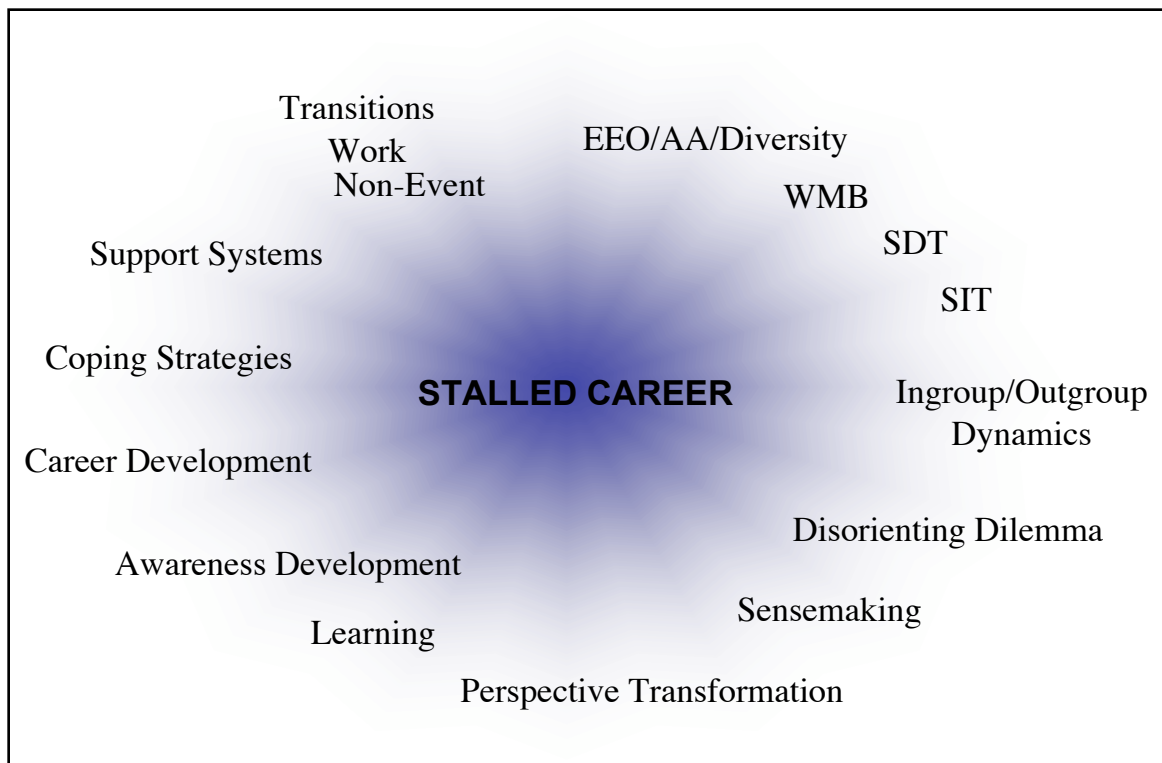


Figure 1. Phenomenology of a stalled career.

Transitions Theory Conceptual Framework

This study describes the stalled career experience of the middle age white male using qualitative phenomenological research methods and Schlossberg's (1981) transitions theoretical framework. Transitions, when "an event or non-event results in a change in assumptions about oneself and the world and thus requires a corresponding change in one's behavior and relationships" (p. 5), are an undeniable part of everyone's life. Schlossberg (1994) describes transitions simply as important changes in an individual's life, "good or bad, expected or unexpected—that unsettle our lives, shake us up, and take some adjusting over time" (p. xv). Transitions are an integral part of adult development, yielding cognitive and psycho-social effects. "Adults continuously experience transitions, although these transitions do not occur in any sequential order, nor does everyone experience the various transitions in a like manner. All we know for certain is that all adults experience [transitional] change and that often these changes require a new network of relationships and a new way of seeing oneself" (p. 3).

Schlossberg's (1981) initial model for analyzing adults in transition shows a life transition as a form of crisis and the concept of adaptation to the crisis is central to the transitions framework. Earlier studies of the transitions construct in the life-span developmental psychology literature focus on adaptation to transition stress over the life course (Lowenthal & Chiriboga, 1975; see also Lowenthal, 1971). Many life stressors are seen as critical life events (Pearlin, 1991). "Every crisis presents both an opportunity for psychological growth and a danger of psychological deterioration" (Moos & Tsu, 1976, p. 13). Although Schlossberg's (1981) framework for transitions draws heavily on the construct of critical life events (Danish, 1981; see also Brown & Harris, 1989; Miller, 1989), not all transitions are perceived as critical (e.g., non-event transitions, chronic hassles). Also, further development of the transition model suggests that the adaptation construct is incomplete in describing responses to transition and expands the concept of adaptation to coping (Charner & Schlossberg, 1986). Rather than a critical life event, this

study proposes that a stalled career represents a non-event, to which those experiencing it must learn how to cope.

The conceptual framework for life transitions explains the key factors to be studied and the presumed relationships among them when analyzing adults in transition. The earlier model includes three factors: characteristics of the transition, characteristics of the individual, and characteristics of the environment (Schlossberg, 1984). Subsequent development of the model modifies these factors into the 4 Ss: Situation (i.e., characteristics of the transition), Support (i.e., characteristics of the environment), Self (i.e., stable characteristics of the individual), and Strategies (i.e., things the individual can learn and do) (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995). The interaction (i.e., presumed relationship) between these four factors represents the transition process and leads to a positive or negative transition outcome (see Figure 2).

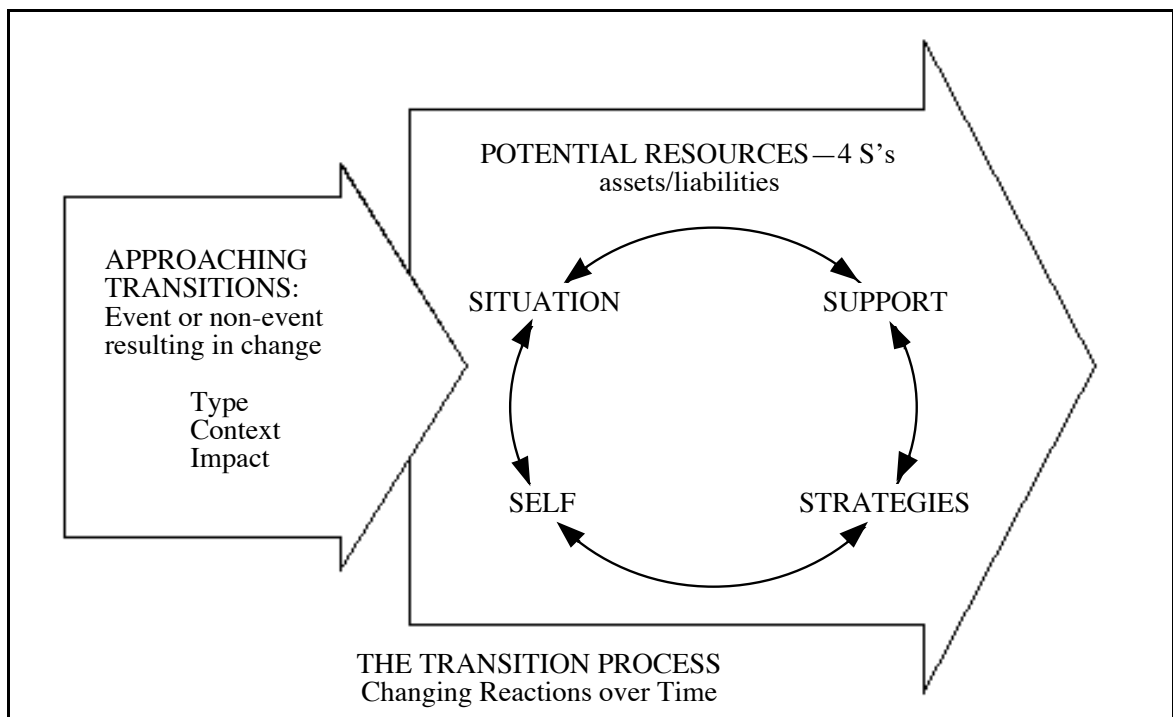


Figure 2. Model for analyzing the individual in transition (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995, p. 27).

This conceptual framework is useful in identifying where the individual is in the transition (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995), and provides a helpful taxonomy for examining the non-event work transition of a stalled career. An assumption inherent to the model is that an individual's response to the transition changes over time, depending on whether the individual is moving *in*, *through*, or *out of* the transition. Schlossberg (1981) suggests assessing, at one point in time, the transitional opportunity for growth or deterioration. This is accomplished by examining an individual's resources/assets and liabilities/deficits among the 4Ss for adaptation to the life stressor at the heart of the transition. The transition outcome is the balance of the individual's coping assets and liabilities (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995). Although a number of individuals may be going through a similar transition, each individual would have a different 4S profile because of the multiple factors taken into account in this analysis.

Schlossberg (1981) uses numerous adult developmental theories in the construction of the framework for analyzing adults in transition, synthesizing life stage, individual idiosyncrasy, and chronological age perspectives. The life stage component of Schlossberg's transitions framework draws from theory on the sequential life stage resolution of internal crises (Erikson, 1950; Gould, 1972, 1975, 1978). Emphasis on individual idiosyncrasy in the transitions framework comes from the social clock and psychological timing of Neugarten's (1976, 1979) life cycle theory and Vaillant's (1977) emphasis on the importance of sustained relationships in shaping the individual's future. The chronological age perspective of the transitions framework comes from Levinson's (1978) concept of the invariant sequence of the life structure and the developmental arc of life aspirations (i.e., the "dream").

The Transition Process

Schlossberg (1981) notes that transitions may involve expected or anticipated life events (e.g., high school graduation, job entry, marriage, birth of a child) or unanticipated (e.g., death of a loved one, job layoff). Transitions may be critical life events (e.g., heart

attack). They may also be subtle life changes (e.g., separation from a friend, loss of career aspirations) and non-events (e.g., non-occurrence of an anticipated promotion, non-achievement of the Levinsonian “dream”). Schlossberg (1984) later adds the non-event of transition of “chronic hassles” (e.g., concern with weight and physical appearance, home maintenance, neighborhood crime rates). Schlossberg’s model for analyzing adults in transitions is an attempt to make some sense out of individual variability in coping with the variety of stressful life transitions.

There are three contexts for life transitions: individual, relationship, and work (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995). A work transition is a situation where a task change, position change, or occupation change is being considered (Heppner, 1998). Changes in society in general, as well as changes in the work environment in particular, have led to an increase in work transitions. The rapidly changing environment of the contemporary workplace ensures that work transitions are inevitable. Some work transitions may be unanticipated and forced upon the individual, while others may be anticipated and voluntary. Some may be life changing non-events.

Adults in their 40s and 50s constitute the fastest growing segment of those in work transition (Newman 1995). Empirical research in the area of work transitions has largely focused on specific populations. Examples of research include: students (Breese & O’Toole, 1995; Worthington & Juntunen, 1997); clerical workers (Charner & Schlossberg, 1986); older workers (Newman, 1995; Taylor, Carter, & Cook, 1995; Warr & Jackson, 1984); and minority women (Simpson, 1996). The most studied populations are students, work-adjustment rehabilitatees, and women (Bejian & Salomone, 1995; Guy, 1994; Newman, 1994; Zimpfer & Carr, 1989).

For purposes of this study, the term work transition will be used, augmenting Heppner’s definition with Schlossberg’s concept that a transition can be a non-event. The middle age white male’s stalled career experience represents a non-event work transition. Schlossberg, Waters, and Goodman (1995) note that “[a] transition is not so much a matter

of change as of the individual's perception of the change" (p. 28). In this study, the perception of the change lies in the white male's revised expectations for advancement—that he is not getting promoted or advancing, yet his minority and female colleagues continue to advance in their career objectives.

Drawing from Neugarten's (1976) concept of social time as being in sync with one's peer cohort development, having a stalled career may entail being out of sync with one's professional cohort in terms of career progression (i.e., plateaued, detained, delayed, slowed). One's professional cohort includes male and female coworkers of all races who are doing similar work at the same organizational level. Being off-time with one's cohort carries a certain social stigma, making it more difficult to adapt to transitions (Schlossberg & Leibowitz, 1980).

The career-related work transition process is highly connected to age, tenure, and functional background (Pelled, Eisenhardt, & Xin, 1999). There are powerful age norms encouraging individuals to expect that career progress comes over time, with age (Lawrence, 1988). Hence, individuals may view people who are similar in age—people at the same stage in life—as yardsticks with which to measure their own career progress, and they may be concerned about falling behind (e.g., not being as successful or powerful as) those persons. For example, a group member who is 25 years old is apt to be more concerned about a 27-year-old "shining" in the group than about a 50-year-old shining. By the same token, there are implicit career timetables and expectations for know-how associated with tenure, so individuals are inclined to look to others of the same tenure to see who has achieved greater recognition, acquired more expertise, or made more career progress in other ways. Additionally, since formal evaluations typically compare individual employees in the same functional area or department (Kirkpatrick, 1986), group members may be especially inclined to focus on persons from the same functional area when making social comparisons. In this study, white males perceive their career has stalled in comparison to

women and minorities in their professional cohort (i.e., the same functional area with approximately the same tenure).

In contrast, Pelled, Eisenhardt, and Xin (1999) find that race and gender are less highlighted in informal assessments of career progression. For example, a female employee will not necessarily expect the same degree of influence and recognition as another female employee simply because both are women. Instead, she is more likely to recognize that each brings a different degree of experience to the group. Thus, consideration of social comparison processes leads to the expectation that diversity in age, tenure, and functional background will have stronger negative associations with group conflict than diversity in race and gender. This study of the stalled career experience brings these variables into play.

Response to Work Transitions

Any work transition holds potential for individual growth or deterioration (Moos & Tsu, 1976). That is, a work transition can have either a positive or a negative outcome. In the transition process, the individual's sense of control may shift toward internality or externality. A positive transition outcome toward internality can occur if the individual takes the opportunity to redirect career goals and priorities, explore career alternatives, develop new competencies, or find a more satisfying job (Eby & Buch, 1995). Career growth represents a positive outcome to a work transition. Conversely, Latack and Dozier (1986) describe the negative work transition outcome of "a downward spiral of career withdrawal [that] occurs and people lose the motivation, self-esteem and capacity for goal setting needed to reestablish psychological success" (p. 384). This embodies Schlossberg's (1984) non-event transition. Maladaptation or nonadaptation represents a negative outcome to transition (Schlossberg & Leibowitz, 1980). There is some evidence that individuals at midlife would be more likely to experience the positive outcome of career growth than those in early or late stages, but the data is not conclusive (Latack & Dozier, 1986).

Attention to both planned (i.e., anticipated) and unplanned (i.e., unanticipated) transitions provides a more holistic approach to the study of work transitions (Engels,

1995). Engels particularly emphasizes the need for self-renewal in the face of unanticipated adult transition. Successfully managing the change involved with work transition demands self-reflection and self-efficacy (Eby & Buch, 1995). To what extent do those experiencing a stalled career engage in reflective practice regarding their career progression? Self-efficacy beliefs can be altered in four primary ways: performance attainment, vicarious learning, verbal reinforcement, and physiological state (Bandura, 1977).

A number of studies have explored the emotional impact of work transitions (Eby & Buch, 1995; Gilbert, 1985; Latack & Dozier, 1986; Vaux, 1985). People in work transition feel less confident, more vulnerable, and alone (Heppner, 1998). Emotional acceptance of the situation is a factor in adaptation to a work transition. Unfortunately, societal norms inhibit men from expressing feelings, emotions, and vulnerability (Gilbert, 1985; Vaux, 1985). The suggestion is that emotional acceptance of the work transition is critical in determining which men experience career growth as the transition outcome (Eby & Buch, 1995). There is some evidence indicating women may adapt better than men to the work transition of job loss, and subsequently may experience more career growth (Baruch, Bienner, & Barnett, 1987; Gallos, 1989; Lunneborg, 1990). More conclusive data on the emotional impact of work transitions is needed, particularly comparing the responses of men and women. What is the affective component of the stalled career experience?

Brown (1995) alludes to work and career change as a lifelong phenomenon. Hall (1992) suggests that traditional career paths are obsolete. Jobs that, until now, lasted for generations cannot be anticipated to even last one lifetime (Engels, 1995). The magnitude and scope of change in contemporary organizations makes career resilience a core essential for career development. Critical competencies for success in today's fast-paced, global economy include self-understanding, learning to learn, self-respect, respect for others, life-long learning (Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills [SCANS], 1992). Bejian and Salomone (1995) note the harsh realities of a workforce for which upward mobility depends on personal internal career resilience and renewal. Lindeman (1926) lays

down a foundation for achieving life-long resilience and renewal through continuous learning. There is a need for data on the relationship between the factors that sustain career development and the unanticipated non-event work transition of a stalled career.

Work Transitions and Coping

A work transition is one example of a life strain or stressor (Charner & Schlossberg, 1986). Coping is defined as “any response to external life strains that serves to prevent, avoid, or control emotional distress” (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978, p. 3). Pearlin and Schooler use the terms strain and stressor interchangeably. Coping dimensions include social resources (e.g., family, friends, neighbors, coworkers), psychological resources (e.g., self-esteem, self-denigration, mastery), and specific coping responses (e.g., change the situation, change the *meaning* of the situation, control the stress itself). Social and psychological resources reflect what individuals *are*, while specific coping responses represent what individuals *do*. Adaptation to work transition is an example of a coping response. How do white males cope with a stalled career?

Positive coping mechanisms enhance successful work transition (Saam, Wodtke, & Hains, 1995). While no single coping strategy exists (Charner & Schlossberg, 1986; Pearlin & Schooler, 1978), the outcome of a transition largely depends on the balance of an individual’s coping assets and liabilities (Charner & Schlossberg, 1986; Schlossberg, 1981, 1984). The balance results from the interaction of three groups of variables: characteristics of the particular transition, characteristics of the individual, and characteristics of the environment. Successful management of work transition change often means the positive outcome of career growth. In their study of work transitions, Latack and Dozier (1986) identify three factors related to career growth: the transition process, characteristics of the individual, and the environment. These are the same three groups of variables that Schlossberg (1984) recommends for assessing the balance of coping assets and liabilities.

Regarding the characteristics of the individual, Eby and Buch (1995) show that a positive attitude is a key factor in effectively coping with work transition. Individuals who

have a tendency to view the world more optimistically experience higher levels of career growth. Eby and Buch note that assessing changes in attitudes in connection with the work transition is critical. The less negative the emotional state of the individual experiencing a work transition, the more they use active coping strategies (Leana & Feldman, 1992). For example, the stress of the work transition of job loss may be buffered by maintaining an active, structured lifestyle (Shamir, 1986). Other research shows that structured activity may provide a sense of purpose and increase feelings of self-efficacy and restore optimism (Eby & Buch, 1995). The participants' sense of a lack of control in relation to their stalled career experience emerged as a substantial theme in this study, and the construct of locus of control proved helpful in examining the stalled career experience.

Locus of Control

Rotter (1966) provides grounded theory on locus of control in a discussion of generalized expectancies for internal versus external control of reinforcement. The construct developed out of social learning theory, where sensemaking is done in context with others (Lefcourt, 1972). Locus of control is a predisposition in the perception of the source of reinforcement (e.g., reward, favorable outcome, goal accomplishment) between internal and external. Internality, a predisposition for internal locus of control, results from the perception that reinforcement is contingent on one's own behavior or one's own relatively permanent characteristics or traits. Externality, the perception that reinforcement is due to luck, chance, fate, or factors beyond one's control, indicates an external locus of control. The generalized expectancy for locus of control is that it is fluid, moving between internality and externality, based on the social context.

Lefcourt (1976) provides a slightly different perspective on the concept of internal versus external control of reinforcement.

In being forced to hear predictable noise we may stop work and wait until it ceases, or steel ourselves for the onset, minimizing our own responses to the noise. We are not as helpless as we might otherwise be since we can do something to minimize the impact of the predictable noise. It is this perception of the ability 'to do something' that gives rise to the concept of perceived control. (p. 5)

Perceived control is a generalized expectancy for internal control of reinforcement. Reactions to unpleasant stimuli are shaped by the individual's perceptions of the stimuli and by the individual's perceptions of the ability to cope with the stimuli. What is the white male's perception of the stalled career and what is his perception of his ability to cope with the experience?

In the life-span development literature, Gurin and Brim (1984) provide yet another perspective on the construct. Sense of control is a function of causal reasoning. Expectancy is a probability assessment, tied to causal questions. "Control over outcomes logically involves judging and analyzing two interrelated connections: that between the self and an act, and that between the act and an outcome" (p. 284). An individual understands that a certain condition results in a certain outcome, and the individual has or can produce the certain condition. Bandura (1977) defines this latter component as self-efficacy.

Interest in studying the locus of control construct began with problems encountered in individual psychotherapy, and the study of the locus of control construct as a personality variable (Joe, 1971; Lefcourt, 1976). Although Rotter's initial theory focuses on the individual as the unit of analysis, investigators have identified generalized locus of control expectancies for certain populations, including patients (Jackson & Tessler, 1984; Ormel & Schaufeli, 1991), genders (Feather, 1967, 1968; Harrington, 1985), racial groups (Cain, 1994; Harrington, 1985; Trimble & Richardson, 1983), social/political action groups (Gurin & Brim, 1984; Thomas, 1970), students (McLaughlin, 1977; Suls & Mullen, 1981), and the workforce (Conger & Kanungo, 1988; Frost & Clayson, 1991; Howell & Avolio, 1993; Nelson, Cooper, & Jackson, 1995; Thomas & Velthouse, 1990). These studies focus on such primary aspects of locus of control as self-efficacy (i.e., having the skills), self-esteem (i.e., having the confidence), autonomy (i.e., having dominion), and instrumentality (i.e., contributing to the outcome). This study of the stalled career experience returns to these themes.

Confusion and misuse of the locus of control construct prompted Rotter (1975) to provide several clarifications. One area of clarification centers on the multidimensionality of the construct. Joe (1971) also stresses the need to study the locus of control at a multidimensional rather than unidimensional level. Unfortunately, investigators often referred to subjects unidimensionally, as internals or externals, with internals being viewed more favorably. Rotter (1975) reiterates that the I-E scale represents a multidimensional continuum. An individual's position on the continuum is dynamic rather than static, and neither good nor bad. Consistent with Schlossberg's (1981) encouragement to assess, at one point in time, the transitional opportunity for growth or deterioration, this study provides a moment in time snapshot of individuals who are experiencing or have experienced transition of a stalled career. There is no assumption of a predisposition toward internality or externality of the individual experiencing a stalled career, and there is no valuation that one predisposition of locus of control is better than the other.

Rotter's (1954, 1966) initial conceptualization of the construct focuses on control over reinforcement (i.e., goal attainment, outcome). Some investigators, on the other hand, interpret this conceptualization as control over the individual's *environment* (Frost & Clayson, 1991). The latter perspective appears faulty. For example, one cannot control whether it is going to rain (i.e., environment), yet one *can* control how wet one gets in the downpour (i.e., outcome). Bandura (1977), and later, Gurin and Brim (1984) provide some clarity on the interrelationship between the locus of control and environment, noting that "the outcome expectancy which is the person's estimate of the extent to which a particular behavior will lead to a desired outcome in [a] particular environment" (p. 286). As noted in Chapter 1, environmental factors play a substantial role in the manifestation of the stalled career phenomenon.

Overall there appears to be broad interpretation regarding the meaning and application of the locus of control construct. Two themes emerge from the literature review. One theme focuses on locus of control based on perceptions of self-efficacy (i.e., the

individual has skills, the individual can “do it”). The second theme focuses on reinforcement (i.e., doing it will result in the expected outcome, rational expectation for cause and effect, the environment will be responsive to coping efforts). These themes are evident in looking at changes in locus of control in general, locus of control and critical events, locus of control and life transitions, and locus of control in the workplace context.

Changes in Locus of Control Orientation

Rotter (1954) suggests that personality is a learned behavior, as compared to Jungian philosophy positing that personality is a heritable characteristic. Change in locus of control orientation is, therefore, expected. One aspect of an individual’s personality is the equilibrium between the individual’s drives for autonomy, control, and social acceptance. This equilibrium contributes to the individual’s locus of control orientation. Social learning theory suggests that locus of control orientation can change due to changes in reinforcement, the value of the reinforcement, or the situation itself. The implication is that an individual’s locus of control orientation will change with life’s experiences. Regarding age, Rotter hypothesizes an orientation toward externality in children and young adults by suggesting that “early acquired goals in humans . . . are entirely controlled by other people” (p. 100). Cain (1994) investigates locus of control as it relates to negotiating stages of adult development. The findings show a consistent inclination toward internality over the life course, with a peak in internal locus of control during the mid-life (i.e., 40-45) transition years. Conversely, regarding gender, Rotter (1966) reports no difference in generalized expectancies for the locus of control in males and females.

In the adult development literature, Hultsch and Plemons (1979) indirectly link their discussion of the life-span development component of adult development theory to the construct of locus of control. The authors propose a metamodel as a framework for discussing theory and research on life events, suggesting that a change in perceptions of personal control is a developmental outcome of life events, precipitating transition. After an initial appraisal of the threat posed by a life event, any dissonance one feels represents a loss

of the sense of control. Resolution of the life event involves recreating congruity with one's environment (i.e., shifting toward internality). Conversely, perception of a lack of control over undesirable life events correlates with psychological illness. There is no evidence on the impact that the dissonance experienced in the non-event of a stalled career will have on life span development.

In the psychology literature, Flannery (1986) looks directly at the issue of personal control as a moderator variable of life stress. Using Rotter's (1966) I-E scale, the study examines the relationship between expectations for outcome (i.e., the environment will be responsive to individual coping efforts) and efficacy (i.e., the belief that one can do the task) and the dependent variables of anxiety and depression. Flannery (1986) shows that depression in men has a significant negative correlation with the measure of internal locus of control. Flannery's findings suggest that the less internal control an individual perceives, the greater the likelihood for depression.

Cain (1994) takes a Levinsonian approach in examining the impact of racism on locus of control among African American males, particularly the shift in locus of control over the life span. The data show that racism does not adversely impact the subjects' sense of internal versus external control; the study participants tended *not* to blame any lack of opportunity, accomplishment, or success on a system of institutionalized racism. Qualitative data augmenting the statistical analysis suggests "an unabiding awareness of racism; yet, an over-riding motivation and drive to take charge of one's life in spite of racism" (p. 170). Also, the African American male cohort in Cain's study shows a higher tendency to vascilate between internality and externality. Cain reports that tasks and situations have a greater impact on locus of control, rather than specific life span developmental stages. Both these conclusions support the multidimensional possibilities of locus of control, and may provide insight in comparison to a cohort of white males experiencing a stalled career.

Conger and Kanungo (1988) identify two different approaches to the development of the empowerment construct—relational and motivational. Empowerment as a relational

construct occurs through movement toward participative management, where organizational decision making is shifted to lower levels for inclusion of a larger number of employees. Empowerment as a motivational construct occurs when management enables employees by helping employees perceive they have power and control. The authors suggest that empowerment as a motivational construct involves creating “expectancy belief-states that are internal to individuals” (p. 473). This expectancy belief is derived from the construct of locus of control. Conger and Kanungo’s theory of empowerment provides the framework for Thomas and Velthouse’s (1990) refinement of the cognitive elements of empowerment: sense of impact, competence, meaningfulness, and choice. Both Conger and Kanungo (1988) and Thomas and Velthouse (1990) draw heavily on Bandura’s (1977) self-efficacy work. All these investigators use Rotter’s (1966) description of generalized expectancies for locus of control as their foundation, adding to the framework for examining the stalled career experience.

The complexity of organizational change undeniably affects employees’ sense of control (Coates, Jarratt, & Mahaffie, 1989). Consistent with transitions theory, organizational change results in a disorienting dilemma for many employees, forcing them into a work transition. Similarly, as discussed in Chapter 1, a stalled career represents a disorienting dilemma associated with environmental and demographic changes in the workplace. One of the earlier studies of the locus of control construct shows that internality enhances information-seeking, while externality reduces information seeking (Davis & Phares, 1967). Within the context of social learning theory, information-seeking is viewed as a function of the value placed on the objectives to which the information-seeking behavior is related and the expectancy for success in achieving those objectives (Rotter, 1954). A high expectancy for success would result in a positive work transition outcome. Nelson, Cooper, and Jackson (1995) find that the issue of control only becomes relevant “when an event is of significant magnitude to make uncertainty a source of general concern” (p. 68). Their data suggest that the disorienting dilemma of organizational change causes an increase

in employees' externality, leading to a reduction in information seeking, in turn yielding a negative transition outcome. One way to reconcile the disorienting dilemma and address this causal chain is through sensemaking, usually done through communicative or dialogic learning in groups (Mezirow, 1985). Support systems provide one mechanism for communicative learning.

Support Systems

There are a number of factors that are environmental, or external to the individual, that explain part of the variance in individual response to work transition (Heppner, 1998). Environmental characteristics include financial resources, family flexibility, and social support (Latack & Dozier, 1986). Other environmental factors worth investigating include ties to the community, marital status, and perceived organizational support (Eby & Buch, 1995). Schlossberg and Leibowitz (1980) equate environmental variables to support systems, including intimate family relationships, network of friends (e.g., "best friends," coworkers, acquaintances), and institutional assistance (e.g., formal programs, rituals, ceremonies). Later, Charner and Schlossberg (1986) broadly describe environmental variables as any support system that affects coping with a transition.

Support systems in the context of this study of the stalled career experience include intimate family relationships, a network of friends, and institutional support. Although Pearlin and Schooler (1978) identify social support as one of three key coping mechanisms, they omit social support from their study of the structure of coping because social resources "are all somewhat complex issues" (p. 5). Charner and Schlossberg (1986) suggest that support systems vary as to sources and forms of support, identifying four forms of supportive behavior: love and affection, affirmation and agreement, assistance, and feedback. Studies show that having social support is related to decreased work transition stress (Caplan, Vinkour, Price, & van Ryn, 1989; Newman, 1988). Mallinckrodt and Fretz (1988) show that lack of social support predicted a number of stress symptoms for those in work transition.

Different sources of support are fundamental to individual adjustment to work transition (Latack & Dozier, 1986). Taylor, Carter, and Cook (1995) identify social relationships outside of work as important for navigating work transitions. Schlossberg and Leibowitz (1980) concur, specifying that individuals who have the support of those closest to them (e.g., spouse, other members of the immediate family) are better able to adapt to a transition. Gilbert (1985) shows that men rely almost exclusively on their spouse for support. Sparks (1987) similarly shows that support and assistance from family is valuable when coping with a work transition, yet notes that support and assistance from work associates is also valuable. Another study supports these findings, showing that men who are able to expand their support base are more likely to experience career growth in times of work transition (Eby & Buch, 1995).

Men and women rely on different forms of social support during work transitions (Eby & Buch, 1995). Other authors suggest that men and women consistently differ in access to and reliance on social support during work transition (Harris, Heller, & Braddock, 1988; Vaux, 1985). For example, Russell (1993) shows that a lack of access to mentors who can provide critical support and encouragement is a major detriment to both job and career change. Women have historically lacked the guidance of a mentor (Kram, 1988). Conversely, men have traditionally had greater career access to the critical support and encouragement of mentors. The implication is that access to mentor support enables men to better cope with work transitions. Eby and Buch (1995) echo these findings, noting that friend and coworker support was more predictive of career growth for men than women in work transition.

The assumption is that individuals in transition use their coping resources, such as support systems, to get beyond the crisis created by the transition (Schlossberg, 1981). Transitions theory suggests that white males who are experiencing a transition due to the changed workplace will use their social support systems to ensure a positive transition outcome. Individuals experiencing change due to a work transition often “require a new

network of relationships and a new way of seeing oneself” (p. 2). Doing so would enhance the individual’s ability to navigate the transition. Where this is the case, the effect would result in a positive transition outcome. Instead, the perception of a stalled career may be symptomatic of a negative outcome of some white males’ non-event work transition.

Awareness Development

The construct of awareness development emerges from the adult development and psychology literatures, particularly theory on life transitions (Kormanik, 1999). When two individuals are confronted by a transitional issue, they will likely differ in their perception of the issue based on their perspective or meaning schema (Schon, 1987). Central to the construct of awareness development is change in perspective or meaning schema (Mezirow, 1985). The experience of a stalled career appears to include a change in perspective or meaning schema. Awareness development reflects making new meaning or sense out of the transition experience because old mental models no longer apply.

Life transitions should be developmental. Similarly, awareness development comes from knowledge (i.e., learning) and experience (i.e., change). Depending on the specific issue, however, some individuals may progress rapidly in their awareness development and some might stagnate at an early stage. Schlossberg (1981) shows a life transition as a form of crisis and the concept of adaptation to the crisis is central to the transitions theoretical framework. “Every crisis presents both an opportunity for psychological growth and a danger of psychological deterioration” (Moos & Tsu, 1976, p. 13). Consistent with Erikson’s (1980) discourse on identity and the life cycle, unless the crisis issue is addressed, awareness development may stagnate, growth may be impeded, and deterioration may result.

The cycle of awareness development helps describe the transitional change process of awareness development through five stages: pre-encounter, intellectualization, encounter, empowerment, and integration (Kormanik, 1999). The cycle repeats for each transitional issue. Individuals generally progress through the stages of awareness in sequence, but

progression may vary substantially from individual to individual even though both are confronted with the same transitional issue. Movement to the fifth stage in the cycle does not mean the individual's cognitive and psychosocial development are complete. The process of awareness development is not static; it is a dynamic, repeating cycle. The individual will remain at the integration stage only until the next transitional issue emerges. The individual may have already reentered the cycle around another transitional issue. The aim is that progression through successive iterations would benefit from the cognitive and psychosocial effects gained in previous awareness development cycles.

Reality is subjective and at the same time multiple, as experienced and seen by the individual (Creswell, 1998). This antipositivist ontological perspective is appropriate for looking at the individual and collective realities of awareness development. "The grounding of theory in paradigm-appropriate assumptions helps researchers to avoid the common tendency to try to force-fit functionalist theory-building techniques as a 'universal' approach" (Gioia & Pitre, 1990, p. 587). The construct of awareness development parallels the process of making meaning, with the process yielding cognitive, psychosocial, and behavioral effects. Kormanik and Sturdevant (2001) show the application of the construct of awareness development at the organizational level is grounded in social learning theory (Rotter, Chance, & Phares, 1972) and the concept of organizations as social systems (Parsons, 1951), where making meaning tends to be done through the interaction of individuals (Mezirow, 1985).

Social Learning Theory

Learning cannot take place without social interaction (Vygotsky & Kozulin, 1986). While people may grow as individuals, giving life meaning—making meaning—is largely done collectively (Argyris, 1957; Mezirow, 1985). An extension of collective, the organization, comes into being and its survival depends on the willingness to engage in cooperative action (Barnard, 1926). Cooperative action is the process of synthesizing in action physical, biological, personal, and social factors (i.e., interacting, working in unison).

Similarly, Weick (1989) identifies enactment as the process of interacting with the environment, so that the individual influences the environment, and in turn is influenced by the environment. Sensemaking—the making of meaning—is influenced by the social environment. This shapes individual development and, consequently, the individual's perception or sense of reality.

A primary reason for continuous learning is to make life meaningful within a social context (Lindeman, 1926). Without lifelong and continuous learning, individual growth (e.g., personality) is stifled and life is rendered meaningless. Where individuals have difficulty interacting socially, they are seen as socially inept. Their personality development is seen as stunted. Lindeman astutely identifies the interdependence between lifelong and continuous learning, individual development, meaningful existence, and social interaction.

The idea of continuous learning and making meaning within a collective context through interaction with one's environment is embodied within social learning theory (Rotter, 1954). Social learning theory represents a synthesis of Hullian stimulus-response theory and Tolman's cognitive interactionist theory. The major difference between stimulus-response and cognitivist learning theory centers on the use of the concept of reinforcement (i.e., goal, objective, outcome). The premise of social learning theory is that an individual's actions are predicted on the basis of the individual's expectations for reinforcement, the perceived value of the reinforcement, and the situation in which the individual finds himself or herself. Reinforcement "acts to strengthen an expectancy that a particular behavior or event will be followed by the reinforcement in the future" (Rotter, 1966, p. 2). Expectancy is equal to the value of the reinforcement (Lefcourt, 1976). Expectancy requires that the individual value the outcome, have self-efficacy, understand and trust the reward system, and avoid negative or unacceptable outcomes (Lawler, 1973).

Although Rotter's social learning theory attempts to integrate stimulus-response and cognitive interactionist learning theories, Rotter is more commonly viewed as a leading contributor to the study of linear cognitive interaction (Bigge & Shermis, 1992). Perhaps

this view is based on Rotter's emphasis on the cognitive-field interactionist learning theory of Lewin (1951), rather than Skinner's (1938) conditioning through reinforcement. Several researchers (Gurin & Brim, 1984) have made substantial connections between Rotter's work on locus of control and the self-efficacy work of Bandura (1977), also in the cognitive interactionist family. Other investigators have suggested moving the locus of control construct away from Skinnerian (i.e., stimulus response) thinking entirely, arguing that "man must come to be more effective and able to perceive himself as the determiner of his fate if he is to live comfortably with himself" (Lefcourt, 1976, p. 3).

Social Dominance Theory

Sidanius and Pratto's (1999) social dominance theory (SDT) proposes that "human social systems are structured as trimorphic, group-based social hierarchies. The three forms of group-based systems are an age system, a gender system (i.e., patriarchy), and an arbitrary-set system. The arbitrary-set system consists of socially constructed group distinctions that happen to be relevant within specific situational and historical contexts" (p. 55). Race is an example of an arbitrary-set system. The social group of white males reflects the arbitrary-set and gender subsystems. SDT assumes that most forms of group conflict and oppression are symptoms of the human predisposition toward group-based social hierarchy. The perception of a stalled career may be the result of this group conflict and oppression. SDT also assumes that human social systems are subject to driving (i.e., hierarchy-enhancing) forces counterbalanced by restraining (i.e., hierarchy-attenuating) forces. Hierarchy-enhancing (HE) forces promote group-based social inequality, while hierarchy-attenuating (HA) forces promote group-based social equality.

SDT synthesizes numerous theories, including several psychological theories addressing the internal processes taking place within individuals, that may contribute to understanding the stalled career phenomenon. The frustration-aggression hypothesis suggests that aggression from one individual toward another results from the individual's frustration over not receiving his/her highly desired goals, with the individual often turning

his/her anger toward less powerful others (Dollard, Miller, Doob, Mowrer, & Sears, 1939). White males' frustration over their own lack of career advancement may lead to displaced aggression against women and minorities. Authoritarian personality theory unifies individuals' social, economic, and political convictions (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950). One aspect of authoritarianism is generalized ethnocentrism, or denigration of the "outgroup" by the "ingroup," which is positively correlated with political conservatism (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Rokeach's (1979) two-value theory of political behavior continues this theme. "Besides helping us understand political choice and ideology . . . the values approach has the additional advantage of relating the attitudes of individuals to the social institutions (e.g., political parties) that so powerfully determine the nature of group relations" (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999, p. 11). Negative attitudes from white males has been linked to conservative political groups (Yang, 1996).

Organizations are a form of human social system (Parsons, 1951). As such, they are also group-based social hierarchies subject to HA and HE forces. SDT would suggest that the perception of having a stalled career is an HE force acting to counterbalance gains made by the HA forces of AA and diversity programming. As an HE force, the perception of having a stalled career may lead to displaced aggression against women and minorities and a lack of support for organizational efforts to promote social equality.

Social Identity Theory

Social identity theory (SIT) stipulates that humans have a general desire for a positive social identity (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Social identity is defined as those aspects of individuals' self-concept that derive from their social group memberships, along with the emotional and evaluative significance of those memberships (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Those who most strongly identify with their group would be the ones most prone to differential treatment in favor of their group. SIT provides the basis for examining the relationship between demographic group membership and values, beliefs, and experiences that affect group attitude among white males.

Group position theory suggests that more powerful *ingroups* will endeavor to perpetuate their dominant position over less powerful *outgroups* by resisting social policies that they see as redistributing power to the outgroup (Blumer, 1960). Realistic group conflict focuses on the perception that one group's gain is another's loss (Campbell, 1965). In both instances, prejudice is a function of one group's sense of entitlement to resources, status, and privileges and perceived threats to those entitlements posed by other groups. The perceived threat may lead to solidarity and internal cohesion within the ingroup, as well as prejudice and negative stereotyping of the outgroups (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Although white male privilege may not be acknowledged (Jensen, 1998), the perception of having a stalled career may be based on the threat posed by women and minorities to white males' dominant position and sense of entitlement. The threat to ingroup interests may be more of a driving factor in provoking negative reaction from white males than traditional American ideological principles or racism/sexism (Bobo, 1998). Conversely, Gagnon and Bourhis (1996) found that personal or self-interest may be a factor motivating prejudice and discrimination more than the factor of social identity.

White Male Backlash

Burke and Black's (1997) literature review on backlash from white males continues the discussion of factors provoking a negative reaction from white males, providing a baseline definition and proposing a research agenda, but yielding no empirical data. Other writers suggest that the backlash phenomenon has surfaced in response to Federally-mandated AA programs (Hoppe, 1996; Reeves, 1995; Yang, 1996) and organizationally-mandated formalized diversity initiatives (Galen & Palmer, 1994; Rifkin, 1994; Whittenburg, 1999). The growing demand for fair and equitable treatment of historically marginalized groups has been met with increased resistance in the workplace. Studies on differences in the attitudes of specific demographic groups have shown white males' attitudes toward AA and diversity programs is significantly lower than that of other groups (Konrad & Linnehan, 1999; Lobel, 1999).

There may be other reasons for the distress experienced by white males. Kets de Vries (1995) notes that:

. . . feelings of distress can be attributed to failures and deficiencies in coping with environmental demands as well as the experiences of personal failure and inadequacy which the individual sees as permanent. Lack of control over changes in the environment, real or fantasized dangers, humiliations, or loss of status are some examples. (p. 45)

White males have counted on the traditional expectation that hard work pays off in steady career path progression, yet the danger is that career progression is no longer assured.

Perceptions of humiliation or loss of status may follow.

Bobo (1998) proposes that group position and perceived threat can be a more potent force against AA than objections based on racism or traditional American individualism and political ideology. The white males' reaction may be based on the perception that women and minorities are "competitive threats for valued social resources, status, and privileges" (p. 989). Perceiving that AA programs give women and minorities an unfair advantage, some white males feel frustrated, alienated, and angry.

Given the perception of having a stalled career may be a symptom of backlash, this literature review includes the key findings from an exploratory study in which Kormanik (2000) identifies white male backlash (WMB). Study informants (e.g., human resource directors, EEO/AA program specialists, diversity program managers) were purposely chosen based on the nature of their occupation. They reported that WMB is known as an issue in the contemporary workplace and is perceived as an organizational problem. The findings show a considerable sense that the phenomenon is having a negative impact on the workplace. Examples of WMB in the workplace vary widely from inactive expressions of negative attitude (e.g., griping, resentment, apathy) to active behaviors (e.g., creating conflict in work relationships, detrimentally affecting organizational mission accomplishment, outright hostility, sabotage). Through descriptive comments, most informants identified that WMB is detrimental to organizational effectiveness.

The exploratory study shows that nearly 72% of informants had heard about WMB. In defining WMB, the most common theme was white males' feelings of disenfranchisement by being ignored, alienated, and excluded (i.e., affective aspect of WMB) (Kormanik, 2000). A second theme was socially driven change (e.g., demographics, legislation). A white male said WMB is "[t]he hostile response by a white male to potential or real changes in the 'rules' that have governed career progress before the discovery of demographic changes in the workforce and accompanying values change." A third theme was displaced aggression (i.e., behavioral aspect of WMB). Another white male defined WMB "as a reprisal or lashing out by specifically white males at minorities . . . in terms of uncooperativeness, not welcoming them to the organization, etc., that they deem have received promotions or were hired simply based on their minority status rather than their skill sets." A fourth theme was the perceived threat to entitlement and limited opportunities (i.e., cognitive and affective aspects of WMB). A white female said WMB is "[t]he response white males exhibit when they believe that others are getting the jobs/opportunities that they deserve because they have 'paid their dues' and now are locked out of their rightful place because the 'system' is artificially advancing less qualified females and minorities."

Regarding the workplace impact of WMB, the primary theme was conflict or clashes that diminish workforce morale (Kormanik, 2000). A secondary theme was viewing women and minority colleagues as unqualified. A minority male said WMB "[c]reates a negative impression of the qualifications of women and/or minorities (regardless of the facts), as well as negatively impacts morale. Based on this in extreme cases could lead to lack of cooperation/teamwork and even sabotage." A third theme was reduced productivity. A minority male said, "White males perceive they are being discriminated against by actions occurring in the organization. They then spend their time reacting to this perceived action and do not continue their work at an effective or normal working pace thus affecting the organization."

Kormanik (2000) reports that 38.5% of informants had direct experience with WMB, describing a range of examples. A minority female provided an example of inactive expressions of negative attitude, saying, “Listening to [white males] whine about ‘lost opportunities,’ [that] ‘they didn’t do anything wrong,’ [and that] ‘people should work for what they get,’ etc.” A white female provided an example of active behaviors, saying:

I was teaching a class at [headquarters] when a white male opined that what was wrong with [the agency] was that females and minorities had been let into other jobs. He said also that during the [agency’s] ‘Glory Days’ only white males had the important jobs—women typed and minorities worked blue collar jobs. And further that [the agency] began its decline when ‘you people’ were promoted out of your places. The class fell silent and I asked him why he felt that way—could he give some examples. He talked awhile but it turned out he hadn’t been promoted since the early ‘70s and felt that but for the females/minorities, he would have gotten further. (Kormanik, 2000a)

A white male drove the point further home in providing the following statement about a general malaise of some white males:

I sense the deep disquiet of the white male over the ‘sensitivity’ of individuals of color or women to the well-meant playfulness of the ordinary white male. Even [senior managers] are not immune from musing plaintively on why the world of 1998/9 is so different from the world of two decades ago. Then men could sit around and discuss affairs without being so \$^%&*&\$# careful about hurting someone’s feelings. In fact, a manager today is counseled to take out workplace insurance in a PC and litigious time and place Nasty e-mail ensued with writers clearly feeling that the world they had grown up in, their moral universe, was closing in on them, morality dissipating, and there being no place for the ordinary white male. (Kormanik, 2000a)

White male backlash was seen as a workplace problem by 47.0% of the informants (Kormanik, 2000). Themes in their examples emphasized self-identity and group cohesion. A minority male said, “White males project unhappiness. They don’t believe the other gender or racial choice is doing as good a job as they could. They have a tendency to band together and to blame the situation on others.” Another theme centered on the amount of energy used in dealing with the effects of WMB. A white female said, “I have to spend a lot of my time working issues related to it including hostile working environments in some of our work areas.” Another theme had to do with hierarchical power. A minority female said, “[White males] with influence can create more harm and make the rest of us lose

focus.” Another theme was perceived threat and exclusionary behavior. A white male said, “When any group feels threatened, there is a tendency for defensive routines to kick in, many of which can reduce workplace effectiveness (i.e., lack of information sharing).” A minority female summed it up by saying, “Anytime any group of individuals feel excluded and disenfranchised it is a workplace problem.”

A smaller percentage (28.2%) agreed with the statement ‘White male backlash is a problem in my organization’ (Kormanik, 2000). A minority female noted, “In my organization, sheer numbers indicate that this is a problem and the [comparatively high] number of minorities who have progressed in the organization tells me that they received assignments and/or promotions that many feel (including white males) should have gone to white males.” She suggested this was indicative of management’s desire to increase representation of women and minorities regardless of their qualifications.

One organization’s White Male Issue Study Group’s ‘administrative use only’ report concluded that:

. . . the agency’s white male problem includes white male backlash. We believe there are a small but significant number of white male employees who are extraordinarily angry The negative impact of this anger on the productivity of these men and the people around them is, in the group’s view, substantial. But the problem goes far beyond backlash. We believe there are much larger numbers of white males who . . . are to one degree or another disaffected, disillusioned, disheartened and confused. This is a far more subtle problem, and yet in our view the cumulative energy diverted by the issue from accomplishing the mission of the organization is considerable. (Kormanik, 2000, p. 185)

Kormanik (2000) shows that backlash from white males is evidence of some white males’ reaction to workplace change, and that the reaction is at least partly negative. This result is consistent with a negative non-event work transition outcome (Schlossberg, 1981). The WMB data suggest that white males’ dissonance, defined as WMB, includes the perception that “the system” is unfair, the perception that promotions and other employment opportunities given to women and minorities are not tied to merit or performance, the unspoken upheaval in the white males’ traditional sense of entitlement, and the white males’ general desire for a return to the way things used to be (Kormanik, 2000).

The bottom line is that WMB promotes generalized ethnocentrism, has strong ties to political conservatism, and leads to solidarity among some white males in the effort to preserve their dominant position and sense of entitlement. WMB in the workplace becomes problematic by being divisive and diverting energies away from organizational mission accomplishment. In turn, WMB has a detrimental impact on organizational effectiveness.

The ontological assumption is that white males who exhibit backlash appear to be constructing their own reality based on their perception that women and minorities are getting an unfair advantage in employment opportunities, resulting in a loss of employment opportunities for white males (Kormanik, 2000). This is the white males' perception, yet it is often inaccurate. Although some informants in the exploratory study described inappropriate AA practices (e.g., hiring unqualified women or minorities to increase representation), triangulation of the informants' data with organizational documents refutes the white males' perception of an unfair advantage. For example, in a number of informants' organizations, the actual percentage of new hires who were white males *exceeded* the existing representation of white males in the organization. Similar data were reported around the percentage of white males receiving promotions and awards.

Chapter Three: Research Design

Chapter Overview

This research described the stalled career experience of the middle age white male. This chapter describes the research design for studying the experience of a stalled career. The first section focuses on the paradigmatic lens for conducting phenomenological research. The second section identifies the research methods. The chapter closes with a discussion of trustworthiness, delimitations, and limitations of the study.

Paradigmatic Lens

Popkewitz (1997) describes the baseline purpose of inquiry in suggesting that “the modern idea of reflection and self-scrutiny is related to a particular strategy for seeking truth” (p. 20). Inquiry represents the regulated search for truth. There is, however, more than one paradigmatic lens for conducting inquiry (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). The vantage point changes enough to change the interpretation or meaning of that which is observed through the paradigmatic lens. An openness to alternative perspectives—to be aware that they exist and to be aware of bias due to one’s own world view—would seem crucial to effective inquiry. If the process of inquiry centers on the search for truth, it is counterintuitive that truth can only be found in the prevailing paradigm. A key premise for inquiry is to identify the “new” as well as what fits in with the prevailing paradigm. The prevailing paradigm maintains that white males traditionally hold power within the social hierarchy, yet inquiry into the phenomenon of a stalled career represents a new perspective, calling into question the prevailing paradigm’s assumptions regarding white males and power.

Eisner (1997) suggests that traditionally we have “concretized our view of what it means to know. We prefer our knowledge solid and like our data hard. It makes for a firm foundation, a secure place on which to stand. [The idea that] knowledge is a process, a temporary state, is scary to many” (p. 7). Glaser and Strauss (1967) note that contemporary research focuses primarily on verification of existing theory within the

context of the prevailing paradigm. Alternatively, they recommend putting effort into generating new, grounded theory—to gain understanding rather than dismiss possibilities. The Glaser and Strauss philosophy is continued in the action learning emphasis on problem exploration (i.e., multiple truths) rather than puzzle solving (i.e., one truth) (Weinstein, 1995). Inquiry into the stalled career experience is one of problem exploration rather than puzzle solving.

The Process of Inquiry

The traditional functionalist paradigm emphasizes that explanation of the phenomenon leads to prediction and control, with assumptions based on objective reality (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). Alternatively, the researcher may take a more subjective and open approach. This debate is not an issue of sloppiness. It is a question of the value of being precise versus proving the point (Stallings, 1985). Central to the debate is the focus of the inquiry. If the intent is to look beyond the traditional paradigm for alternative answers, the byproduct will be a change in the questioning (Eisner, 1997). The researcher needs alternative questions and alternative methods suitable to an altered, if not different paradigm. For example, Thompson (1996) stipulates that if a study is not intended to be generalizable, then statistical significance is not important. The process of inquiry for this study was to describe the experience of a stalled career. *Understanding* was the desired byproduct. It was not intended to be generalizable.

What are we looking for in the process of inquiry? Is the goal to endorse an answer that fits in with the prevailing “truth,” so that the box can be checked upon completion? Is the goal to stretch or reshape the conventional world view by the identification of new alternatives? Is the goal to narrowly define, broadly interpret, or thoroughly understand? The process of inquiry in this study could just as easily have focused on statistical analysis to refute a hypothesis regarding promotion rates for middle age white males employed by the Federal government. It might also have focused on correlation among gender, race, and discrimination in Federal employment. While both of these quantitative approaches would

have been valid as a process of inquiry, neither would have addressed the purpose for this study or answered its research question.

Guba (1981) simplifies the debate between choosing a quantitative (i.e., functionalistic, rationalistic, positivist) and qualitative (i.e., naturalistic, critical) paradigm for the design of a research project by suggesting that it boils down to “fit”—choose the paradigm which provides the better fit to the nature of the inquiry. Some studies benefit from a qualitative approach because the nature of the study is not suited to quantitative measures (Morse, 1991). Qualitative research emphasizes the individual’s lived experience and is appropriate for describing the meaning an individual places on the events, processes, and structures of his or her life (Van Maanen, 1975). For most qualitative research, the intent is to facilitate understanding; to be descriptive rather than explanatory. Given this study’s purpose of describing the stalled career experience of middle age white males, a qualitative research design provided the best fit. This study sought to describe the experience (i.e., its meaning to the individual) rather than produce measurements, and thus was best approached using an emergent qualitative design.

The Researcher’s World View

Calas and Smircich (1999) suggest that the researcher explicitly identify his or her perspective or world view for exploring the particular issue under study. In examining the stalled career experience, I acknowledge that I am writing from a social constructivist perspective. As such, reality is less an objective fact and more a subjective construction by individuals and societies (Clark, 1993). The ontological implication is that reality is subjective; an interpretation of the individual’s experience based on his or her mental schemas. These mental schemas both enable and constrain the individual’s process of sensemaking (Resnick, 1991). Truth is thought to lie in the depths of the human being (Parker, 1989). Knowledge exists only in the individual’s ability to construe and reconstrue the meaning of an experience in his or her own terms (Mezirow, 1991).

If one has understanding, one knows what is real. One has found truth. The understanding of truth, however, is individually-based. I can only understand my experience as I see it. Sometimes others do not understand my experience—my point of view—because they see it from their perspective. For some white males employed in the United States workforce at the advent of the 21st Century, reality is in transition. The Puritanical work ethic suggests that by working hard and keeping my nose clean, I'll steadily progress up the career ladder. This objective "reality" has been radically changed. Traditional assumptions of career progression no longer hold true and can no longer be taken for granted. Career development has become a struggle requiring adaptation and resilience. The perception of having a stalled career is some white males' understanding of their experience—their truth.

Personal Significance of the Study

Moustakas (1994) specifically recommends that the phenomenological researcher identify the personal significance of the issue under study by employing the *epoche* process. The epoche process entails "setting aside predilections, prejudices, predispositions, and allowing things, events, and people to enter anew into consciousness, and to look and see them again, as if for the first time" (p. 85). Weick's (1989) concept of selection, or giving attention, is integral to research. In the process of inquiry, to what do we pay attention? Equally important, what do we miss? What do we hold in memory? What do we discard? Or, more actively, what information do we use—learn from—and bring to bear to determine our next enactment? The answers to these questions are shaped by the researcher's world view and can easily compromise the process of making sense of phenomena. The epoche process in phenomenological analysis attempts to mitigate the natural selection and attention due to the researcher's world view.

An epoche interview on this study promoted reflection and self-dialogue, clarified the intent underlying the research, and fostered an attitude and frame of reference to minimize the influence of preconceived thoughts, judgements, and biases. The epoche

process allowed me to bracket my own experiences in relation to the stalled career phenomenon. Analysis of the epoche interview transcript yielded highlights of the personal significance of the study of the stalled career experience (see Appendix A).

While I am proceeding in this study from a decidedly cognitivist worldview, it is important to recognize that the experience of a stalled career can be examined from a behaviorist perspective (e.g., Watson, Thorndike, Hull, Skinner). Perhaps those experiencing a stalled career are merely passive in their actional nature. Perhaps these “subjects” are merely responding to the stimuli of “rejection” from their environment, rather than opting to be interactive in seeking to transform their life space through the development of new insight. I choose the latter perspective, taking the research back to Burrell and Morgan’s (1979) radical humanist paradigm and Mezirow’s (1991) concept of transformative learning. In essence, this study examines the learning journey of white males who experience a stalled career.

In discussions with fellow researchers about the purpose for this study of the white male experience of a stalled career, some failed to see the need to study the white male population. Ironically, their viewpoint is grounded in the radical humanist paradigm that focuses on the emancipation and empowerment of the alienated by raising their consciousness. The intimation was that white males have traditionally been those with the power, so there should be no need to empower them. Curiously, the argument was, “Why bother?” This argument appears shortsighted, as illustrated by the multiple areas of significance identified in Chapter 1. Faludi (1999a) agrees that white males have traditionally been those in power, yet also calls out the white male “dilemma” created by a changing society in which white males’ power is no longer secure. Although we are living in an increasingly pluralistic world, white males still account for the majority of the U.S. civilian labor force. It seems irresponsible to *not* learn more about the work transition experiences of middle age white males, such as the non-event transition of a stalled career.

Research Methods

This section provides specific information on the research methods utilized in this study. It includes information on the phenomenological research tradition, ethical considerations and confidentiality, the research setting, the unit of analysis, the research participants, data collection, data analysis, and data representation.

Phenomenological Research Tradition

Based on Creswell's (1998) dimensions for comparing qualitative research traditions, this study used the phenomenological research tradition because of phenomenology's focus on understanding the essence of experiences about a phenomenon (i.e., a stalled career) and its desired narrative form of a description of the essence of the experience. Phenomenology asks a different question from the traditional quantitative research paradigm in that phenomenology is "pre-empirical, pre-experimental, and pre-statistical; it is experiential and qualitative" (van Kaam, 1966, p. 295). It is object-centered rather than method-centered. The phenomenological research tradition involves searching for meaning and the essence of experiences, rather than measurements and explanations (Moustakas, 1994).

"The expression '*phenomena*' signifies *that which shows itself in itself, the manifest*" (Heidegger, 1962, p. 51). An early definition of *phenomenology* describes it as "knowledge as it appears to consciousness, the science of describing what one perceives, senses, and knows in one's immediate awareness and experience" (Kockelmans, 1967, p. 24). Phenomenology is a deductive process, making inference from the general to the particular. As such, phenomenology involves extracting from individuals their understanding of the phenomenon and how they experience that phenomenon, then distilling the data down to the meaning and essence of the experience. "Phenomenology demands that its evidence must be 'intuitable,' which means, in its proper context, that what is given or accepted as evidence must be actually experienceable within the limits of and related to the human experienter" (Ihde, 1986, p. 21).

This study entailed gaining an understanding of the participants' experience with the work transition of a stalled career within the context of the contemporary workplace. The phenomenologist's focus is on description of the experience, rather than on explanation. Data is based on some form of intentional reflection on experience. "The aim is to determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience and are able to provide a comprehensive description of it. From the individual descriptions general or universal meanings are derived" (Ihde, 1986, p. 13).

Firestone (1987) notes that "reality is socially constructed through individual or collective definitions of the situation" (p. 16). This antipositivist ontological perspective is appropriate for looking at the individual and collective realities of middle age white males who perceive themselves as having a stalled career. Firestone also suggests that this ontological perspective is well suited to a qualitative phenomenological research design, where the purpose is to describe meaning rather than identify matters of fact.

Ethical Considerations and Confidentiality

Attention to ethical issues in designing qualitative research is essential (Eisner & Peshkin, 1990, Maxwell, 1996). To ensure that participants received adequate information about the study prior to their participation, each participant received an Information Sheet for Participants describing the purpose of the study, the intended use of data provided by each participant, and the requirements of study participation (see Appendix B). Participants were also informed of the value of their participation in the study. Participation in this study was voluntary. Ethical considerations suggest that provision for the confidentiality of the participants and their employers is important to consider prior to conducting fieldwork. Conforming to the guidelines of the George Washington University, written agreement to participate in the study was received from each participant prior to their participation through a Standard Informed Consent Form regarding confidentiality and other rights of human participants (see Appendix C). Consistent with guidance from the Human Subjects Review Committee this study used a pseudonym for each study participant.

The relationship between the researcher and the participants is a primary ethical issue. I am a white male in the same age bracket as the participants. Establishing a relationship with the participants as an extension of each participant's social support system was a central part of the research process. At the same time, ethical considerations suggest I could not have been duplicitous in the relationship. Seidman (1991) helps strike a balance by offering that the rapport between the researcher and the participant should be controlled. Patton (1990) recommends empathic neutrality. As the researcher, I was attentive to the relationship I developed with the research participants. I also recognized that each participant was unique.

Research Setting

The research setting was the contemporary U.S. Government workplace. Authors identify several conditions in the contemporary work environment which are forcing individuals into work transitions (Engels, 1995; Jaffe & Scott, 1998; Yang, 1996). These conditions include a high rate of organizational change, downsizing, flatter organizational structures, reduction in middle management positions, and increased competition for fewer management positions. Most Federal Government agencies are marked by all of these conditions, and traditional organizational career paths have likely been shortened or otherwise revised. Also, Federal employees have traditionally passed up the higher salaries of private industry for the security of Government employment. This idea of job security in Government employment is no longer assured, given the changing contemporary workplace environment in general and the effort to "reinvent" the Federal Government in particular. Study participants came from a variety of Federal agencies, maximizing the variation in the research setting.

Unit of Analysis

Truth in the Modern Age is thought to lie in the depths of the human being (Parker, 1989). The phenomenology tradition emphasizes describing the lived experience of the individual and "accessing the meaning of human phenomena as expressed through the

individual” (Rudestam & Newton, 1992, p. 34). The unit of analysis for this study, therefore, was the individual.

Research Participants

The choice of participants for qualitative studies should be driven by the conceptual question rather than a concern for representativeness (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Given the philosophical assumption that phenomenology involves extracting the meaning from individuals to understand how they experience a phenomenon, there exists ontological underpinnings in the phenomenology approach. Reality is subjective and at the same time multiple, as experienced and seen by the study participants (Creswell, 1998). This world view had implications for the choice of study participants. Participants should be purposefully chosen from among those individuals who can most thoroughly describe the experience and can answer the research question (Maxwell, 1996). Participants for this study were purposefully chosen, thereby ensuring the information-richness of the data. As white-collar workers are disproportionately experiencing involuntary work transitions (Cameron, Freeman, & Mishra, 1991), the participants held white-collar occupations within Federal agencies. Study participants came from a variety of technical and administrative occupations.

Patton (1990) recommends a criterion-based approach to purposefully choosing study participants. The five criteria for selecting participants for this study were: 1) Federal employment, 2) 40–60 years of age, 3) white, 4) male, and 5) those who perceive themselves as having experience with a stalled career. The Federal civilian employee was an ideal population for this study because the changing Federal work environment has created havoc in many employees’ lives and coerced many civil servants into involuntary work transitions (Engels, 1995). The age of 40-60 was chosen based on adult development literature showing this as the midlife or middle age bracket (Chiriboga, 1989; Erikson, 1950; Levinson, 1978; Neugarten, 1972). Early in the process, time-in-grade (i.e., length of time at a certain level within the Federal employment structure) was also identified as an objective

criterion for purposefully choosing participants. While this data was collected during the interviews, time-in-grade was eliminated as a criterion because a white male may be in grade longer than expected without necessarily having the experience of a stalled career.

The process of identifying candidates who met the criteria started formally in October 1999, after approval of the proposal for this study. The following sections highlight some of the issues associated with the process of identifying and enlisting study participants. These process issues contributed to understanding the context of the stalled career experience.

Identifying candidates and securing participation. Three primary strategies were used to identify individuals who met the criteria for study participants. The first strategy involved approximately 75 face-to-face or telephone communications with internal contacts associated with 51 consulting or training projects inside Federal agencies (e.g., EEO and AA program officers, diversity program managers, HR practitioners). A common sentiment expressed by the majority of these contacts was, “You could find enough guys to be able to do your whole study here at this agency!” More than a dozen of these contacts said they could identify at least one white male experiencing a stalled career. The second strategy involved placing a classified advertisement in *The Federal Times*, an independent weekly periodical with a circulation of over 41,000 targeted to the Federal employee. The periodical initially refused the advertisement with the rationale that the topic was “inflammatory.” After two appeals stressing the legitimacy of the study, the periodical’s management allowed insertion of the ad in two issues. The third strategy of informal face-to-face contacts involved more than two dozen conversations with Federally-employed white males who self-identified as experiencing a stalled career. These conversations occurred as a result of formal programs (e.g., adjunct faculty work, conducting training seminars, serving as a conference panelist), informal social contacts (e.g., dinner gatherings, holiday parties), and incidental interactions (e.g., seatmate on an airplane, health club locker room).

The process of identifying candidates who met the criteria was remarkably easy. Securing their participation in the study, however, was extremely difficult. The strategy of using internal contacts yielded only one candidate, “Clyde.” The classified advertisement yielded two candidates, only one of whom fully met the sample criteria and subsequently participated in the interview process. The face-to-face interactions produced three other participants—one through a locker room conversation, one through a dinner conversation, and one initiated by a recommendation from the participant’s wife. The final participant came through a “snowball sampling” referral from another study participant.

When we met face-to-face for the first interview, Clyde started describing his frustration over his stalled career. He said that he had been in, and to some extent was still going through, a stalled career transition. We scheduled the second interview, but he subsequently cancelled and asked to drop out of the study. He was evasive as to his reasons, but eventually he “had to confess” that he was withdrawing because “confronting” his stalled career made him “uncomfortable.”

Networking contacts indicating interest but yielding no participants. Despite being unfruitful, two of the face-to-face networking contacts are worth recounting. The first involved “Ralph” who had referred me to potential candidate “Phil.” Both were middle age white males working within the same Government agency. In keeping with the policy of guarding confidentiality, while meeting with Ralph I did not mention the conversation I had had with Phil regarding Phil’s participation in this study. Ralph said he had spoken with Phil and shared that Phil would probably not be participating in the study because Phil was not interested in the “catharsis” I had offered as a benefit for his participation. Ralph said that, given Phil’s occupation and personality, Phil would be scared by the idea of catharsis and would more likely be persuaded by an offer of career guidance. I called Phil to discuss these ideas and to try to persuade him to participate. I also pointed out to him that my interaction with Ralph provided an example of the way in which I guard participants’ confidentiality.

Phil decided that he could not participate in the study due to his concerns over confidentiality, saying, “I don’t think you could provide it.” He also expressed concern that I was going to “drill” him into revealing his “innermost thoughts” during the three interviews and that he did not want to be “the first body run over because I told my story.” At the same time he continued to reiterate the importance of studying the stalled career. Because Phil said that he felt this study was worthwhile, I asked him if there were any other guys he would refer as potential participants. Interestingly, he said I should go back to my initial contact, Ralph. Phil said he did not want to be part of the “gamesmanship,” alluding to conversations that he had had with Ralph. Phil’s statements suggested two things. First, Ralph was experiencing a stalled career himself. Second, Phil’s concerns about confidentiality were exacerbated by his conversations about his own stalled career with his colleague Ralph (i.e., Ralph violated Phil’s confidentiality) and by the possibility that Ralph and I would have had conversations about Phil.

A second networking example worth recounting started through a chance encounter with “Peter” when we were seatmates on an airplane flight in June 2000. Noticing I was reading a textbook prompted him to ask about my topic of study. I told him about the stalled career phenomenon and the difficulty I was having finding participants. He became very animated, explaining that he worked for a Federal agency and was on his way to a training conference with fellow employees from across the country. While he did not identify himself as experiencing a stalled career, he reported that this “issue” was a “constant topic of hallway discussion at every one of these conferences.” I encouraged him to contact me if he met anyone that might be willing to be a participant and he assured me that he would “talk it up.”

Peter sent two emails while he was still at the conference. One said that he had, “talked to several white males with stories. They asked if you had a questionnaire or something similar for questions you were asking . . . Let me know and I’ll forward to them.” The second email reported that, “I’m sure you’ll find that the people I’ve spoke

with will be able to tell you interesting stories.” I sent Peter an abbreviated interview protocol. In turn, I planned to follow up and attempt to get survey respondents as full participants in this study. I emailed Peter three months later, having received no responses. Peter replied, “I have asked and gave out another half dozen surveys, you should be getting them . . . let me know.” Two weeks later he sent the email, “Let me know if you are getting any responses. Also I’d be interested in seeing some of them . . . or the final paper.” I wrote back that I had received one response. A month later he inquired, “Have you received any more surveys? I have passed several out.” Four months after our initial meeting, he sent a last email asking, “Are you familiar with the FEORP (Federal Equal Opportunity Affirmative Action Plan) each agency has to have one for the areas that are targeted for minority hiring.” Peter’s level of interest over the four months in 2000 was intriguing, especially if he were, in fact, *not* experiencing a stalled career. An even more powerful testament to his sustained level of interest was his follow up emails four years later, in June 2004, asking about this study. Having retired, he now felt comfortable with becoming a participant in the study and felt certain he could secure participation of several fellow retirees.

Data Collection

This study used an exploratory phenomenological approach with descriptive, semi-structured questions to allow for data collection. Data collection used Seidman’s (1991) in-depth, three interview protocol. The first interview in the series focused on establishing rapport and a relationship with the participant. The second interview generated specific information on the participant’s life transitions experience in general, and the stalled career experience in particular. The third interview focused on describing the meaning underlying the participant’s stalled career experience. Each participant completed the series of three interviews, with each interview session lasting approximately 90 minutes. The data collection process began formally in June 2000, with the completion of the first participant’s interview series.

Phenomenology emphasizes forming an empathic alliance with the participants (Seidman, 1991). Consequently, the interview protocol included some opening questions to establish a rapport with each participant so that he was comfortable with providing sensitive information in an open and honest manner. The second and third interview sessions included participants' verification of the transcribed data. During the second and third sessions, participants were asked for additional information on their responses from the earlier sessions and to define and clarify meaning underlying their earlier statements.

The interview protocol for this study evolved from a 1998 pilot study on adult development, focusing on awareness development as a life transition (Kormanik, 1999). The pilot study used an unstructured questioning approach, generating a great deal of non-germane data and delaying discussion of the focal issues. Although Seidman (1991) recommends keeping the interview unstructured and allowing the participant to steer the discussion, he acknowledges that semi-structured questions may be used to help focus the participant's responses and in the interests of time. Revisions to the pilot study interview protocol included adding semi-structured questions to keep the participant focused on the specific research topic (see Appendix D). The revised interview protocol also provided participants with an explanation of Schlossberg, Waters, and Goodman's (1995) 4S framework (i.e., situation, support, self, strategies) for analyzing the coping assets and liabilities of adults in transition (see Figure 3). Structure came from the 4 Ss, but the questions remained open-ended to generate data. After completing the series of interviews with the first participant, the protocol was edited to ensure that time was managed effectively during the process and that sufficient data was obtained (see Appendix E). Schlossberg's (1993) *Transitions Coping Guide* is a quantitative instrument designed as a self-assessment of an individual's transition. Because a combined qualitative and quantitative research design yields a deeper understanding of the phenomenon (Creswell, 1994), use of the instrument in the second of the three-interview cycle provided quantitative data on the 4 Ss.

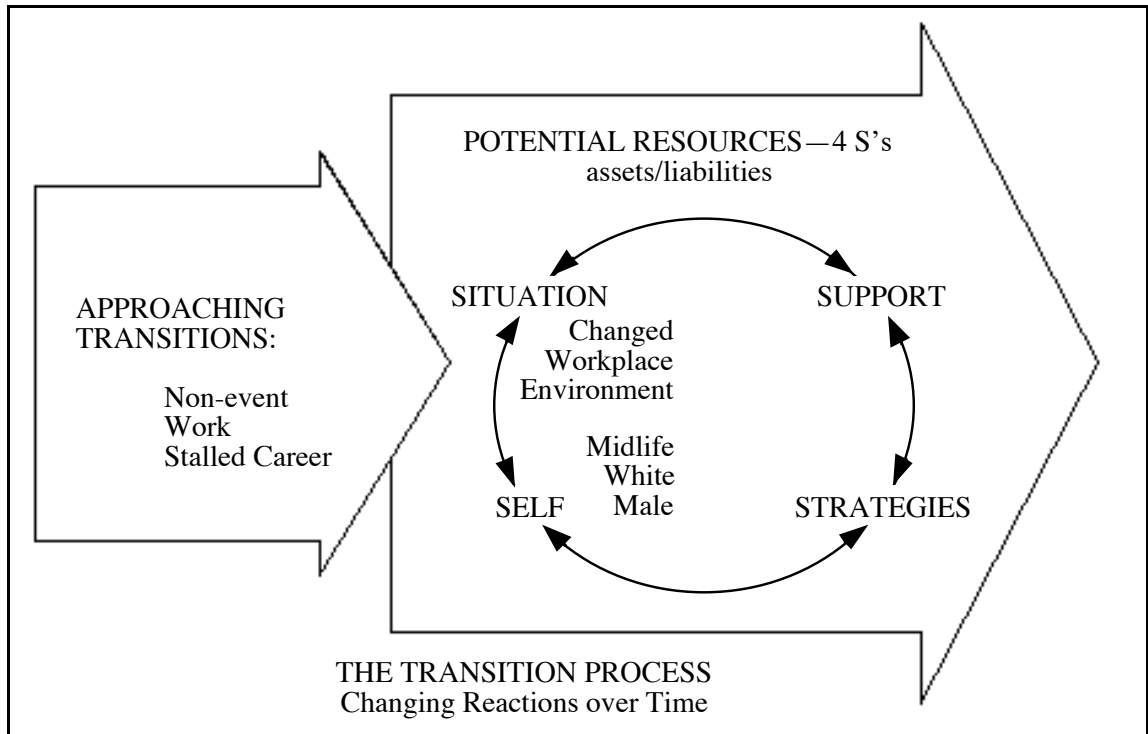


Figure 3. Model for analyzing the non-event work transition of a stalled career. Adapted from Schlossberg, Waters, and Goodman (1995, p. 27).

The phenomenology tradition emphasizes exploring phenomena in their natural environment (Creswell, 1994; Maxwell, 1996). In line with this approach, the interviews were conducted at a location of the participants' choosing. Each interview was audio-taped and conversations were transcribed verbatim. Sanders (1982) notes that the transcribed narratives provide the most accurate data for analysis in a phenomenological study. I kept a set of written notes on the participant's nonverbal responses during the interview process and these notes were included in the data set, as appropriate. I set up a folder for each participant containing hard copies of the interview transcriptions and my notes. I also set up a soft file of the transcripts and the subsequent reductions of the data.

Seidman (1991) identifies two criteria for determining how many participants are required for a study of this type. The first criterion is sufficiency and requires "a sufficient number to reflect the range of participants . . . that make up the population so that others

outside the sample might have a chance to connect to the experiences of those in it” (p. 45). The second criterion is saturation of information that indicates a “point in a study at which the interviewer begins to hear the same information reported. He or she is no longer learning anything new” (p. 45). Creswell (1998) arbitrarily recommends ten subjects for obtaining the requisite subjective and multiple realities needed for saturation in a qualitative study. Sanders (1982) recommends using in-depth probing with a minimal number of subjects for a study in the phenomenological tradition, cautioning that too many participants may make the study overwhelming and unproductive. The Seidman (1991) three-interview data collection method provided this in-depth probing. In the phenomenological tradition, one informed subject is enough to develop the textural-structural description of the essence of the experience (Husserl, 1931; Patton, 1990). Dissertations using phenomenological methods to describe a transition experience use between one and five subjects (see Davies, 2003; Gill, 1999; Howard, 2004; Lander, 2000; Morey, 2001; White, 2002).

Ultimately, consultation with my dissertation committee about the requisite number of participants and the difficulty in securing participants resulted in the determination of data sufficiency. Given the level of consistency evidenced in the transcripts from the first three participants, a level of saturation in the data had been reached. We decided to stop data collection after I completed the series of interviews with the fifth participant in June 2001.

Data Analysis

As reflected by the assumptions for qualitative studies, I was the primary instrument for data collection and analysis. The data analysis process occurred simultaneously with data collection, interpretation, and writing of the narrative (Creswell, 1994; Maxwell, 1996). Audiotapes of the interviews of each of the five participants were transcribed verbatim. Approximately 560 transcribed pages provided the raw data for analysis. Additional data came from the 39 pages of researcher journal and the 22-page transcript of the epoche interview with the researcher. Without having personally experienced a stalled career,

analysis of the epoche interview transcript yielded highlights of the personal significance of the study of the stalled career experience (see Appendix A). The epoche interview helped in bracketing, the process of identifying and suspending researcher bias as much as possible.

Two phases of analysis promoted a full description and the clearest understanding of the stalled career phenomenon. First, the description of the essence of the stalled career experience resulted from data analysis using the phenomenological research tradition. The product of phenomenological analysis is a description of the essential structure of the experience being investigated (Polkinghorne, 1989). Second, a clearer understanding of what is happening to those experiencing a stalled career resulted from thematic analysis using Boyatzis' (1998) three-step, theory-driven approach for transforming qualitative data. The theory driving the analysis was Schlossberg, Waters, and Goodman's (1995) 4S framework for analyzing adults in transition.

Phenomenological analysis. Although the experience of each individual is unique, phenomenological analysis reveals those elements of the experience that are invariant, essential, and transcend the specific individual experiences on which they are based. After completing the epoche interview, phenomenological researchers:

. . . describe in detail and fully the whole account of an issue, problem, situation, or experience, using qualities and properties from specific contexts or perspectives, so that the events or experiences take on vivid and essential meanings, a clear portrait of what is. We then reflect on these textural portraits to arrive at their essences, in terms of underlying conditions, precipitating factors, and structural determinants. We combine the textural and structural to arrive at the essences of an experience. (Moustakas, 1994, p.60)

van Kaam (1966), one of the first to operationalize empirical phenomenological research into "the phenomena of behavior as they manifest themselves in their perceived immediacy" (p. 15), brings rigor through a seven-step analysis process. This study followed Moustakas' (1994) modification of van Kaam. First, I conducted horizontalization by considering each statement in each participant's interview transcripts with respect to its relevance to the experience of a stalled career. Second, all relevant statements (i.e., horizons) were reduced or eliminated to determine the invariant constituents of the stalled career

experience for each participant. Third, I clustered the related invariant constituents of the stalled career experience into the core themes of the experience. Fourth, I conducted a final validation of the invariant constituents and core themes of the experience through review and comparison with the original transcripts. Fifth, for each participant, I constructed the themes into an individual textural description of the experience (i.e., the *noema*, that which was experienced) for each participant. Sixth, I used the phenomenological technique of imaginative variation to construct a structural description of the experience for each participant (i.e., the *noesis*, how the experience was experienced). Seventh, for each participant, I used the textural and structural descriptions to construct a composite textural-structural description of the meaning of the stalled career experience (i.e., the essence). After completion of the process with the complete transcript of each research participant, I developed a composite description of the meanings and essences of the stalled career experience from the individual textural-structural descriptions.

Field and Morse (1985) suggest that in the phenomenology tradition, no preconceived notions, expectations, or frameworks guide researchers as they analyze data. The inductive approach to qualitative research entails developing general patterns through analysis of data (Rudestam & Newton, 1992). This *ex post facto* approach required that I not impose structure or define relationships prior to collecting data or making observations. “Phenomenology attempts to get beneath how people describe their experience to the structures that underlie consciousness” (p. 33). This required me to reduce, reconstruct, then analyze the data. The primary level of inquiry was to be true to, respect, and capture the details of each participant’s transition experience.

“Disinterested” colleagues performed coding and data interpretation verification for structural corroboration and consensual validation (Eisner, 1991) of what could be equated to the internal “trustworthiness” of the study (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). Two colleagues familiar with the stalled career concept and the transition theory 4S conceptual framework coded one 40-page interview transcript. Comparison of the three sets of coded

data showed an agreement rate of 95% between me and at least one colleague, and an agreement rate of 75% with both colleagues.

Member checks, a verification procedure of showing the analysis to the participants and giving them an opportunity to validate the data and researcher interpretation, remedied the gap in the coding rate. Each participant saw the textural-structural description of his experience and was asked, “Does this summarize your stalled career experience? Is this the essence of your stalled career experience?” Each participant saw the composite description of all the participants’ stalled career experience and was asked, “Do you recognize your experience in this description?” The participants understood that their suggested edits and additional comments were welcome. The few requested modifications involved changing names or organizations, even though names and organizations had already been camouflaged during transcription. This reiterated participants’ concern over confidentiality.

The relatively short amount of time between the three interviews with each participant did not appear affect the participants’ sense of their stalled career. Consistent with the change inherent to transitions theory, however, the four years between the interviews and the member checks of the descriptions showed an evolution in some participants’ perspective of their stalled career. As Martin states:

I believe that you captured my feelings at the time and I am not sure that things have changed in this work place but really have not looked. Maybe that is a result of past experiences! If you interviewed me today, I am not positive that I would have responded in exactly the same way.

Analysis using Schlossberg’s transitions theory. After developing the description of the essence of the stalled career, I used transitions theory as the way to understand what is happening to those experiencing a stalled career. This phase of the qualitative analysis was theory-driven, using Schlossberg, Waters, and Goodman’s (1995) conceptual framework for analyzing adults in transition. The analysis used Boyatzis’ (1998) three-step, theory-driven approach for transforming qualitative data through thematic analysis. First, Schlossberg, Waters, and Goodman’s (1995) 4S framework provided the primary,

“sociologically constructed” codes (Strauss, 1987). Second, open coding within the primary codes provided greater refinement of the data. Third, disinterested colleagues performed coding and data interpretation verification for structural corroboration and consensual validation (Eisner, 1991). I then reviewed the analysis in light of the 4S transitions framework (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995) to identify consistencies, inconsistencies, and new possibilities.

Throughout the data collection and analysis processes, my intention was to remain open to inquiry. This openness yielded three observations that contributed to understanding the context of the stalled career experience. First, in a number of informal discussions and peer debriefs, both professional and social acquaintances referred to the study participants as “losers.” For example, when I told a colleague that I was waiting for a participant to arrive at my office for one of the interviews, the colleague commented, “Oh, waiting for one of your *losers* to show up.” Second, in another, non-work instance, a friend inquired, “Why would a white male experiencing a transition want to be seen as a *loser*?” His intimation was that by meeting the selection criteria and then participating in this study, a white male was labeling himself as a loser. Third, despite these two contrary perceptions, most white males had an immediate relation to the stalled career concept and preliminary description during the discernment of prospective participants, through word-of-mouth contacts, and throughout the data collection and analysis processes.

Data Representation

Seideman (1991) writes of developing comprehensive portraits of each participant based on the interview transcripts. A lengthy portrait, however, is not in keeping with the phenomenological research tradition (Moustakas, 1994). Rather than thick, rich description, the objective for the phenomenologist is to distill the data down into the essence of the experience. The resulting narrative provides a composite description of the meaning and essence of the stalled career drawn from the participants’ individual textural-structural

descriptions. The explication of the understanding of the stalled career experience came from the data analysis using transitions theory.

Trustworthiness

Moustakas (1994) suggests that “scientific investigation is valid when the knowledge sought is arrived at through descriptions that make possible an understanding of the meanings and essences of experience” (p. 84). For the qualitative, naturalistic paradigm, such as that used in this study, Guba (1981) reframes the concept of validity to the broader issue of trustworthiness. Guba suggests four aspects of trustworthiness: truth value, applicability, consistency, and neutrality. The qualitative rhetoric for the four aspects of trustworthiness is *credibility* (i.e., measures what it is supposed to), *transferability* (i.e., working hypotheses that can be transferred from one context to another), *dependability* (i.e., trackable variance), and *confirmability* (i.e., free from researcher bias).

Based on Guba’s (1981) recommendations for maximizing credibility, this study included prolonged engagement with the participants (e.g., initial contact, three interviews, follow-up contacts), peer debriefing, and triangulation (i.e., comparison of data from multiple sources including interview transcripts, interviewer notes, and researcher field journal). Member checks were essential to maximizing credibility. Each participant was given the opportunity to review and validate his individual interview transcripts. Each participant also had the opportunity to review and comment on the individual textural-structural description of the meaning of his stalled career experience, and the composite textural-structural description. Purposive sampling and collection of descriptive data maximized transferability. Dependability occurred through the use of overlap methods (i.e., inherent in participant identification and selection), stepwise replication, and a dependability (i.e., process) audit (e.g., third party examination of the methods, verification of procedures). Saturation in the data also enhanced dependability in the findings. Triangulation, researcher reflexivity (e.g., use of a journal to capture introspection), and a confirmability (i.e., product) audit (i.e., verify data exists to support the interpretation) achieved confirmability.

Triangulation of the textural-structural descriptions with the examples surfaced in the data collection process further verified the trustworthiness of the conclusions about the stalled career experience.

Delimitations

Delimitations provide boundaries that address how the study was narrowed in scope (Creswell, 1994). “Boundaries are necessary in a study to provide direction for the terms used, for the scope of the study, and for the potential audience” (p. 105). Delimitations included:

1. This was a descriptive study, not an explanatory study.
2. This study confined itself to understanding the stalled career work transition experience of the middle age (i.e., 40-60 year old) white male employed in Federal service.
3. This study focused on the individual as the unit of analysis. No attempt was made to aggregate the data to other levels of analysis, such as an analysis of any of the site agencies, an overview of Federal employment, or an analysis of all white males.
4. This study focused on support systems as they are used to navigate a stalled career work transition. There was no intent to develop a comprehensive description of support systems.
5. Although my interaction with the participants during the research process may have been transformative and “therapeutic” to some extent, this study made no attempt to psychoanalyze the participants or their responses.

Limitations

Limitations identify potential weaknesses of the study (Creswell, 1994). This was a qualitative study about understanding the stalled career work transition experience of the middle age white male employed in Federal service. As stated in the Chapter 1 assumptions, in qualitative studies “the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis. Data are mediated through this human instrument, rather than through inventories,

questionnaires, or machines” (Merriam, 1988, p. 19-20). As such, there are limitations to this study, including:

1. The potential that I may have only collected data that was consistent with my expectations.
2. Although the interview protocol was semi-structured, with open-ended questions, the data collected from the participants may have been limited by the questions asked.
3. I may have made conclusions from the data that fit with my preconceptions. The data may be subject to other interpretations.
4. Purposive sampling has direct impact on the findings for this study. This study is not generalizable to all males, nor is it generalizable to all white males, nor is it generalizable to white males in Federal employment.