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

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“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.

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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.

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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).

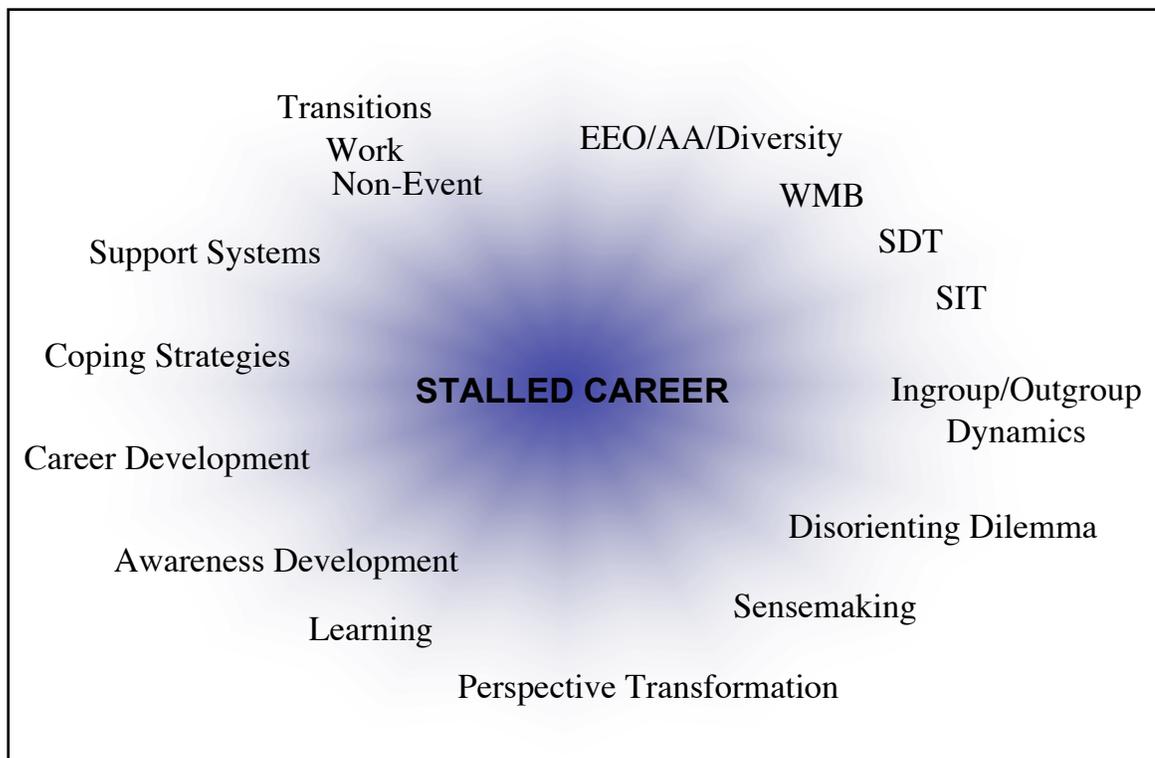


Figure 1. Phenomenology of a stalled career.

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).

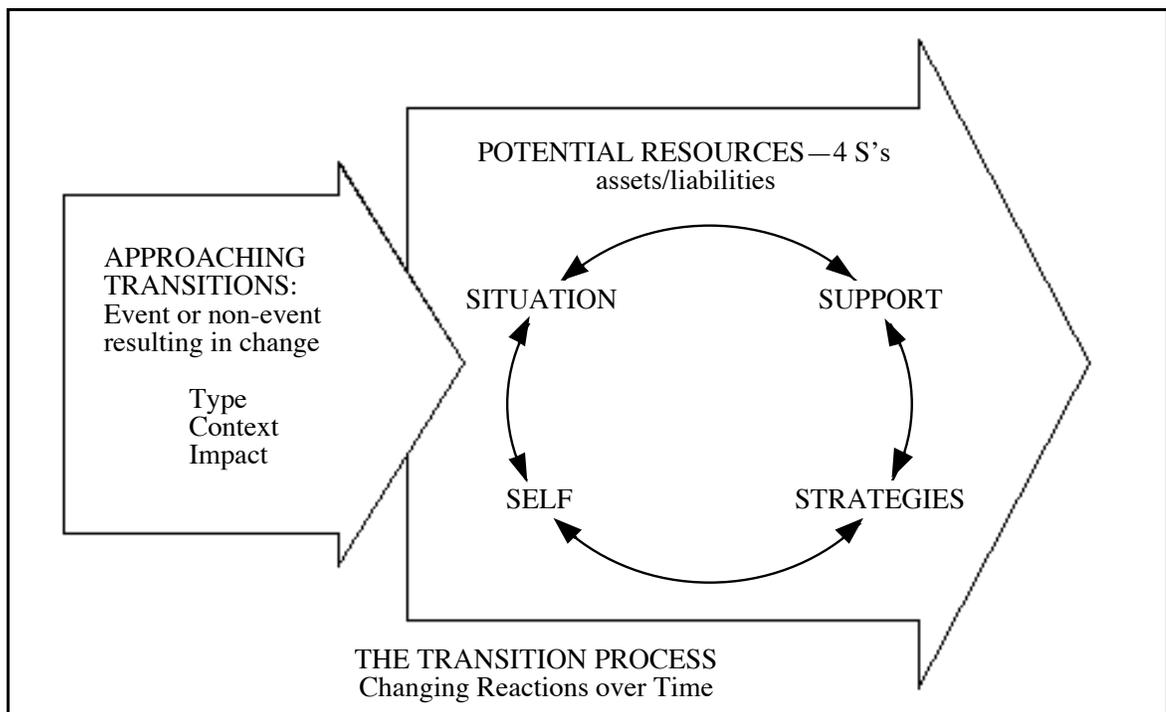


Figure 2. Model for analyzing the individual in transition (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995, p. 27).

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.

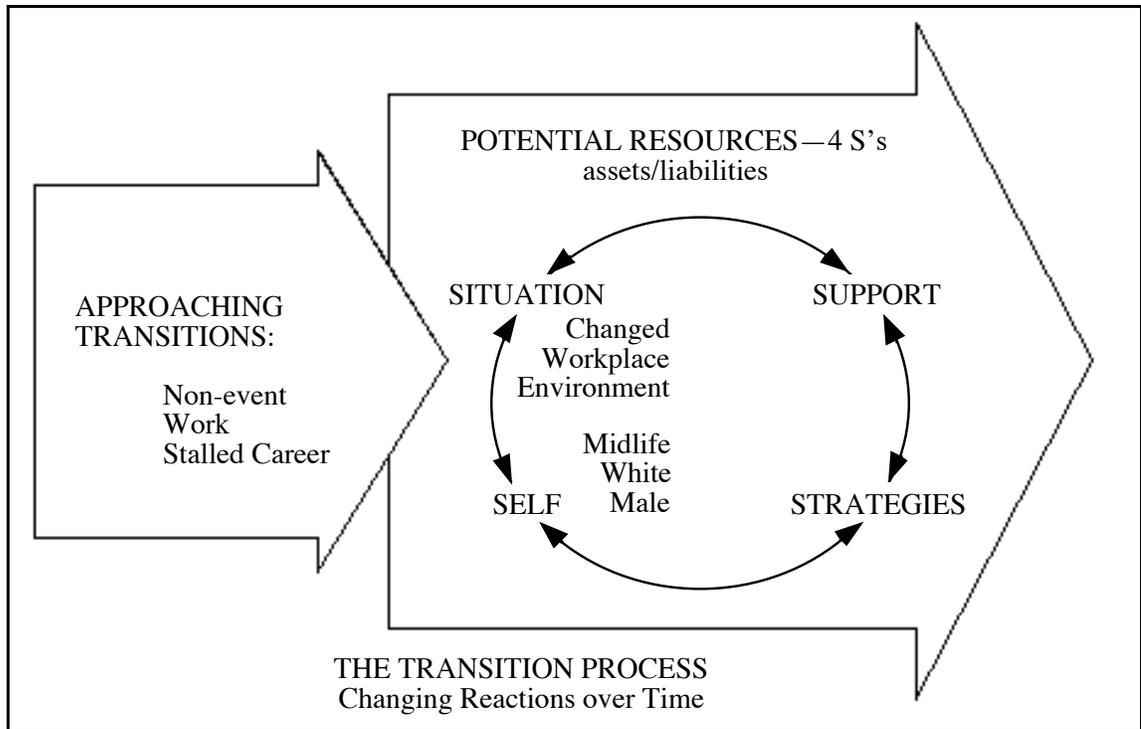


Figure 3. Model for analyzing the non-event work transition of a stalled career. Adapted from Schlossberg, Waters, and Goodman (1995, p. 27).

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.

Chapter Four: Findings

Chapter Overview

This chapter provides the findings of the study in two sections. Each contributes to a clearer understanding of the stalled career phenomenon. The first section provides the description of the stalled career experience produced using Moustakas' (1994) method for phenomenological analysis. The second section provides the analysis of the non-event work transition of a stalled career using Schlossberg, Waters, and Goodman's (1995) conceptual framework for analyzing adults in transition.

Findings from the Phenomenological Analysis

Moustakas (1994) suggests that phenomenological findings are best presented by providing examples from each step of the data analysis, including horizontalization, reduction and elimination into invariant constituents, clustering into core themes, development of textural description, development of structural description, and synthesis into the final textural-structural description of the essence of the experience. These examples demonstrate the process of distilling the raw data from the interviews with all the participants into the composite textural-structural description of the experience of a stalled career.

As much as possible, this output from each step of the phenomenological analysis uses the words of the participants, written in the first person to reflect the voice of the individual experiencing the phenomenon. At the same time, however, rather than speaking in first person, sometimes the participants spoke in third person (e.g., "It's not because of your lack of knowledge" or, "Then a factor that you don't have comes in" or, "You think about this then you go on your merry way."). Also, the participants often used the term "guys" when referring to other white males. Similarly, participants used "this" or "this situation" to refer to the stalled career experience, rather than using the full descriptor. Consequently, to give full voice to those experiencing the stalled career, these terms continue throughout the structural, textural, and structural-textural descriptions.

Individual Horizontalization

The first step in the phenomenological analysis, horizontalization, involved considering each statement in each participant's interview transcripts with respect to its relevance to the experience of a stalled career. Each horizontal statement has equal value in illustrating the totality of the stalled career experience. Each statement also contributes to the understanding of the nature of the stalled career experience.

The horizontalization process started the reduction of the full transcript from the three interviews with each participant to relevant statements about the stalled career experience. For example, the process reduced Mel's 112-page transcript to 37 pages, yielding 119 horizontal statements, of which 43 came from his first interview. The following excerpts illustrate 30 horizons of the stalled career experience, through a set of 10 samples from each of the three interviews, with each set coming from a different participant.

Horizontal Excerpts: Mel, Interview #1.

1. And then when she talked about or didn't think my attitude was good I said, "My attitude is based somewhat on what I think—how I'm getting rewarded and what I see in my future based on my input. You have no complaints about me. My supervisor gave me an outstanding rating and, you know, it's carrot and stick. I'm doing my part and you haven't seen fit to back me. So why should I have a good attitude?" Well she could understand where I was coming from. "But you know, not everybody gets everything they want." That was her kinda [reply]. "And if you can't have everything you want in life, sometimes people have to be satisfied and know that's kind of it. Be happy about it."
2. I was doing what was expected of me and I wasn't . . . I'm not gonna bust my chops when I knew that the rewards that you think you should get are not coming.

3. Like most places, we have those people that don't do their work, but manage to get ahead and complain Some people are successful at that. Especially if they have some reason that the agency doesn't want to deal with, like minorities or women. Some of my coworkers in the past have yelled and screamed and they were gonna complain and file EEO suits because they weren't moving ahead. And most of 'em have been successful. Some of them shouldn't have gotten to be at the grades they are, based on their responsibilities and based on their work product, but, because in my mind, they're black women, they get away with a lot more than I could. Because I think if I pulled some of that stuff, they could fire me. I'd be out on the street.
4. My perception there—the white males in this agency are the ones that are being kind of like, “You're not going anywhere.”
5. When you know what you're putting in and what your capabilities are and you match them up with what someone else's done or not done and all the negative things that she's provided for the agency versus the positive things that I have done. You say, “Hey, there's no justice.” It's like, it does hurt. And you say, then, “Hey, why do I bother?” Then you wind up saying, “I don't really care anymore. And just as long as I show up and get my salary, I'm not going to go out of my way.” So your incentive to excel and maybe make them feel that you are indispensable and they don't want you to go and will do what they can to keep you—it goes out the window.
6. I don't see the need to talk to a black male coworker or a black female coworker about why they think they should get this job when in my mind there may be others that, you know, what have they done to earn it? Just because they're who they are? That'd be nice. I'd like to get something just because of who I am—not whether I know what I'm doing.

7. They'll bring it up, because some of the minorities there think the white people are getting everything and they're getting nothing out of it. In fact, we almost had an incident where Derrick, who was one of the printing assistants out working for Alex, was promised an office because he was working in a cubicle. And then they redid the space and they made more offices. And usually they do it by grade—partially grade, partially seniority. And Derrick [a white male] had the grade and had the seniority, but some black woman thought that she was supposed to get the office. So there was a big tussle, and they were gonna file a complaint if he got the office, and not this other woman. . . . So Derrick said he didn't want any part of the tussle so he kinda stayed where he was until they managed to find an office later on. But they would have gone in and complained that this white man got the office and he shouldn't have gotten it.
8. [I've talked to other guys.] To Robert. To Steve. To my peers—people who are about my age, in the same boat. . . . And we all kind of pretty much feel the same way because we're working in this group with these people.
9. Sometimes [guys], we'll talk in someone's office, when we hear something. Like when Robert came in and said, "Guess what?" And I said, "What?" And he said, "I understand Jane's going to go in and talk to Tina about getting her 13." And George and I just kinda like, "Excuse me!?! Are you, you know, joking?" "No." And we'll talk about it walking to lunch out of the building. If someone wants to close the door and talk about things. But, it'd be kinda foolish to stand there right in the middle of the office and then have everybody hear you. No. That wouldn't work. That would not be PC.
10. [Regarding being PC in this agency], I think it's fairly important not to say anything to offend somebody.

Horizontal Excerpts: George, Interview #2.

1. They utilized [affirmative action] as a tool to get ahead. That's part of their—their, in essence, promotion scheme. It's unwritten, but the—the first thing that happens when—when you bring up any accusations or charges against a black male or a black female was immediately, “You're being racist.”
2. They fired four people from the [Baltimore] police department. Immediately the charges are that the city council wants the—the—Ed Morse, the white Chief of Police in there, to explain *why* he fired two blacks. It was two blacks and two whites, from what I—what I could understand. And it's kind of like, if they're going to call him in, call him in and say, “Why did you fire these four people?” Not, “Why did you fire these two blacks?” Because if you were having a successful time, weren't all four of these? But the—but they—but what hits the press is two blacks are being discriminated against. And you see it everyday in society but it—it's not politically correct to—to raise up your hand and say, “Wait a minute. Weren't four people fired?”
3. I had a black XO in that same company . . . that basically didn't get along with the blacks. And pointblank he said, “It's this way. There's no preferential treatment for blacks, whites, or anybody. I expect you to work, period!” And so he was perceived as—as being an ‘Oreo.’ . . . That he's not protecting his own kind; that he's a traitor to the race. . . . Not a good perception from that—that part of the community. Now the other side of the community has got like, “Hey, he's being fair.” And so it's not going to hinder him from the other side of the community. The other community being the other races that the—the whites and everyone else. It's a matter of for his own people he was a traitor.

4. I'm in the wrong age for being a white male Time and place, yeah.
Fifty years ago I don't think it would have happened. Was there injustices then? Yes. There's always injustices. There's always problems with the system.
5. I don't *think* [I'm racist]. I—I—I don't—socialize as much with blacks as whites, but I don't socialize with hardly anybody. I'm—I'm more *antisocial* than I would be racist.
6. The situation of not being able to get ahead was totally undesirable . . . unmanageable.
7. You have the benefit of knowing what's going to happen but you don't have the benefit of being able to utilize that [knowledge] to change the outcome.
8. I perceive that when I got away from it and got out into business that merit would be more noteworthy simply because they're out there to make money and that's the bottom line. Now they'll play socialization and—and some of these other games too, to an extent, but they're not going to let it get in the way of the bottom line. They still have got to make money, whereas with the military they don't have to make anything.
9. [Family] was more important to me and—and so consequently I was able to get my focus on what was important to me in spite of the fact that my wife was kind of like, "Well your career is important." And I was kind of like, "A career in the [agency] is 20-30 years. I intend to be married to you until the day I die."
10. I would have anticipated that [minority and women co-workers] would be perceiving [my stalled career] as—as a bias more so because I did—did feel it more so, whereas the white male would be more able to identify with it.

Horizontal Excerpts: Martin, Interview #3.

1. If I compete against a women and she is better qualified she'll get it. I think ten or fifteen years ago that was not necessarily a given. I think now there's more of a push just to increase the numbers, whatever it takes, for minorities and women—just to get those numbers up, from a higher level. And maybe it's to cover for past transgressions that they weren't given an equal opportunity in the past.
2. I don't think it has [changed my behavior]. I'm trying to finish up what I've got to do in this job and move on, because I think it . . . Like I say, doing something stupid or just getting carried away with this probably isn't going to help the people that work for me . . . I don't want to do something that's going to jeopardize that and get people all ticked off at me and ultimately impact on them. So I don't think it's done a whole lot to change me. I hope it hasn't.
3. I am not basically a violent person, you know. I would hope that I would never resort to that . . . I've never seen something like that as a way to, in this environment, to get anything done. In fact, if anything it probably reduces your credibility and people just say well you know Martin Beecham is a nut case you know he went after somebody or started a fight or brought a gun to work or whatever. I don't think that . . . I hope I'm too logical to slip into that type of mentality. But it's out there. And there are some people around here that I think probably could go that way. I hope not to the point of shootin' somebody. But I've seen a few people very violent.
4. I just feel that if it looks as though this program is going to go forward and there'll be money to pay for it, why move me? I just feel that it was a negative of what they're trying to do. It's reverse discrimination I think in this case, moving me out in the name of diversity rather than just letting it

and whatever happens with me. If I got one of the other promotions or do retire next year then you know there's a vacancy there. And I just think the system pushed too hard to where it's reverse[d] I think if they'd left well enough alone I wouldn't be here talking to you right now probably because all in all I think I've had a good career and I don't feel that I've been discriminated against for diversity reasons. But I think this case it's just, it's blatant why it was done.

5. I do go see the General, you know, I would just like to make the point that things like this are going on and in my feeling it's not fair and it's not a right way to do things. If he chooses to look into it and do something about it, so be it. If he doesn't, then I think he's going to wind up with an even more disgruntled workforce.
6. I think here, the fact that I am a white male sort of caught in this whole thing, is just a victim of circumstance. I just think it's kind of a push by the federal government right now for diversity and I happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time I think it's kind of gone the other way now. Maybe it would be a good point to just [retire], you know. It's the wrong part of the swing of the pendulum where we are right now for me and it's good for some people.
7. The worst part of it was . . . getting pushed off to the side Just kind of getting knifed in the back and nothing ever said about it. I think to me feeling like I had tried to team with the people who have worked for me and the ones above me and just being screwed. It's very disconcerting, very disgruntling.
8. I don't think [white males perceiving a stalled career is an issue for senior management]. I really don't. I mean somebody can get upset and go see the General but if diversity is a big push throughout [the agency] right now

it's, you know, "I'm sorry about that. It'll swing back the other way in a few years and if you're still here you take advantage of it then."

9. If I had been competing against Ruth, which I will be for a couple of positions, and if she gets it you know, okay. I'm sure diversity plays a role in it to some extent. But like I say, in my case, to be moved, I feel moved out of where I was doing a good job to make a position for a white female, I just think it's going too far I don't think I [had a chance].
10. I really never had an experience in the past where I felt like diversity had impacted me negatively, but I really do now. And I can see how people would get upset about it and disgruntled.

Invariant Constituents

The second step of the phenomenological analysis entailed reducing or eliminating the horizontal statements down to the invariant constituents of the stalled career experience for each participant. Each statement was analyzed to discern those that stand out as significant or relevant as the core horizons that comprise the unique qualities of the experience. This process involved testing each statement to determine if it contained a moment of the experience that is necessary and sufficient for understanding the experience (Moustakas, 1994). It also involved discerning whether the statement could be abstracted and labeled. Statements not meeting these requirements were eliminated. Overlapping, repetitive, and vague statements were also eliminated, so that only the invariant constituents of each participant's experience remained.

Core Themes of the Stalled Career Experience

The third step in the phenomenological analysis involved clustering the related invariant constituents of the stalled career experience into the core themes of the stalled career experience. Initially, the process produced a set of themes for each participant. Similar themes were clustered and given a thematic label. Review and comparison with each participant's original transcripts, the fourth step in the phenomenological analysis validated

the trustworthiness of these core themes. Examination of each core theme ensured it reflected the relevant statements in each participant's original transcripts and that it did not suggest something that was not in the original transcripts. The resulting 14 core themes of the stalled career experience were:

1. I have a sense of being a good employee because of positive performance feedback and evaluations from my supervisor.
2. I'm confronted with a series of unfair, discriminatory double standards that benefit women and minorities and disenfranchise me and other white males.
3. The situation is driven by legislation, the focus on "diversity," and social pressure to be politically correct.
4. The system worked for me before but doesn't work for me now; the system works for women and minorities and against white males.
5. The situation doesn't make sense because I've never experienced the situation before.
6. Management controls the system through mismanagement.
7. I am not racist or sexist.
8. I see women and minorities take advantage of the system.
9. I get minimal support for changing the situation.
10. I get commiseration from other white males.
11. Actions I take to address the situation make no difference.
12. I have a diminished sense of control of the situation.
13. There is a mental, physical, emotional toll to this experience.
14. My changed perspective leads to my reduced performance.

Textural Descriptions

The fifth step in the analysis involved developing individual textural descriptions of that which was experienced by each participant. The textural description portrays the *noema* or "what" of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). Each individual textural

description evolved from the invariant constituents and themes identified previously. The two examples that follow below show that, although there are common themes to the stalled career experience, each participant's experience had unique textural qualities.

Textural Description: George.

The final crack I had at Captain, that thing went back three times. It kept coming back because, "No, we will take the next lower minorities so that we'll meet the profile. And by the way, that means some of you white officers are going to have to drop out." People who were on Promotion Boards told me. My Command pyramids out. It's harder to get ahead. *Much* more competitive. And then to unofficially increase the representation of certain populations, it just aggravates that situation. Yet all my reports indicate I was well above the average officer; all top blocks or well up above the center of mass.

The Company Commander talked to me about court-martialing a black NCO, because he was concerned that they track those issues and that his record might not look all that good and that he may be hurting his career. He made an issue of it to me. It could be that he was being talked to too. That would be my guess. Same thing when I gave a less than sterling report to another black NCO. My superiors brought me in and tried to get me to change it.

This is all about being PC—the mindset of being racially sensitive so that you aren't offending any group. So, on down the line, when they look at your statistics, they can't say that you were racist in any way, shape, or form because the number of blacks, the number of whites, the number of Hispanics that you held back for some reason were consistent. Things get made into a racial issue without any reason. I watched the sponsorship of black officers by people that were afraid of being accused of being racist. They sponsor a black officer and top-block him and try and further his career as much as they can because that's proof that they're not racist. And it's like, "Wait, a minute! What kind of a job is the guy doing?"

Some women were trying to get around things. Same with some minorities. They utilized [affirmative action] as a tool to get ahead. That's part of their, in essence, promotion scheme. It's unwritten, but the first thing that happens when you bring up any accusations or charges against a black male or a black female is immediately, "You're being racist."

Organizations *have* to do certain things, it's a *tremendous* opportunity for a minority. I don't know how many times I heard, "Yeah. She's got two strikes in her favor. One, she's a woman. Two, she's black." So nobody's going to mess with her because, frankly, they have to answer to too many things, and if you were her you could do just about anything.

If a board has five voting members on it, and three of them are black they will tend to vote as a group. Consequently the long run is they populate the NCO Corps more heavily and tend to control it more, so that they have an equality or affirmative action *de facto* built in from the start. And it does not necessarily balance out because you also have the institutions that are to balance out the inequities. EEO was set up for the minorities and it tends to be a spokesperson for them to try and correct injustices. You've got this for minorities, and the people who are doing the investigations are more in tune with that, so they're more compassionate; more lenient. They interpret the party line a little bit differently because they have to realize that just like someone in private business, "My job depends on me finding these things and correcting them. I am getting evaluated on results." Naturally they're going to find it.

You have an IG branch, that's serving all its soldiers and you have a race relations or EEO branch, that's serving a select group. Once they establish that as a separate system they establish separate rules; a dual standard. Much in the same way as they establish with the women's PT test versus the men's PT test.

Women officers get selected for assignments based on sex. Women get the assignments that go to the field less or go to the field in a more luxurious mode. And the male officers that have to go through can't get into slots because they have to have enough females to balance out the profile of the corps. Once, they selected a Puerto Rican female with no experience, because she was going to do the session in Puerto Rico and, "She'd be able to deal with the locals." Well, they moved it to the Virgin Islands, so the only reason for assigning her is gone.

Textural Description: Martin.

I've gotten four top-block appraisals. So I have to assume from that that my bosses think I've done an okay job. I was this woman's boss and, after a while, we started getting involved with the military more and more. And she didn't want to work for the military, so she said, "Well, I want to go back to where I came from." And then she did this exercise and the first thing I know they're asking me, "Do you want to work for her?"

The chart showed the people who were going to be there after the 1st of October, and she has this group with her six or seven people on it. And it shows "GS-14, Acting." She's a 13. Now pre-selection's illegal in the Federal government. My boss is saying that, "The director wants to promote a 13 to the 14 for growth potential." Well there's another fellow over in a parallel group who's also a 13. He doesn't have 14 next to *his* name as "Acting."

Management is the problem. Scuttlebutt I've heard is that the director is anxious and has been courting certain women to try and get them to apply for higher jobs. He's anxious to increase the number of women. He is obsessed right now with diversity and he's going to get some women and minorities or whatever into some key positions. And I don't think it matters too much who might be there already.

The numbers of women in the workforce have gone up considerably over recent years over what it used to be. I don't know what's driving the director, if he's getting pressure from above to have a few more women and a few more minorities. I think they're either looking for the path of least resistance or whatever will make the powers above happy. And that seems to me to be the driving, or any large part of the drivers, on selections of new people.

A friend on a panel mentioned that it looked as though diversity was one of the driving forces in the thing. He mentioned that he had heard that if you are a woman or a minority, there was no justification required, and that apparently our higher headquarters had sort of laid those as the ground rules. I don't think anybody is specifically saying, "We want a woman" necessarily. If there are women or minorities available, I think they're looking for a much higher percentage. Probably if 25% of the people applied were women that one out of the four would get the job. They'd be happier if two out of four got the job. If I compete against a woman and she is better qualified she'll get it. I think 10-15 years ago that was not necessarily a given. Now there's more of a push just to increase the numbers, whatever it takes, for minorities and women, just to get those numbers up to a higher level. And maybe it's to cover for past transgressions that they weren't given an equal opportunity in the past.

I think right now it's the system that has most effected me. I think within the area I'm working there is an awfully aggressive push for diversity and I would assume it probably is across all of DOD and the government. But, I think it's the managers that carry out the policy; that run the system. For example, in a selection panel, they're going to have a woman on it and they're going to have a Hispanic, Ron Gomez. I'm not sure he, other than the name "Gomez," has a drop of Hispanic blood in him, but they're going to say he represents the Hispanic

community on the selection process. Things like that become common knowledge very quickly. It's just total hypocrisy.

Composite textural description. Analysis of the group of individual textural descriptions generated a composite textural description. The composite textural description depicts the noema of the stalled career experienced by the group of participants as a whole. The composite textural description follows below.

I've consistently had good performance appraisals with no complaints or negative comments, so I have to assume that my bosses think I've done an okay job. But my career is dead in the water. I've been shoved to the side for the sake of diversity.

This is about being passed over while other people, by nature of their sex or race, manage to get things that I don't or can't because of management saying, "We have to promote those people. You may be worthy, but you're the wrong sex, wrong color." Things are supposed to be neutral, based on qualifications or experience. But then another factor that you don't have comes in. And it's not because of your *lack* of knowledge or *lack* of qualifications.

The playing field is tilted, and the tilt has gone too far. The organization is getting pressure from above to increase the representation of certain populations, no matter what it takes. Management is pushing women and minorities to fill quotas—courting them to get them to apply for key positions. It may not be policy to increase the numbers, but that seems to be what is happening. Management said, "This is what we want to do." When it comes right down to it, they do whatever they want.

This is also about being PC—the mindset of being sensitive to race and gender so that you aren't offending any group. That way, when they look at the statistics, they can't say that you were racist or sexist because the number of blacks, the number of whites, the number of Hispanics that you held back for some reason

were consistent. Management is concerned that their record might not look good and it might hurt their career. They're afraid of being accused of being discriminatory so they sponsor a woman or minority and try and further that person's career because that's proof that they're not discriminatory.

Things get made into a racial or gender issue without any reason. If you take action against a minority or a female, it's immediately, "You're being racist" or "You're being sexist." Some women threaten they're going to quit, or complain about discrimination or harassment, to get what they want. Same with some minorities. They stick together and use affirmative action as a tool to get ahead. Even when something is supposed to be decided by grade or seniority, they threaten to file a complaint if a white guy gets it.

Although things are supposed to be done on merit, decisions are more subjective. There are separate rules—double standards—in discipline, selection, assignments, performance evaluation, opportunities, promotions. I've been told, "I really want *you*, but I have to consider these others, and when I make that determination I have to also write a letter to justify why I chose you over them. And it has to be centered around, not that you're male and they're female or whatever. It has to be based on qualifications, even though it's kind of made up." If a woman or a minority is picked, no justification is required.

Females and minorities have supporters. They get a lot of individual attention—red carpet treatment without consideration of qualifications. They end up with mentors, where a white male wouldn't. They get a lot of opportunities, without having to go through tough rites of passage. They get selected over more experienced, senior guys who have already completed training. Sometimes the standards for a position are lowered. Even if they're incompetent, they're making it into the pool of candidates to ensure that there is representation. "And by the way, that means some of you white guys are going to have to drop out."

This is not about the system. It's about people who work in the system—who understand it, know how to manipulate it, and use it to their advantage. Managers carry out the policy. They run the system. It creates an organization of contradictions, which adversely affects morale. I could complain to EEO, but it wouldn't matter. Nothing would happen. Civil Rights was set up [for] the female or minority. I don't have any protection. It's not written, but spoken behind the scenes, "White males don't have any rights."

Structural Descriptions

The sixth step in the phenomenological analysis involved developing a structural description of the stalled career experience for each participant. The structural description depicts the *noesis* of the experience, "a vivid account of the underlying dynamics of the experience, the themes and qualities that account for 'how' feelings and thoughts connected with [the phenomenon] are aroused" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 135). This step uses the technique of imaginative variation and reflection to creatively explore the precipitating factors or underlying structures of the stalled career experience. It supports understanding the experience in a more holistic way. Individual structural descriptions for two participants follow below.

Structural Description: Mel.

The structures that evoke Mel's stalled career include a sense of unfairness, a lack of control, and disillusionment. This comes from seeing minorities get something just for being a minority; because of *who* they are rather than *what* they do. "That would be nice. I wish I could do that." He feels a disconnect because of getting passed over. There's no justice; no fair competition for jobs. It's absurd; doesn't make sense.

It's also an unbelievable situation because it's "totally out of my control." He also believes that other white males feel the same way. "We don't have a

chance.” Because, “We can’t talk about it in the open,” other white males give covert commiseration, support, and empathy.

This sense of unfairness has aroused feelings of frustration, disappointment, and disillusionment. He raised the issue with his boss and got accused of having a bad attitude. “I feel crappy, disheartened, hurt.” Some of these feelings are directed toward management, due to their lack of support; “just lip service.” He’s also “angry with myself” because he didn’t “see the writing on the wall sooner.” Just the same, he doesn’t want to get mired in a woe-is-me self-pity.

As a result of the situation, he has diminished expectations and has lost his incentive to excel. “I don’t really care anymore.” He’s not going to put forth the extra effort he usually would. “Why bother when I won’t get the rewards I should get?” A sense of cynicism is balanced with pragmatism. The situation “leaves you having to decide whether you want to continue in a nonsensical environment or move on and hope that, where you alight the next time, the situation doesn’t happen again. You know, of course, there’s no guarantee.”

Structural Description: Jeff.

The structures that evoke Jeff’s stalled career include feeling that things have changed; that women and minorities have gained power and he is somehow “less-than” because he is a white male. “I underestimated the lack of my own power.” White males have been dominant in the work environment; perhaps the cause of discrimination. Now, it’s reverse discrimination. Because he is a white male, he’s seen as part of that group; “the blanket of white maleness that needs to be ripped apart.” He’s being singled out and separated, pushed off to the side, left out in the cold, with “one strike against me before I get started.”

This impression that things are not right or out of the ordinary has left him frustrated. He doesn’t understand the situation. “Bringing this up, I almost feel like I’m discriminating.” It’s senseless. It’s not fair. “I can’t help it that I was

born a white male. I've not discriminated so why should I be punished or have to suffer?" He's got "a clear perspective on how it *should* be. And then there's how it *is*." He doesn't want special treatment. He just wants to be considered equally, where everyone gets the opportunity.

Because he is getting held back, he feels hurt, used, angry, and abused. "I'm not looked at for what I can do, my capabilities, but for who I am." His "sense that I'm just a peon" has hurt his self-esteem; lowered his self-image. He feels that "nobody is pulling for me." Management doesn't see the problem, even though they are the ones creating it. His concern about reprisal contributes to his lack of trust in management. Other white males provide support because they are experiencing the same thing. Yet, "white males don't really have a say." He senses that there is nothing that he or other white males can do to change the situation and that a lot more white males are "going to go Postal with the frustration."

He feels this situation portrays white males in a bad way. "We don't want to believe that we're actually living discrimination or being discriminated against intentionally. And I think it has to do with ego and I think it has to do with white male ego—white male perceptions of themselves. I'm saying that because I am a white male and this is what I sense. We don't like to complain, in general. We don't like to appear weak. We don't like to appear all of these things. We don't like to appear anything other than the image we're trying to project, and by saying that this is happening to us is a chink in the personality."

The situation has diminished his expectations and goals. "I don't need to butt my head up against a wall, knowing I'm not going to get anywhere." Distancing himself helps his self-preservation. "Work doesn't define who I am." This is not about him. It's about management. "It's their problem." He's coming

to grips with the situation, “being empowered enough so I can get into a position where I can take care of myself.”

Composite structural description. Analysis of the group of individual structural descriptions generated a composite structural description. This composite description depicts the noesis of the stalled career experienced by the group of participants as a whole. The composite structural description follows below.

The structures that evoke the stalled career experience start with an awareness that things are no longer the way they were. I realize that I’m not gonna get ahead. The situation emerges from a series of incidents of preferential treatment of women and minorities and unfair treatment of white males. It’s personal. “I’m seen as part of that group; the blanket of white maleness that needs to be ripped apart.” Women and minorities get something just for being *who* they are rather than *what* they do, while doing a good job and getting good evaluations doesn’t help me. I’m a victim of diversity, with one strike against me before I get started. I feel confused and disgruntled by the change from the way things used to be, disillusioned by management’s changing rules and ulterior motives, apprehensive and uncertain about the future, and frustrated that I can’t do anything to change the situation.

I’m confused and disgruntled by the awkwardness of the situation. “Things were set, then upset.” I don’t understand why this is happening. It doesn’t make any sense. There should be one set of rules for everyone, not double standards. It’s not fair. I’m treated differently and disadvantaged. It’s not supposed to be this way. I feel like I wasted a good part of my career working hard and thinking I’m going to get ahead, only to find that I’m in the wrong age for being a white male. I’m being shoved off to the side and screwed over. “I really never had an experience in the past where I felt like diversity had impacted me

negatively, but I really do now. And I can see how people would get upset about it and disgruntled.” I feel disheartened, used, angry, and abused.

Disillusionment comes from management’s push for diversity. The drive to increase the numbers of women and minorities has overshadowed the focus on getting the job done. Management does what it wants, when it wants. I’m expendable. The rules shouldn’t be changed at this point in the game. It’s very disconcerting and demoralizing to find nobody pulling for me. It’s hard to get motivated to trust management, let alone support them. When I question people about the situation, they blame upper management, humor me with lip service, or flat out deny any unfair treatment. Management’s lack of support has reinforced the sense of betrayal. My trust is gone. I was happy about my job. Now, I’ve become somewhat cynical and paranoid, knowing what *should* happen and then seeing what actually *does*.

This situation makes me apprehensive and uncertain about my future. I don’t want special treatment. I just want to be considered equally, where everyone gets the opportunity. Now, my career aspirations are gone; my expectations diminished. I don’t really care anymore. Sure, I’ll still do a good job, but I’ve lost interest in putting forth any extra effort when I know that the rewards I should get are not forthcoming. I’ve got less enthusiasm and lost any incentive to excel because of the bitter taste in my mouth. Cynicism is balanced with pragmatism. I want things to be normal again, but I know that those days are gone. Getting ahead should be done on your own merits and, unfortunately, that’s not the way things are anymore. The situation “leaves you having to decide whether you want to continue in a nonsensical environment” or leave.

I don’t have any control over this. “You have the benefit of knowing what’s going to happen but you don’t have the benefit of being able to utilize that knowledge to change the outcome.” It’s undesirable and unmanageable. I can’t

help that I was born a white male. I'm not racist. I've not discriminated. Why should I be punished? Other guys I've talked with had a similar reaction: commiseration and empathy that we can't do anything about it, yet we can't talk openly because it's not socially acceptable. It's not PC. I can't bring this up with women or minorities because they don't want to hear about it or they like to think I'm being discriminated just like they've been. I finally regained some sense of control when I left.

Individual Textural-Structural Descriptions

The seventh step in the phenomenological analysis involved constructing a textural-structural description of the stalled career experience for each participant. The textural-structural description incorporates the invariant constituents and themes into a synthesis of the meanings and essences of the stalled career experience. Each participant reviewed the draft of his textural-structural description to validate its credibility in portraying the essence of his stalled career experience. Their feedback was incorporated into the final individual textural-structural descriptions (see Appendix F). Two examples are shown below.

Textural-Structural Description: Robert.

I had been doing well, so I don't understand what is happening. It's strange. The system is corrupt; the employment contract is a lie. The white male has no rights and it is not fair. Women and minorities are getting ahead without having the required experience or qualifications. They are getting sponsors and mentors, where the white males are not. They are using the system. They know how to work the system. They—management, the union, coworkers—are cutting deals. Management does what they want to do. They are not supporting white males. My support from others—from women and minorities, from white male colleagues—is gone. I've lost my friends and other coworkers are making fun of me behind my back.

As a result of this experience, there has been a personal toll; a tangible impact. It has changed me, draining my energy. I have a loss of interest in things I used to do. I've lost the ability to focus on things. I feel really depressed. This is definitely going to also have a negative impact on the organization; on accomplishing the mission. I have been trying to do some moving on—trying to find some strategies for dealing with this, like going back to school. There is the possibility of this being a learning experience. There may be some benefit to me in the long-term. As I look back, I do have a sense of hope that there will be some positive outcome.

Textural-Structural Description: Mel.

My last performance appraisal was outstanding. There were no complaints or negative comments about my performance, but right now my career is dead in the water. I'm being passed over or ignored while other people, by nature of their sex or race, manage to get things that I didn't or couldn't because of management implying unofficially, "We have to promote those people. You may be worthy, but you're the wrong sex, wrong color." Things are supposed to be neutral, based on qualifications, experience, longevity in the job, knowledge. But another factor that you don't have comes in. And it's not because of your *lack* of knowledge or *lack* of qualifications. There's no fair competition for jobs. The same with holding people accountable for their work. It's a double standard. Even my black female boss agreed. White males are treated differently.

It's part of being PC. The agency is pushing women and minorities. White males are being told kind of like, "You're not going anywhere. We need minorities to fill quotas. We have to have more division chiefs that are female and black, or female and Hispanic." Management promotes women outside of normal career paths, without regard for their job performance and their capabilities. Some people are part of affirmative action themselves and want to help their brothers and sisters.

They're looking out for another woman or another black person. Even when something is supposed to be decided by grade or seniority, they're gonna file a complaint if a white guy gets it. You think, "I just don't see how that person got that job or keeps that job. They're lazy. They're this. They're that. What have they done to earn it?" Just because they're *who* they are. I'd like to be able to get something just because of who I am—not whether I know what I'm doing.

The situation makes me feel crappy. I'll still show up. I'll still do the wonderful job that I do, but I won't go out of my way to do anything more than I would be inclined to do if the situation were different. With this situation, it's like, why bother? I'm not going to bust my chops when I know the rewards that I think I should get are not coming. When you know what you're putting in and what your capabilities are and you match them up with what someone else's done or not done, versus the positive things that I've done, you say, "There's no justice." It hurts. So your incentive to excel goes out the window. When my boss told me she didn't think my attitude was good, I said, "My attitude is based on how I'm getting rewarded and what I see in my future based on my input. You've had no complaints about me or my work or my interactions with others in the agency. I'm doing my part, and you haven't seen fit to back me. So why should I have a good attitude?"

It's hard to look at minorities and not feel some disconnect. Having a conversation about this issue with my boss would be really difficult. She'd probably say, "Not true. Whoever got it got it on their merits." And what do you say to that? It's not PC to say, "I know what's going on and I wish I could get away with what you get away with."

At least once a week I talk about this with other guys in passing. In a staff meeting, we counted up the black faces and the white faces, and found more were black. We all feel pretty much the same way—commiseration support. It's a commonly felt issue, and you're empathetic because you've been through it. "I

know what you've been going through. I know where you're coming from. We don't really have a chance. Isn't this a crock of shit!" But, we can't talk about it in the open. So you think about it and then go on your merry way.

This doesn't make any sense to me and other guys in this situation. Sometimes you can't make sense out of anything. It leaves you having to decide whether you want to continue in a nonsensical environment or move on and hope that, where you alight the next time, the situation doesn't happen again. You know, of course, there's no guarantee. You can't deny this is happening—block out the reality—because it's there. And most peoples' goal at the end is not so much where I'm going to be. I don't expect it anymore, because of getting passed over for what they've denied me that I strongly feel I earned.

This experience gets you to wake up and smell the coffee quicker. People can't make decisions for you. You have to bite the bullet and move along. If you don't, you get mired in this, "Woe is me," self-pity. I think in trying to fight my way out of this I've hit the whole spectrum, from thinking that my boss was going to back me because she said she was, to fighting it on my own, to thinking I had changed her attitude so she was a little more willing, to thinking, "She's got the strings and she's playing me like a puppet." Then you go back down to the other end and you say, "Shoot! What an asshole I've been. I thought I was working in an environment that I would be judged on my merits and my work product. And that I would have as good a chance as this other person who happens to be black." So, you know, disillusionment.

I could protest or complain, but nothing would happen. It's frustrating and disappointing that the agency wouldn't support me. If you don't have support of management, then it doesn't happen. You can only do so much for yourself. It's like, discretion is the better part of valor. Like maybe let's just drop this before you stick your foot in your mouth and you wind up having more problems. Maybe it's

not worth all the grief just to push a point. Nothing more can be done. You have to know when to just quit. That may not satisfy you. You can't really say, "Hey, I affected the situation and maybe it won't happen again."

This situation is totally out of my control. The only sense of my control now is that I can walk out. That's what I'm doing, saying, "Hey, screw it. I don't have a chance so let's do something else." I'm letting go of the feeling that, you know what's happening isn't fair to you and that you can't really do much about it. You finally get to the point that you might as well just move on and try to either find yourself another situation or just accept the fact that in the current environment in this agency, it's happened and it's going to continue to happen. And saying that the emotional energy, the mental energy, the physical energy, the time that you may spend doing this maybe could be channeled to someplace more productive.

My personality is the thing that's enabled me to say, "That's it. I'm not going to put up with any more." I think I'm independent and self-reliant. I'm not going to do something just because it's the thing to do. Now, I know what side of the bread the butter is on. Financially, if I want to take a leap of faith, I could do it. That makes a big difference. I'm a survivor.

Composite Textural-Structural Description

Culminating from the eighth step of the analysis, the final product of the phenomenological reduction is a composite textural-structural description of the "essence" of the experience. Polkinghorne (1989) explains the process requires imaginative testing of various descriptions of the essence until the essential elements and their relationships are differentiated from the unessential and particular. This final step of the phenomenological analysis involved developing a composite description of the meanings and the essences of the stalled career experience, using the validated textural-structural description from each research participant. Each participant reviewed the draft composite textural-structural description to validate its credibility in portraying the essence of the stalled career

experience. Their feedback was incorporated into a final composite textural-structural description. This description of the essence of the stalled career experience follows below.

The Essence of the Stalled Career Experience.

I've consistently had good performance appraisals with no complaints or negative comments, so I assume that my bosses think I've done an okay job. Then, an awareness that things are no longer the way they were sets in, emerging from a series of incidents of preferential treatment of women and minorities and unfair treatment of white males. I realize that I'm not gonna get ahead. It's personal. Women and minorities get something just for being *who* they are rather than *what* they do, while doing a good job and getting good evaluations doesn't help me. I've been shoved to the side for the sake of diversity.

This is about being passed over while other people, by nature of their sex or race, manage to get things that I don't or can't because of management saying, "We have to promote those people. You may be worthy, but you're the wrong sex, wrong color." Things are supposed to be neutral, based on qualifications or experience. But then another factor that you don't have comes in. And it's not because of your *lack* of knowledge or *lack* of qualifications. I've been told, "I really want *you*, but I have to consider these others, and when I make that determination I have to also write a letter to justify why I chose you over them. And it has to be centered around, not that you're male and they're female or whatever. It has to be based on qualifications, even though it's kind of made up." If a woman or a minority is picked, no justification is required.

I'm confused and disgruntled by the awkwardness of the situation. I don't understand why it's happening. It doesn't make any sense. There should be one set of rules for everyone, not double standards. It's not fair. I'm treated differently and disadvantaged. The playing field is tilted, and the tilt has gone too far. It's not supposed to be this way. I feel like I wasted a good part of my career working hard

and thinking I'm going to get ahead, only to find that I'm in the wrong age for being a white male. I feel disheartened, used, and angry.

I'm disillusioned by management's push for diversity. The organization is getting pressure from above to increase the numbers of women and minorities to fill quotas, no matter what it takes, even if it overshadows getting the job done. Management does what it wants, when it wants. It may not be official policy to increase the numbers, but that seems to be what is happening. I'm expendable. It's very disconcerting and demoralizing to find no one pulling for me. It's hard to get motivated to trust management, let alone support them. When I question people about this, they blame upper management, humor me with lip service, or deny any unfair treatment. Management's lack of support has reinforced my sense of betrayal. Trust is gone. I was happy about my job. Now, I've become cynical and paranoid, knowing what *should* happen and then seeing what actually *does*.

This is not about the system. It's about people who work in the system—who understand it, know how to manipulate it, and use it to their advantage. Managers carry out the policy. They run the system. It creates an organization of contradictions, which adversely affects morale. It's also about being PC—the mindset of being sensitive to race and gender so that you aren't offending any group. Management is concerned that their record might not look good and it might hurt their career. They're afraid of being accused of being discriminatory so they sponsor a woman or minority and try to further that person's career because that's proof that they're not discriminatory. Things get made into a racial or gender issue without any reason. If a supervisor takes action against a minority or a female, it's immediately, "You're being racist" or "You're being sexist." Some women threaten they're going to quit, or claim discrimination or harassment, to get what they want. Same with some minorities. Consequently, they get supporters and a lot of individual attention. They get mentors, where a white male wouldn't. They get

opportunities, without having to go through tough rites of passage. They get selected over more experienced, senior guys who have already completed training. Sometimes the standards for a position are lowered. Even if they're unqualified or incompetent, they're making it into the pool of candidates to ensure that there is representation.

I don't have any control over this situation. "You have the benefit of knowing what's going to happen but you don't have the benefit of being able to utilize that knowledge to change the outcome." It's undesirable and unmanageable. I can't help that I was born a white male. I'm not racist. I've not discriminated. Why should I be punished? Other guys I've talked with had a similar reaction: commiseration and empathy that we can't do anything about it, yet we can't talk openly because it's not PC. I can't bring this up with women or minorities because they don't want to hear about it or they like to think I'm being discriminated just like they've been. I could complain to EEO, but it wouldn't matter. Nothing would happen. Civil Rights was set up to back the female or minority. I don't have any protection. It's not written, but it's spoken behind the scenes, "White males don't have any rights."

This situation makes me apprehensive and uncertain about my future. I don't want special treatment. I just want to be considered equally, where everyone gets the opportunity. Now, my career aspirations are gone; my expectations diminished. I don't really care anymore. Sure, I'll still do a good job, but I've lost interest in putting forth any extra effort when I know that the rewards I should get are not forthcoming. I've got less enthusiasm and lost any incentive to excel because of the bitter taste in my mouth. Cynicism is balanced with pragmatism. I want things to be normal again, but I know that those days are gone. The situation "leaves you having to decide whether you want to continue in a nonsensical environment" or leave. I finally regained some sense of control when I left.

Additional Aspects of the Stalled Career Experience

At the time of the interviews, the participants varied in their sense of their place in the stalled career, as well as their sense of awareness of the experience (see Table 1). The stalled career experience was sustained over a period of time. Participants' reported that their experiences lasted between 2-7 years, with the most frequent duration at 6-7 years. The experience occurred during middle age or mid-life, when participants were 45-50 years old. This is distinct from mid-career transition, in that the stalled career experience actually marked the end of a career. For most participants the stalled career, albeit an undesirable experience, provided an impetus for retirement. Even for the youngest participant, the experience marked his transition out of one career field and forced him to search for a new career. Each participant, in fact, left the job he held when he experienced a stalled career. Four of the five participants took some form of retirement (e.g., early out, disability).

Table 1. Matrix of participant information.

Participant	Robert	Jeff	Mel	Martin	George
Agency	Transportation	DOD policy	Judiciary	DOD S&E	DOD military
Occupation	Technical	Administrative	Administrative	Technical	Technical
Grade	11	12	13	14	Captain
Years-in-grade	9 (92-01)	10 (92-00)	10 (92-00)	12 (90-00)	6 (89-95)
Family status	Single	Divorced	Single	Married	Married
Current age	42	54	57	55	44
Place in the transition	In it	Moving out	Moving out	Moving out	Out of it
Sense of place in the transition	I'm still in it!	I'm coming to grips with the situation.	I'm letting go.	I've known it was coming so now it's a question of just finishing up.	I'm through it . . . the clear realization that that was it.
Stage of CAD	Encounter	Empowerment	Empowerment	Empowerment	Integration
Age during	37-44	48-55	52-58	54-56	33-39
Duration of stalled career	7 years (1995-2002)	7 years (1994-2001)	6 years (1995-2001)	2 years (1999-2001)	6 years (1989-1995)

Analysis using Transitions Theory Conceptual Framework

Analysis of the data using the 4S transitions theory conceptual framework (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995) included quantitative and qualitative methods. Quantitative data came from the participants' responses to *Transitions Coping Guide* (TCG) (Schlossberg, 1993). The instrument groups its 56 items by the 4S areas: situation, self, strategies, and support. It was administered during the second interview. The resulting scores (see Table 2) provide a 4S profile, a measure of the transitional opportunity for growth or deterioration.

Table 2. Participants' scoring on the Transitions Coping Questionnaire.

Participant	Robert	Jeff	Mel	Martin	George
TCG Total (290)	139 (47.9%)	243 (83.8%)	201.3 (69.4%)	219.5 (75.7)	193 (66.6%)
Situation (40)	16 (40.0%)	20 (50.0%)	31 (77.5%)	28.5 (71.3%)	17 (42.5%)
Self (50)	20 (40.0%)	45 (90.0%)	43.3 (86.6%)	36 (72.0%)	42 (84.0%)
Strategies (125)	71 (56.8%)	108 (86.4%)	67 (53.6)	84 (67.2%)	94 (75.2%)
Support (75)	32 (42.7%)	70 (93.3%)	60 (80.0%)	71 (94.7%)	40 (53.3%)

Higher scores suggest coping assets (i.e., capabilities for navigating the transition) and lower scores suggest coping deficits (i.e., deficient capabilities for navigating the transition). Looking at each participant's percentage of the total possible points for the instrument, participants who were moving out of the transition reported the highest scores and the one participant who felt he was in the middle of the transition reported the lowest score. For three of the five participants, situation had the lowest scores, with the remaining two giving situation the second lowest scores. Support was not the lowest score for any one participant. Looking at the percentage of the total possible points for each 4S area, the highest score for the group of participants was self, followed by support, strategies, and situation.

Qualitative analysis used Boyatzis' (1998) three-step, theory-driven approach for transforming qualitative data through thematic analysis. The 4S transitions theory conceptual framework (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995) provided the primary codes of situation, self, strategies, and support. The following paragraphs summarize the themes within each primary code.

“Situation” Themes of the Stalled Career Experience

The situation arises primarily from “an awfully aggressive push for diversity” tied to the mandate to increase representation of women and minorities, in turn, making the competition for jobs unfair to white males. As Martin explains:

Create a vacancy so you can meet a quota—and I know quotas are nasty words within the government these days—in women or minorities. I just think it’s demoralizing to people like me who are trying to do a good job and then suddenly feel like they’ve just been slid over to the side and, you know, “Don’t say anything. Just get out of the way. We’ve got a freight train moving through the vacancy you left.”

Participants perceived the organizational “system” as flawed or broken, while recognizing that individuals control the system. George suggests:

I would think that it is more a product of society than of policies. Policies are written and they serve as guidelines, in most cases. You can get exemptions to just about anything. The people carry out the policies. They take the politically correct venue and go and do these things. And in some cases you have informal policies. This, in essence, quota system on the boards is nothing in writing. It’s something that goes in the verbal instructions.

Individuals, interested in personal gain, fearful of lawsuits, or under “social” pressure to be politically correct, push the organization into increasing the numbers of women and minorities in the workforce. Some participants also suggested that competition for jobs is exacerbated by uncertain economic conditions, a tight labor market, and limited headroom. As Martin admits, “It’s a flat organization. Opportunities to get to be a 15 have been very few and far between.”

Although participants cited examples of women and minorities using the system to their advantage, the participants did not blame women and minorities for the flawed system or fault women and minorities for exploiting the system. George notes that organizations:

. . . *have* to do certain things, it's a *tremendous* opportunity for a minority person. I don't know how many times I heard, 'Yeah. She's got two strikes in her favor. One, she's a woman. Two, she's black.' So nobody's going to mess with her because, frankly, they have to answer to too many things. You have sexism, you have racism, and I don't know the next one could be, 'She's a black woman homosexual.' I guess that would make it a full house, and [if you were her] you could do just about anything you wanted to.

Also, the participants did not blame their stalled career on women and minorities. If a participant blamed anyone for the flawed system, they blamed "management" for "pushing diversity" (i.e., advocating the promotion of women and minorities into certain jobs in the organization). Those experiencing a stalled career feel they have no control over the situation; no influence over the system or those in control of the system. Jeff notes that:

Management can do whatever they want, whenever they want, however they want, and can put anybody in a position or a grade that they choose to when they choose to do it. It's just having the right wording to justify why and how.

Although some participants mentioned that some white males have been able to get ahead in the flawed system, there was no mention of the fact that white males constitute the majority of the people running the system (i.e., management).

"Self" Themes of the Stalled Career Experience

Participants' assessment of their own characteristics or personality traits was generally positive. Each participant reported above average to superior performance in his job, with verbal feedback and written performance appraisals concurring. Having been told they were doing well in their job, the changed situation left participants feeling powerless and hopeless, unable to make sense of the situation, let alone influence it. The stalled career experience prompted personal awareness of unfair, discriminatory employment practices associated with race or gender. Martin notes, "I really never had an experience in the past where I felt like diversity had impacted me negatively, but I really do now. And I can see how people would get upset about it and disgruntled." He further elaborates:

I am a white male sort of caught in this whole thing, just a victim of circumstance. I just think it's kind of a push by the Federal government right now for diversity and I happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. It's the wrong part of the swing of the pendulum where we are right now for me and it's good for some people.

Several participants wondered why they had stayed with the organization, certain that there must be something wrong; a possible flaw in their character. Some blamed themselves for their inability to play political/social games necessary for advancement. Some also blamed themselves for their stupidity at not “seeing the writing on the wall” sooner than they did. Although the participants recognized that these aspects of self-awareness may not have prevented the stalled career experience, the participants did recognize that increased self-awareness may have shortened the duration of the stalled career experience.

In recounting their experience, participants described a lack of personal control over the situation. George clarifies that, “You have the benefit of knowing what’s going to happen but you don’t have the benefit of being able to utilize that knowledge to change the outcome.” This sense of powerlessness marked a shift in participants’ locus of control toward externality. The perceived violation of the psychological contract diminished participants’ sense of loyalty toward the organization and trust in management. As Martin notes:

I guess I feel violated. I’ve spent 29 years working for the government—tried to play by what I thought the rules were—and all of a sudden, you know, I just feel like somebody stuck a knife in my back.

On the other hand, identification with and trust toward other white males increased. The situation caused participants to see themselves and other white males as an oppressed group. At the same time, participants described relatively strong sense of self-efficacy in other aspects of their lives. The stalled career represented only one transitional issue in one domain of the individual’s life.

“Strategies” Themes of the Stalled Career Experience

Participants used multiple strategies for coping with the stalled career experience. The most frequently cited strategy was to stay in the job, but do less. This entailed continuing to do the job but withholding some level of effort, input, interest, loyalty, or advocacy. The second most frequently cited strategy was to leave the organization or at

least the organizational sub-unit. Most spoke of their intent to abruptly leave the organization at an inopportune point for the organization. As Mel elaborates:

The only sense of my control now is that I can walk out. That's what I'm doing, saying, "Hey, screw it. I don't have a chance so let's do something else." I'm letting go of the feeling that, you know what's happening isn't fair to you and that you can't really do much about it. You've kind of commiserated with others where you work that feel the same way. And you finally got to the point that you might as well just move on and try to either find yourself another situation or just accept the fact that in the current environment in this agency, it's happened and it's going to continue to happen. And saying that the emotional energy, the mental energy, the physical energy, the time that you may spend doing this maybe could be channeled to someplace more productive Do your job so no one can say anything about you, and then one day say, "I've accepted a job someplace else."

This strategy enabled the individuals experiencing a stalled career to regain some sense of control over their own career. At the same time, it enabled them to "get back at" the organization for violating the psychological contract. Other strategies included confronting management about the situation, talking with white male coworkers, talking with white male friends outside of the workplace, going back to school, and actively pursuing a different job.

All participants mentioned filing an EEO complaint against the agency as a potential strategy, but dismissed pursuing a complaint because they felt doing so would not resolve the situation and might bring retaliation from management. As Roberts states:

The lie is everyone is protected, see, and they're not. I'm not protected. And what they're saying is the dangling carrot. "Go to EEOC. Yeah. Go to the agency Hotline. See what you get." Throw me a dangling carrot and then I went for it and I got nailed.

One participant actually filed an EEO complaint, but subsequently dropped it after experiencing retaliation. Most participants also dismissed the viability of talking to women and minorities about the situation, suggesting that women and minorities would dismiss a white male's stalled career experience because a white male having a stalled career is merely experiencing the same discrimination or unfair treatment that women and minorities have long experienced. As Jeff suggests, "I'm sure people on the other side—those people in

that particular group would say, ‘Well it’s about time you white males realized what it’s like to be discriminated against.’”

Participants also described changing their perspective on things, choosing to see the situation from a different perspective thereby reducing the importance of the transition.

George notes, “I could deal with it because it’s a matter of your priorities and what you place. And to me the family and our interests were above the [agency] and the special interests that were manipulating within the [agency].” Jeff elaborates:

Work doesn’t define who I am totally. It defines what my occupation is. That isn’t my life. My life is, you know, a whole bunch of other things. And so, when that wasn’t appearing to be going anywhere, it’s like, “Okay, it’s their issue. It’s them that’s holding me back, or not allowing me to have the opportunity to even try to get another grade or whatever. Or have the opportunity to get ahead or another grade. But, it’s okay, because I know who I am. And I’m okay with that.”

“Support” Themes of the Stalled Career Experience

Participants recognized the need for support from others to help them cope with, and eventually move through, their stalled career experience. They also recognized that they had few support resources. Analysis of the interview transcripts provided specific information on each participants’ social support systems for navigating the stalled career transition (see Table 3). The analysis looked at various sources of support identified by each participant as present or missing. Sources of support included management, coworkers, friends, mentors,

Table 3. Matrix of Participants’ Social Support Systems.

Participant Social Support	Robert	Jeff	Mel	Martin	George
White male management	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
White male coworkers	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
White male friends	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Mentors	No	No	Yes	No	No
Spouse	No	No	No	Yes	No
Family	No	No	No	Yes	No
Women/minority management	No	No	Yes	No	No
Women/minority coworkers	No	No	No	No	No
Women/minority friends	Yes	No	No	No	No
Organizational support systems	No	No	No	No	No

spouse, family, and organizational support systems. The qualitative analysis showed their verbal narrative conflicted with their self-reported scores on the TCG that indicated support was a coping asset.

The minimal amount of support they described in the interviews came primarily from other white males, including management, coworkers, and friends. Mel declares:

Talking with other guys, we all feel pretty much the same way—commiseration support. Kind of talking about a commonly felt issue and being empathetic because you've been through it, saying, "I know what you've been going through. I know where you're coming from. We don't really have a chance. Isn't this a crock of shit!"

Participants reported no support from women and minority coworkers. Participants also perceived that the organization provided no support for addressing their stalled career, either from management or from organizational structures (e.g., EEO, human resources, employee assistance programs, IG). As George explains, EEO "was set up for the minorities and it tends to be a spokesperson for them to try and correct injustices." Only one participant reported support from women/minority friends. Robert notes, "I've told [my neighbor] about some of these scenarios and she's a friend so she listens and she's worried about me." Similarly, only one participant reported support from spouse, family, women/minority management, or mentors. Some participants reported actually losing support from friends and coworkers because of talking about their stalled career. Although some participants discussed their stalled career experience with women and minorities in work and non-work contexts, the participants did not see that as an effective coping activity because it resulted in deterioration of the relationship.

Chapter Summary

This chapter presented the findings from the phenomenological analysis and the analysis using the transitions conceptual framework. Each set of findings contributed to a clearer understanding of the stalled career phenomenon. As much as possible, examples in each set of findings used the participants' own words.

The phenomenological analysis generated the description of the stalled career experience using Moustakas' (1994) method for phenomenological analysis. The findings were presented by providing examples from each step of the data analysis, including horizontalization, reduction and elimination into invariant constituents, clustering into core themes, development of textural description, development of structural description, and synthesis into the final textural-structural description of the essence of the experience. These examples demonstrated the process of distilling the raw data from the interviews with all the participants into the composite textural-structural description (i.e., the essence) of the experience of a stalled career.

Analysis of the non-event work transition of a stalled career used the's 4S conceptual framework for analyzing adults in transition (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman; 1995). The findings included quantitative and qualitative data. Quantitative data came from the participants' responses to *Transitions Coping Guide* (Schlossberg, 1993). The resulting scores provided a measure of the transitional opportunity for growth or deterioration for each participant and the group of participants as a whole, within the context of the stalled career experience. Qualitative analysis used Boyatzis' (1998) theory-driven approach for transforming qualitative data through thematic analysis, with the transitions theory conceptual framework (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman; 1995) providing the primary codes of situation, self, strategies, and support.

Chapter Five: Conclusions and Implications

Chapter Overview

This study explored middle age white males' experience of a stalled career from a phenomenological perspective, then used transitions theory as a framework for inquiry. It addressed the primary research question: How do middle age white males who perceive themselves as having a stalled career experience this non-event work transition? It provided empirical research informed by transitions theory within the context of the contemporary workplace. The results have implications for organizations, practitioners, supervisors, those white males experiencing a stalled career, and others experiencing a work transition.

This inquiry into the stalled career experience centered on description rather than explanation; gaining understanding rather than problem solving. Consistent with the goal of describing and understanding the stalled career phenomenon, this chapter provides conclusions about the meaning of the findings. It includes conclusions about the phenomenon, implications of these conclusions for theory and practice, and recommendations for further research.

Conclusions about the Stalled Career Experience

The conclusions evolved through reflection on the findings, in light of the problem addressed by the study, the study's purpose, areas of significance, and the research question. This study addressed the problem of a lack of understanding of the stalled career phenomenon and its impact by providing empirical evidence documenting the phenomenon and its impact. The purpose of this study was to describe the experience of middle age white males who perceive themselves as having a stalled career, where 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. Fundamentally, the perception of the individual going through the stalled career framed the experience.

This study generated theory on the phenomenon of a stalled career. Glaser and Strauss (1967) suggest that the discovery of theory from social research data is of particular

importance when it provides “relevant predictions, explanations, interpretations and applications” (p. 1). This study presents the stalled career construct as new theory that enhances understanding of the uniqueness of some white males’ plateaued career, within the context of the contemporary U.S. workplace. The construct helps predict, explain, and interpret these white males’ attitudes and behaviors.

This study explicated a distinct form of plateaued career and non-event work transition within the contemporary workplace, as well as some distinct aspects of social dominance theory (SDT), social identity theory (SIT), white male backlash (WMB), ingroup/outgroup dynamics, and the locus of control construct. This study confirmed the substantial role of the environment in shaping the work transition experience. It also confirmed the stalled career is a form of WMB (see Figure 4), the role of self-interest in generating negative reaction to AA and diversity programs, the emotional impact of work transitions, the nature of the non-event transition, the process of sensemaking during a transition, and the importance of social support in successful navigation of a transition.

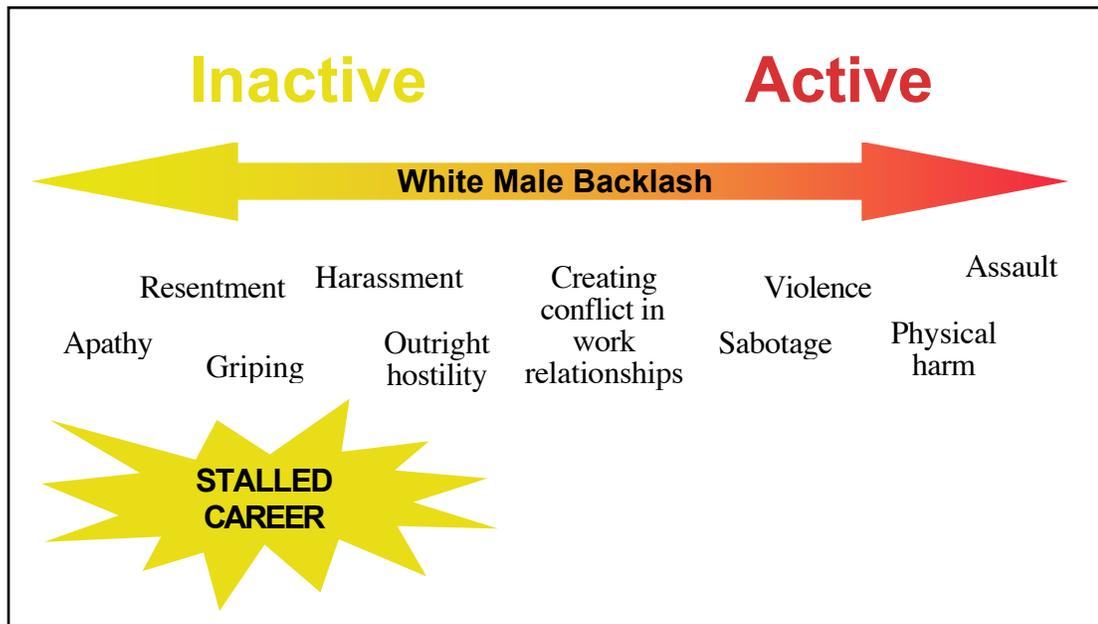


Figure 4. Stalled career and white male backlash.

The primary evidence of the stalled career phenomenon is the description of the essence of the experience, including textural components (i.e., that which is experienced) and structural components (i.e., the way it is experienced). The textural-structural composite description reveals the meanings and essences of the stalled career experience. The phenomenological reduction included thematic analysis that produced additional empirical evidence on the phenomenon and its impact in the form of 14 core themes within the phenomenology of the stalled career. Secondary evidence to enhance understanding of the stalled career experience comes from analysis of the data using Schlossberg, Waters, and Goodman's (1995) transitions theory.

The following discussion of the conclusions about the stalled career experience includes two sections. The first delves into the conclusions from the phenomenological analysis. The second explores the conclusions from the analysis using transitions theory.

Conclusions from the Phenomenological Analysis

There are five primary conclusions from the phenomenological analysis of the stalled career. 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 individual having the experience.

Role of the environment in precipitating the experience. The findings confirm the substantial role of the environment, particularly the context of ongoing organizational change, in precipitating the non-event work transition of a stalled career. Organizational change results in distress for many employees, forcing some into involuntary work transitions. A stalled career is representative of some white males' distress associated with

three areas of workplace change: structural (e.g., EEO/AA policies, governmental legislation), demographic (e.g., increasing representation of women and minorities in the workforce), and socio-political (e.g., push for diversity programs, the mandate for increasing representation of underrepresented groups). The perceptions of white males confronted with a stalled career echoes the environmental factors identified as the factors precipitating white male backlash (WMB) (Kormanik, 2000).

Environmental factors include a temporal aspect. As George summarizes, “I’m in the wrong age for being a white male Time and place, yeah. Fifty years ago I don’t think it would have happened.” Social dominance theory (SDT) posits that socially constructed group distinctions, such as race, are relevant only within specific situational and historical contexts (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Currently in the U.S., race is a highly-charged, polemical workplace issue and in all likelihood will remain as such (Hansen, 2003; Katz & Moore, 2004; Koonce, 2001; Sinderbrand, 2004). The forecast for gender issues is the same (Ali & Miller, 2004; Faludi, 1999a; Powell, 1999; Towery, 1998).

The findings in this study show that some white males’ sense of their career progression is tied to changes in the context of the contemporary workplace, and that association is at least partly negative. While this sense does not appear to *create* the perception of a stalled career, it is one of the key situational variables that precipitate the experience. The white male experiencing a career plateau senses these environmental changes in the workplace, then other precipitating factors emerge. Perceiving that things are no longer the same as they were, and things are not as they “should” be, he thinks that things are unfair and wonders why. He thought he knew the way the system worked, but the system does not work that way anymore. The unwritten rules have changed. The “system” is broken.

Because management controls the organizational system, the white male experiencing the stalled career perceives that the situation occurs as a result of mismanagement. Management’s desire to not appear racist or sexist and the pressure to be

seen as “politically correct” compels management to “absurd” or “ludicrous” decisions and actions. Martin provides an example from his organization:

In a selection panel, they’re going to have a woman on it and they’re going to have a Hispanic, Ron Gomez. I’m not sure he, other than the name “Gomez,” has a drop of Hispanic blood in him. But they’re going to go through, you know, and say he represents the Hispanic community on the selection process. Things like that become common knowledge very quickly. It’s just total hypocrisy.

The plateaued white male senses that he is a good employee due to performance that achieves or exceeds his supervisor’s expectations. Despite his sense of doing good work, he is not getting ahead. His old meaning schema was that hard work will get him ahead; it does not matter who he is, it matters what he does. Suddenly, he senses that what he does no longer matters.

These changed environmental conditions create a disorienting dilemma and provoke a shift in perspective or meaning schema, exemplified by the recurring sense of “the way things should be versus the way they actually are.” Awareness development entails making new meaning or sense out of the transition experience because old mental models no longer apply (Kormanik, 1999). Awareness development in the stalled career experience centers on the white male’s understanding of workplace equity.

Participants noted that they had never experienced something like this before. As Martin clarifies, “I really never had an experience in the past where I felt like diversity had impacted me negatively, but I really do now. And I can see how people would get upset about it and disgruntled.” Things are not normal. The white male’s encounter with the stalled career challenges his old meaning schema. He tries to move through the encounter stage of awareness development by making sense of the changed situation, but he is unable to make sense. As Robert says, “I just want to be normal again.” But that which was perceived as normal under the old mental schema has been changed by the newfound awareness. That which was normal has changed. A new “normal” emerges. Consistent with Erikson’s (1980) discourse on identity and the life cycle, unless the transitional issue of a stalled career is addressed, awareness development may stagnate, growth may be

impeded, and deterioration may result. Adjustment to the new normal by the participants was unclear, as discussed later in the conclusions.

Comparison to women and minorities. Seeking to make sense out of the disorienting dilemma, the white male compares his situation to that of his professional cohort. Although career progression is not assured for anyone in the contemporary work environment and anyone can plateau in his/her career, the findings in this study explicate that the plateaued career experience can be unique for some middle age white males. The distinctiveness of their experience forms the basis of the stalled career construct. Despite good performance evaluations and the understanding that he is doing a good job, this white male compares himself and other white males to women and minorities in his professional cohort. In comparison, he comes across a series of double standards that benefit female or minority colleagues and disenfranchise him. This perception reinforces the sense that the situation is “unfair” and discriminatory.

The stalled career experience includes the white males’ perception that promotions and other employment opportunities given to women and minorities are not tied to merit or performance. These white males admit that women and minorities may have earned the promotions and other employment opportunities. The white males’ belief, however, centers on management’s statements that promotions and other employment opportunities were given to women and minorities because of their race or gender, rather than their performance. The broader idea that individuals should advance based on merit is an example of the recurring theme of “the way things should be versus the way they actually are.” Jeff provides an example:

If I’m being considered for a position, I have one strike against me before I get started into it, and that is I’m a white male, so I’m off to the side. And they have to consider whoever else is on the list, whatever their ethnicity or gender is, and then make a determination based on that. And then it’s, “We really want *you*, but we have to consider these others, and when we make that determination I have to also write a letter to justify why I chose you over them. And it has to be centered around, not that you’re male and they’re female or whatever. It has to be based on qualifications, even though it’s kind of made up.”

SDT assumes that most forms of group conflict and oppression are symptoms of the human predisposition toward group-based social hierarchy (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). The perception of a stalled career does not appear to be the result of this group conflict and oppression. White males experiencing a stalled career showed minimal generalized ethnocentrism or denigration of the outgroup of women and minorities by the ingroup of white males. Although some of the participants cited examples of women and minorities advancing despite questionable qualifications, the white males experiencing a stalled career did not fault women and minorities for “taking advantage of the system.” White males experiencing a stalled career described these instances as indicative of mismanagement, rather than a denigration of women or minorities. This finding is consistent with the exploratory study of practitioners’ perspectives on WMB, where several female and minority informants suggested that some amount of backlash from white males was warranted, admitting that management’s desire to increase representation of women and minorities overshadowed concern for their qualifications (Kormanik, 2000).

Social identity theory (SIT), a construct contributing to SDT, stipulates that humans have a general desire for a positive social identity (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). SIT enhanced understanding of the relationship between demographic group membership and values, beliefs, and experiences that affect group attitude among white males. In an ironic twist, the dynamics of the stalled career experience is more, “I am just like women and minorities,” rather than feeling, “I am better than women and minorities.” White males experiencing a stalled career view white males as the outgroup with women and minorities as the ingroup. Women and minorities benefit from being the ingroup. While those experiencing a stalled career freely acknowledge that being a white male can be an advantage at times, in the instance of a stalled career, it is a disadvantage. Being a white male is a stigma. Being a white male is “bad.” As Jeff vividly states:

I see it as stalled because I don’t believe that I’m really looked at for who I am and what I can do. I’m looked at as a part of a blanket—a White blanket if you will. And that blanket needs to be ripped apart. And what I refer to as the white blanket is

white maleness . . . Experience through the years. What I've seen. What I've experienced, with the putting in place of the different laws, regulations, whatever, to promote minorities, to promote women, to have equal numbers. I'm not saying that I think it's bad. I just feel that it's been handled in a bad way. Because I think that women were not considered equal, and I think minorities were not considered equal. So I think that something needed to be done to help them get into a more equal, accepting kind of a place or way. But at the same time I feel like men—white men—have been adversely affected by that because their skills and what they can contribute haven't really been looked at. "Oh, you're white male. You stop. We have to move these ahead." That's what I see.

While the stalled career has aspects of stigma, it is a socially constructed stigma.

Similar to the individual idiosyncrasy suggested in Neugarten's (1976) concept of social time, the white male experiencing a stalled career sees himself as being out of sync with his professional cohort. The stalled career is different, however, in that the white male experiencing a stalled career does not see himself as being out of sync with other white males in the professional cohort. In comparing himself to male and female coworkers of all races, the white male experiencing a stalled career moves from individual to group comparison. Consistent with SIT, he identifies himself with other white males, comparing white males as a group to women and minorities. The white male experiencing a stalled career sees white males as out of sync with women and minorities.

The findings in this study also indicate a distinctiveness to the stalled white males' comparison to women and minorities. The frustration-aggression hypothesis of SIT 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). In this study, the white males' frustration over their own lack of career advancement created an "us" versus "them" dynamic, but that dynamic did not necessarily lead to displaced aggression against women and minorities. The white males in this study blamed their stalled career on management, not women and minorities.

At some point in the interviews, each participant stated that he is not a racist. The statement was usually made within the context of defending himself against others thinking he is racist because of his perception that he is experiencing a stalled career. This raises the

possibility that these white males actually do blame women and minorities for their stalled career, but do not do so publicly for fear of being labeled as racist or sexist, just as the participants suggested that white male managers behave so as not to appear racist or sexist. The participants noted their inability to discuss their stalled career with women and minority coworkers, but that did not appear to constitute displaced social aggression. It was more indicative of the sensitive, undiscussable nature of the stalled career addressed later in the conclusions.

Although the negative reaction of a white male experiencing a stalled career may be based on the perception that women and minorities are competitive threats, the findings in this study differ, in part, from findings in other studies. Bobo and Kluegel (1993) identify self-interest, stratification ideology, and racial attitudes as three factors that generate opposition to race or gender targeting efforts. Although Konrad and Linnehan (1999) suggest that “it is easier in contemporary society to develop socially acceptable arguments for opposition to a specific government policy than to justify racist sentiments” (p. 448), self-interest may be the more substantial motivator for a negative reaction against programs (e.g., AA, diversity) that are perceived as “not for me” (Sears & Funk, 1990). The perception of having a stalled career appears to be associated with self-interest, rather than stratification ideology or racism.

Bobo (1998) suggests that perceived threat to ingroup interests can be a more potent force against race targeting programs such as AA and diversity, than objections based on racism/sexism, traditional American ideological principles, or political ideology. This study shows that traditional ideological principles, such as the expectation that individuals should get ahead based on what they do (i.e., one’s work) rather than who they are (i.e., one’s race or gender) is a more substantial factor in provoking the sense of a stalled career.

The results of this study reinforce how, perceiving that race targeting programs such as AA and diversity give women and minorities an unfair advantage, some white males feel frustrated, alienated, and angry. These results follow Gagnon and Bourhis’ (1996) finding

that personal or self-interest may be a factor motivating prejudice more than the factor of social identity. The white male experiencing a stalled career wonders, “Why am I being denied this? Oh, it must be because I am a white male.” This deduction engenders group cohesion among white males. In another ironic twist, the white male experiencing a stalled career says, “It’s not fair that women and minorities get advanced because of who they are, without any regard to what they can do,” and at the same time the white male says, “It’s not fair that I’m looked at for who I am rather than what I can do.”

The group position theory aspect of SIT suggests that 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 (see Blumer, 1960; Campbell, 1965). The perceived threat may lead to solidarity and internal cohesion within the ingroup (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999), as happened with the white males experiencing a stalled career. The dynamics of the stalled career experience, however, did not show that 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. While the white males participating in this study explicitly acknowledged the sense of entitlement and privilege that white males have had in the past, their only expectation was for a reward for doing a good job. They did not claim any personal sense of entitlement.

Shift toward externality. The participants’ sense of a loss of control in relation to their stalled career emerged as a substantial theme in this study, and the construct of locus of control proved helpful in examining this theme. The stalled career experience results in a shift toward externality in the individual’s perceived locus of control of reinforcement (i.e., “I can’t do anything to change the situation.”). “It is this perception of the ability ‘to do something’ that gives rise to the concept of perceived control” (Lefcourt, 1972, p. 5).

Locus of control includes four aspects: 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) (see Cain, 1994; Gurin & Brim, 1984; Harrington, 1985;

Howell & Avolio, 1993; Jackson & Tessler, 1984; Nelson, Cooper, & Jackson, 1995; Ormel & Schaufeli, 1991; Thomas & Velthouse, 1990; Trimble & Richardson, 1983). The phenomenological analysis of the stalled career showed all four aspects of locus of control. The findings suggest that those experiencing a stalled career have a moderate sense of self-efficacy and self-esteem, but a low sense of autonomy and instrumentality. As George notes, "You have the benefit of knowing what's going to happen but you don't have the benefit of being able to utilize it to change the outcome." This makes the situation undesirable and unmanageable.

The participants' sense that the situation is due to luck, chance, fate, or factors beyond their control, indicates an external locus of control. This perceived loss of control over the environment shapes the white male's perception of his ability to cope with the stalled career. As Martin states, "It really doesn't matter what I've done or what I do. If what I perceive the problem will be is correct there's not a thing I can do about it." The perceived loss of control is detrimental, so that any action taken to address the situation makes no difference. The essence of the experience includes feeling disenfranchised and frustrated at the inability to do anything to change things.

Research in the U.S. shows a consistent inclination toward internality over the life course regardless of race and gender, with a peak in internal locus of control during the mid-life transition years (Cain, 1994). That did not occur for the white males experiencing a stalled career, continuing the theme of "the way things should be versus the way they actually are." Although locus of control may change with life experiences, internality should be peaking at this point in life, contributing toward a positive career outcome. The situation, however, is not the way it was, and it is not the way it is supposed to be. Things that the individual held to be true are no longer true.

Given the strong perception of externality, those experiencing a stalled career intentionally chose the coping strategy of relinquishing any remaining control over their situation. As Jeff states, "This is not about me. It's about management. It's their

problem.” George concurs, “You accept some of the stuff you can’t change. I view it as experiencing the realities of life and I now choose to not worry about it.” Martin elaborates on the intentional shift toward externality, saying:

I’m letting go of the feeling that, you know what’s happening isn’t fair to you and that you can’t really do much about it. You finally get to the point that you might as well just move on and try to either find yourself another situation or just accept the fact that in the current environment in this agency, it’s happened and it’s going to continue to happen. And saying that the emotional energy, the mental energy, the physical energy, the time that you may spend doing this maybe could be channeled to someplace more productive.

Undiscussable nature of the experience impedes sensemaking. “Organizational defensive routines are any policies or actions that prevent organizational players from experiencing embarrassment or threat and, at the same time, prevent the organization from uncovering the causes of the embarrassment or threat to reduce or get rid of them” (Argyris, 1999, p. 42). Organizational undiscussables, a form of defensive routine (Argyris, 1992, 1999), breed tension, add to role conflict and ambiguity, and lead to inconsistent practices that foster concerns about equity, diversity, and fair treatment. The findings from the phenomenological analysis suggest that the phenomenon of the stalled career is an organizational undiscussable. As Mel stipulates, “We can’t talk about it in the open. In this agency it’s fairly important not to say anything to offend somebody. So you think about this and then you go on your merry way.” Societal norms that inhibit men from expressing feelings, emotions, and vulnerability (Gilbert, 1985; Vaux, 1985) reinforce the undiscussable nature of the experience.

Issues surfaced during the data collection process described in Chapter 3 support the conclusion that the stalled career is an undiscussable, starting with the requirement to use pseudonyms for each subject. Other issues include the newspaper declining the classified advertisement soliciting participants because they considered the topic inflammatory; Peter’s sustained interest in the study but unwillingness to get involved “on record” until after he had retired, similar to many other potential participants; Ralph and Phil’s concern that I was talking about one to the other; Phil’s disbelief of my assurance of

confidentiality, despite the use of an alias; Phil's concern about damage to his reputation or career because "I told my story;" and, requested changes to individuals' names and organizations (e.g., "That pseudonym might be too close to my real name.") during the member checks.

Sensemaking or making meaning tends to be done through interaction with others (Lefcourt, 1972; Mezirow, 1985). Because sensemaking is done with others, it becomes difficult if the issue is an organizational undiscussable. For the white male experiencing a stalled career, things do not make sense. At the same time, this white male is unable to make sense of the situation through conversation with others because the topic of having a stalled career is an organizational undiscussable. Mel acknowledges this double bind, stating, "It leaves you having to decide whether you want to continue in a nonsensical environment or move on and hope that, where you alight the next time, the situation doesn't happen again. You know, of course, there's no guarantee."

Additionally, sensemaking is constrained if everyone involved in the discussion shares the same perspective (Resnick, 1991). In this study, those experiencing a stalled career primarily discussed their stalled career with other white males. Generally, other white males showed empathic support to the white males experiencing a stalled career because they had the same perspective, thereby impeding sensemaking.

Negative impact of the experience. The findings show the stalled career phenomenon is an issue in the contemporary workplace and has a negative impact on the organization, as well as the individual experiencing it. The "transition is not so much a matter of change as of the individual's perception of the change" (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995, p. 28). This study showed that the perception of the change lies in the white male's revised expectations for advancement. The transition caused a loss of aspirations; the life "dream" of a career.

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). Eby and Buch (1995) suggest that emotional acceptance of the work transition is critical in determining which men are able to adapt and experience career growth as the transition outcome. The substantial negative emotional impact of the stalled career is consistent with these prior studies, and contributed to the sense of loss of control described earlier in the conclusions. The noesis, or the way the transition was experienced generated a visceral reaction of strong, negative emotions. As Jeff clarifies, “The transition didn’t make me angry. Going *through* the transition made me angry.” The data collection process also indicated the powerful emotions associated with the stalled career experience (e.g., Clyde “confessing” that he was not going to participate because confronting his stalled career made him “uncomfortable,” Phil’s disinterest in the “catharsis” to which the interview process might lead).

The stalled career experience leaves the individual feeling left out, without anyone pulling for him, yet he sees women and minorities getting pushed ahead by mentors, sponsors, and management advocates. As Martin notes, “It’s kind of hard to be loyal to your command when you get shoved to the side so diversity can take over and promote somebody.” At the heart of every employer-employee relationship is a psychological contract that covers the mutual obligations of both parties (Robinson & Morrison, 2002). The participants described the stalled career experience as a “violation” of that contract. The stalled career has a mental, physical, emotional toll, driven by the substantial affective component, where the white male feels ignored, alienated, excluded, pushed off to the side, betrayed, left out. This leaves him angry, disenfranchised, and cynical. The experience erodes loyalty and trust, and reduces performance.

The stalled career phenomenon has a detrimental organizational impact, placing it on the continuum evidenced as the WMB phenomenon (Kormanik, 2000). Examples provided by the participants in this study included inactive expressions of negative attitude, defensive routines that obstruct interaction, verbal conflicts that diminish morale, and intentional

reduction in productivity. In the process, the stalled career phenomenon becomes problematic by being divisive and diverting energies away from doing work. In turn, the participants agreed it has a detrimental impact on organizational effectiveness and mission accomplishment. The participants suggested that white males experiencing a stalled career may increase their level of detrimental behaviors. Some even described instances of violent workplace behaviors perpetrated by other disenfranchised white males. As Martin describes it, “There are some people around here that I think probably could go that way. I hope not to the point of shootin’ somebody. But I’ve seen a few people very violent.”

Participants suggested that at least 30% of white males in their work group were experiencing a stalled career. Robert generalized that, “It’s having an adverse effect on public service.” George was more specific about the compromise to mission accomplishment by the hiring of women and minorities based on quotas rather than qualifications. “The bottom line for preparedness is that you will have a lot of [people] out there that cannot do the job properly. But because they were able to politic their way into positions, they will get a lot of men killed until such time as they’re weeded back out of the system.” The finding that the stalled career phenomenon is having a negative impact on the workplace is consistent with the study of practitioner perspectives on WMB, showing that the broader phenomenon of backlash is seen as a workplace problem by 47% of the informants (Kormanik, 2000).

Conclusions from the Analysis using the Transitions Conceptual Framework

Examination of the stalled career as a non-event transition entailed looking at the 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 between these four factors represents the transition process, indicates the opportunity for growth or deterioration, and leads to a positive or negative transition outcome. The outcome of a transition largely depends on the balance of an individual’s coping assets and liabilities

(Charner & Schlossberg, 1986; Schlossberg, 1981, 1984). Consistent with transitions theory, each participant had a different interaction between the four factors, evidenced in qualitative data (i.e., individual textural-structural descriptions) and quantitative data (i.e., TCG scores).

Despite the participants' differences, regular overarching patterns emerged and enhanced understanding of the stalled career experience. These patterns provided three primary conclusions about the transition. 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 was other white males whose support tended to reinforce being in the transition rather than encourage 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.

Non-event nature of the transition. The participants confirmed that the stalled career is a transition, where “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). A non-event transition is marked by the non-occurrence of an anticipated life event (e.g., expected promotion, non-achievement of the Levinsonian “dream”). The findings show that the stalled career is a non-event work transition.

Change may be unplanned, as “unattended accumulation of change pressures can often result in an abrupt crises or a radical wrenching change” (Smith, 1995, p. 77), without having the occurrence of a critical event. Participants did not see the stalled career as a transition precipitated by a critical event. Instead, they saw it as a form of crisis, consistent with the concept of a non-event, arising from a combination of conversations and incidents of disparate treatment where women and minorities benefit and the white male experiencing the stalled career is penalized. The stalled career experience entailed a change (e.g., loss of

career aspirations, distrust of management, reduced loyalty to the organization) from the way things had been, to which those experiencing the transition had to learn ways to cope.

Support systems as a coping resource. Factors that are environmental, or external to the individual, explain part of the variance in individuals' coping response to work transition (Heppner, 1998). Environmental variables include any support system that affects coping with a transition (Charner & Schlossberg, 1986). Transitions theory assumes that individuals in transition use their support systems as a coping resource to get beyond the crisis created by the transition (Schlossberg, 1981). Support systems in this study of the stalled career experience consisted of intimate family relationships, a network of friends, and institutional support. Examined through the lens of transitions theory, middle age white males experiencing the non-event work transition of a stalled career should use their support systems to ensure a positive transition outcome. Generally, this did not occur for the white males experiencing a stalled career.

Communicative learning through support systems enhances sensemaking, but those white males experiencing a stalled career reported deficient support systems. Studies show that having social support is related to decreased work transition stress (Caplan, Vinkour, Price, & van Ryn, 1989; Newman, 1988) and a lack of social support predicted a number of stress symptoms (Mallinckrodt & Fretz, 1988). In this study, those with the fewest support systems sustained a longer stalled career, reinforcing support systems' substantial role in navigating a transition.

All the participants decried the lack of support from their supervisor, management, and coworkers. Some also noted a lack of support from friends, and even spoke of losing friends as a result of bringing up their experience. As Robert tells it, "I've lost my friends at [work], basically." Just when the white male experiencing a stalled career has the most need, he has the fewest support systems with which he can address his experience. He gets minimal support for adapting to, coping with, or changing the situation. Because the topic

of the stalled career is an organizational undiscussable, discussion is restricted.

Sensemaking is impeded.

In the experience of a stalled career, support primarily comes from other white males. As Mel describes it:

Talking with other guys, we all feel pretty much the same way—commiseration support. Kind of talking about a commonly felt issue and being empathetic because you've been through it, saying, "I know what you've been going through. I know where you're coming from. We don't really have a chance. Isn't this a crock of shit!"

Supportive behaviors include affirmation and agreement, assistance, and feedback (Charner & Schlossberg, 1986). Unfortunately, support for the white male experiencing a stalled career is generally in the form of affirmation and agreement (i.e., "Yeah, I know how you feel.") without assistance or feedback (i.e., "What are you going to do to change things? Would it help if . . .?"). Russell (1993) shows that a lack of access to mentors who can provide assistance and feedback is a major detriment to navigating a work transition. The participants in this study identified a lack of mentors or sponsors as a factor contributing to their stalled career. They did, however, perceive that women and minorities in their professional cohort had mentors "coming out of the woodwork" to provide support and sponsorship. The white males' sense that women and minorities are getting mentored and white males are not is ironic, in that women have historically lacked the guidance of a mentor (Kram, 1988).

Individuals who have the support of those closest to them (e.g., spouse, family members) are better able to adapt to a transition (Schlossberg & Leibowitz, 1980; Sparks, 1987). Men rely almost exclusively on their spouse for support (Gilbert, 1985), but only two of the participants in this study had a spouse, only one of whom provided support for coping with the stalled career. Although men who are able to expand their support base are more likely to experience career growth in times of work transition (Eby & Buch, 1995), four of the five participants in this study noted a reduction in their sources of social support.

Balance of coping assets and liabilities in equilibrium. Coping includes “any response to external life strains that serves to prevent, avoid, or control emotional distress” (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978, p. 3). Dimensions for coping with a life strain (i.e., situation) include social resources (i.e., support), psychological resources (i.e., self), and coping responses (i.e., strategies). This equation for coping with a life strain parallels the 4S model for analyzing adults in transition (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995). The transition outcome is the balance of the individual’s coping assets and liabilities.

Transitions theory suggests that a middle age white male experiencing the non-event work transition of a stalled career will use his coping dimensions to ensure a positive transition outcome. Where this is the case, coping assets greater than coping liabilities tips the balance, resulting in a positive transition outcome. It is not clear that this occurred for the participants in this study (see Figure 5). The following paragraphs explain the

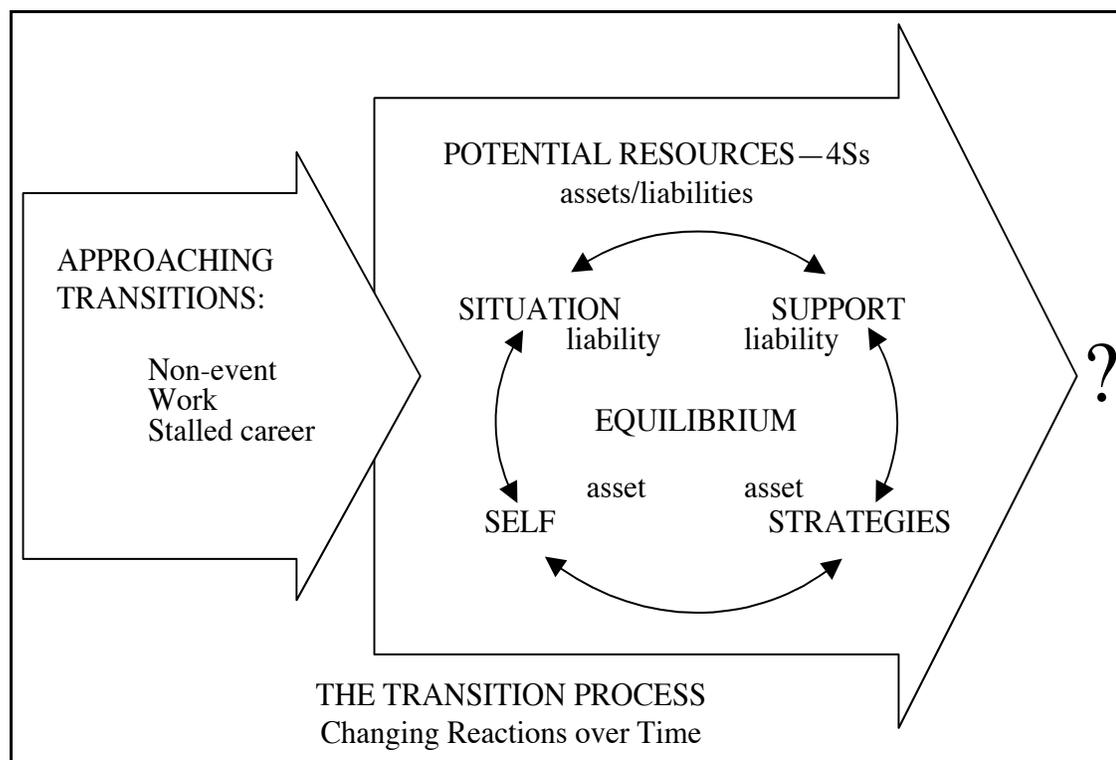


Figure 5. Depiction of the non-event work transition of a stalled career.

conclusion that the balance of the coping assets and liabilities of the white male experiencing a stalled career may be in a state of equilibrium.

Participants indicated that the situation and support were liabilities. Those experiencing a stalled career perceived the situation as the most detrimental of the 4Ss. The situation was forced upon them, was undesirable, and was unmanageable. Individuals experiencing a transition often need a new network of relationships to enhance their ability to navigate the transition (Schlossberg, 1981), but, as discussed earlier, support systems for a successful navigation of the stalled career were deficient.

Participants indicated the self and strategies were assets. Although the participants in this study noted that they cannot control the situation, they said they can control who they are and the way in which they react to the situation. Individuals experiencing a transition often need a new way of seeing themselves to enhance their ability to navigate the transition (Schlossberg, 1981). For the participants in this study, the most prominent strategy in navigating through the stalled career transition involved changing the way they see themselves. Those experiencing a stalled career maintained a high sense of self-efficacy and self-esteem despite the shift toward externality in locus of control of reinforcement regarding career advancement.

Regarding the characteristics of the self, 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. Individuals experiencing a stalled career cannot manage the environment but they can manage the strategies for coping with the environment. The participants' coping strategies included "moving beyond it" and regaining a positive attitude. The less negative the emotional state of the individual experiencing a work transition, the more they use active coping strategies (Leana & Feldman, 1992). The sense of resolution of the stalled career transition involves recreating congruity between the way things are and the way things

should be. Once the white male experiencing a stalled career reconciled the new “normal,” he was able to regain a positive attitude about his future.

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). Lefcourt (1976) argues 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” (p. 3). 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. With the white males in this study, their stalled career ended when they left their job (e.g., lateral move to a similar job, departure to a more menial job, retirement). Career growth did not occur, suggesting a negative career outcome.

The stalled career was seen as a negative experience, both during and after. 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). Some of the white males in this study reduced their work effort as a result of experiencing a stalled career. During the transition they intentionally started doing only “required” work and not putting forth any of the extra effort they had been doing prior to the stalled career. This dysfunctional strategy is consistent with studies of violation of the psychological contract (Robinson & Morrison, 2002). The strategy marked a shift from transformational to transactional relationship behaviors between the white male experiencing the stalled career and his supervisor.

The conflicting data indicating whether the stalled career transition is complete or not makes it difficult to conclude that the transition resulted in a positive outcome. For example, George entered his transition in 1989 and he perceived that he completed the transition in 1995. He has moved on to a different job in a different organization, so it

appears that he is no longer experiencing a stalled career, yet he continues to feel that the system is broken, there is mismanagement, and women and minorities are getting ahead without merit. He feels he completed the transition and, at the same time, feels the situation still exists. Alternatively, the perception of a stalled career may itself be symptomatic of a negative outcome of some white males' non-event work transition. He got through the stalled career, but the violation to the psychological contract of employment erased his trust and left him with a "bitter taste" regarding his employment.

These conditions leave the balance of coping assets and liabilities in a state of equilibrium. The duration of the plateaued state of a stalled career seems longer and the intensity seems greater than expected. This state of equilibrium does not mean the individual cannot function. Despite the perceived loss of control over the issue of career progression, those experiencing a stalled career take charge or maintain control in other areas of their work and personal lives.

Implications for Theory

The results of this study describe and enhance understanding of the stalled career phenomenon. Generalizability was not the intended byproduct. The intent was to facilitate understanding, important for theoretical reasons. This study generated theory on the stalled career construct and provided empirical research on the phenomenon. Konrad and Spitz (1999) suggest that "it is important to move beyond the treatment of demographics as either proxies for theoretical constructs or sources of error variance that must be controlled [R]esearch must identify the theoretical reasons why demographic groups are expected to differ and incorporate measures of the relevant theoretical constructs" (p. 4). In this regard, the data revealed a stalled career as a global construct, having cognitive, affective, and behavioral components. Aspects of the construct include attitude toward AA and diversity programs, concerns about self-interests, reaction to organizational change, sense of equity, and life transitions.

This study explicated that SDT plays out in the contemporary workplace. The findings suggest that the perception of having a stalled career is a hierarchy-enhancing (HE) force acting to counterbalance gains made by the hierarchy-attenuating (HA) forces of AA and diversity programming. As an HE force, the perception of having a stalled career leads to a lack of support for organizational efforts to promote social equality but it does not appear to lead to displaced aggression against women and minorities.

This study provided empirical research on Schlossberg's transitions theory within the context of the contemporary workplace. It also provided empirical research on work transitions occurring at midlife. Although transitions theory assumes a transition outcome, either positive or negative, the results of this study suggest that that assumption may not hold true for the non-event transition of a stalled career. Further research may reveal this is a generalized expectancy for all non-event transitions.

This study also contributes to the careers literature with the introduction of the stalled career construct. The white male experiencing a stalled career perceives that his career has *stalled* in comparison to female and minority colleagues. The findings in this study differ from Pelled, Eisenhardt, and Xin's (1999) study indicating that the work transition process is more highly connected to age, tenure, and functional background than to race and gender. A comparative study contrasting the stalled career experience with other forms of career plateau may reveal further conclusions about the relationship between group conflict and diversity factors (e.g., race, gender, age, tenure, functional background).

Implications for Practice

Engels (1995) calls out the need 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" (p. 84). This study provides data to describe and enhance understanding of the stalled career phenomenon. This understanding is important for practical reasons. The following sections highlight the

implications for the organization, functional practitioners, supervisors, and those experiencing a stalled career or other non-event work transition.

Implications for the Organization

Resistance to planned change is a major issue that organizational leadership and change agents must address (Blake, 1992). Another side effect of planned organizational change is negative or dysfunctional employee attitudes. Those leading organizational change should be aware of the stalled career as a factor that contributes to resistance to change, and plan strategies accordingly. Keeping employees informed in general, and especially regarding the rationale and objectives for planned change, would likely help minimize the disorientation, such as that manifest as a stalled career. The data from this study suggest taking into consideration specific populations, such as white males, in the development of models for facilitating change.

Blake (1992) highlighted that employees' sense of control is an issue in the reluctance of employees to embrace organizational change. Individual employees, including white males, must have some sense that planned change will work. A greater sense of control comes from cohesiveness, collaboration, establishing community norms of acceptance, involvement in problem solving and decision making, and participatory intervention. These actions unify by reinforcing common interests and diminishing the divisive ingroup/outgroup dynamics evident in the stalled career experience.

Implications for Functional Practitioners

The results of this study are useful for functional practitioners (e.g., HR specialist, EEO/AA director, diversity program manager) who must address the collective and individual needs of employees, including white males, by assisting in the successful navigation of work transitions. The functional practitioner should provide guidance and support to organizational change agents and all employees. The emphasis should be on helping people adapt to or cope with change.

All practitioners should contribute to the understanding of ingroup/outgroup dynamics. The primary objective should be to remove the stigma of organizational undiscussables, such as a stalled career, by getting employees engaged in productive conversation. Facilitating structured dialogues on workplace diversity issues is an effective way to create an opportunity for discussion of highly-charged, polemical issues such as race and gender (Kormanik & Apperson, 2002; Kormanik, Krieger, & Tilghman, 2000). The structured nature of the dialogue process enhances awareness development out of intellectualization to encounter, and from encounter through empowerment to integration. Functional practitioners can play a major role in promoting positive intergroup relations by promoting a work environment of cooperative interdependence. One strategy would be focusing on the career development and advancement interests of *all* employees and reemphasizing merit. Formal mentoring programs for all employees, including white males, would add social support to the mix.

Diversity programs need to leverage all aspects of diversity to enhance organizational effectiveness. Organizations should sponsor diversity programs that take a broader, more inclusive approach by looking beyond representation and demographic differences (e.g., race, gender) to the organizational objective of maximizing the cooperative efforts of all employees toward the common interest of mission accomplishment. Diversity programs need to dispel white males' perception that these programs are "not for me." If we do not help white males adjust to the changed workplace, they will disengage, thereby compromising the desired benefit that workforce diversity brings to the workplace (Rifkin, 1994). Where white males experiencing a stalled career exhibit dysfunctional behaviors because of feeling disenfranchised, practitioners must develop strategies for ensuring that any dysfunctional aspects of the phenomenon are minimized.

The results of this study have implications for career counselors and therapists. The perception of a lack of career development appears to be a substantial factor in the stalled career experience. "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). Bejian and Salomone (1995) note the harsh realities of a workforce for which upward mobility depends on personal internal career resilience and renewal. Both problem-focused and emotion-focused interventions are important for men experiencing a work transition. While organizational interventions to address transition should be problem-focused, they should also sufficiently address the affective (i.e., emotional, psycho-social) issues of those experiencing a stalled career transition.

Implications for Supervisors

The results of this study provide insights and guidance to supervisors, who must select employees for limited advancement opportunities and are charged with creating other developmental opportunities for their subordinates. Supervisors can mitigate, if not prevent, the experience of a stalled career through visible and supportive management behaviors. Three things might help. First, supervisors can encourage continuous learning, reflective practice, and open dialogue to enhance employees’ ability to cope with the changed workplace environment. Second, supervisors can more actively support organizational change rather than “blaming” upper management (i.e., “This change might actually help us do the job more efficiently,” rather than, “I know this change is stupid, but management is being PC. I don’t want to do it, but they told us we had to.”). Three, supervisors can do a better job of routinely providing constructive feedback to white males, particularly those who are performing at or below par (i.e., “This is where you can do better. Let’s talk about how you can improve so you can be considered for promotion,” rather than, “You’re doing okay. It’s just that management wants to get more women in the job.”).

Supervisors are those in the workplace with the most direct opportunity to positively influence those experiencing a stalled career. When confronted by an individual experiencing a stalled career, supervisors should support the individual’s successful navigation of this non-event work transition. Three things might help enhance the

employee's sense of control and self-efficacy. First, supervisors can take a more active role in challenging white males to adapt to the changed workplace (i.e., "I can understand that you may not like the way things have changed, but nevertheless they have. What can I do to help you adjust?"). Second, supervisors can refer those experiencing a stalled career to organizational support functions (e.g., career counseling, employee assistance programs). Third, when a supervisor is confronted by any employee alleging discrimination, such as a white male experiencing a stalled career, the supervisor can refer the employee to the appropriate organizational support function (e.g., human resources, EEO, employee relations, grievance office) for redress.

Implications for White Males

Lastly, the results of this study have implications for white males experiencing a stalled career, as well as other individuals who experience the work transition of a plateaued career at midlife. Employees must understand that the traditional model of career progression is no longer assured. To prevent a stalled career or to successfully navigate the transition, the white male must reflect on his career aspirations and assumptions. Education or continuous learning builds career resilience. Without learning, growth and development is stunted. Engels (1995) particularly emphasizes the need for self-renewal in the face of a work transition. Successfully managing the change involved with work transition demands self-reflection and self-efficacy (Eby & Buch, 1995). The results of this study provide a challenge to engage in reflective practice regarding enhancing one's career progression and sense of self-efficacy.

Recommendations for Further Research

Identification of conclusions and implications is not the end of inquiry into the stalled career phenomenon. Moustakas (1994) clarifies that:

Knowledge does not end with moments of connectedness, understanding, or meaning. Such journeys open vistas to new journeys for uncovering meaning, truth, and essence—journeys within journeys, within journeys. This is perhaps the most telling reality of all, that each stopping place is but a pause in arriving at knowledge. Satisfying as it is, it is but the inspiration for a new beginning (p. 65).

Recommendations to inspire a new beginning include replicating this study with a larger sample. A larger sample size would provide empirical evidence on the extent of the stalled career phenomenon in the larger population of all white males. Development of a survey instrument using quantitative psychometric measures would examine aspects of the stalled career (i.e., how it is manifest, experienced), perceptions versus actual experiences or behaviors, discrimination complaint activity or other outcomes, and other relevant factors.

The stalled career phenomenon differed from WMB in that it does not appear to promote generalized ethnocentrism or focus on preservation of white males' dominant position and sense of entitlement. Both phenomena lead to solidarity among some white males. Statistical evidence examining any relationship between the stalled career and self-interest, stratification ideology, and gender/racial attitudes would enhance the qualitative foundation provided by this study. Cross group comparisons with other independent variables can include family status, age, occupation, organizational setting, industry, social background, political affiliation, and ideology.

White males experiencing a stalled career showed minimal aspects of the political conservatism shown by other authors (Sindanius & Pratto, 1999; Yang, 1996). Consistent with SIT, a white male may develop conservative political views as a result of experiencing a stalled career. The participants in this study, however, were not asked about their political views so a conclusion in that regard would be inappropriate. Also, although the white males experiencing a stalled career transition identified a substantial amount of dissonance in the experience, the impact that the dissonance will have on the white male's life span development is uncertain. Future research can address these issues.

To gain further insights into the outcome of the stalled career and its impact on life span development, conduct a longitudinal analysis with the participants. Comparison of the results of this study with the broader population of white males would be helpful. For example, comparison of the composite textural-structural description from this study with a

description of a white male who has experienced a plateaued career, but not a stalled career, would provide additional insights.

The stalled career can be seen as a dysfunctional strategy for coping with change. Further research would help ascertain any benefit (e.g., career growth or development) of the stalled career phenomenon that exceeds the costs (e.g., loss of individual and organizational performance). This exploratory study sought to describe the stalled career phenomenon and provide some indication of its impact on the workplace. Although participants suggested the stalled career is detrimental to organizational effectiveness, further research is needed on ways to effectively address its problematic nature.

This study focused on white males' self-descriptions of their own experience with a stalled career. It would be helpful to get information from others to develop a fuller description of the stalled career experience. For example, what is the experience of those who have to deal with, or those who are confronted by, a white male experiencing a stalled career? What is the other party's experience? How does this impact the individuals' relationship with the white male, both professionally and personally? How does their relationship impact the organization? Will women, minorities, and other white males be aware of or even care that some white males are experiencing a stalled career? Do people who are aware of a white male experiencing a stalled career avoid that white male? Will they be concerned or happy when the white male experiencing the stalled career leaves the organization?

Chapter Summary

This study described the stalled career phenomenon and its impact on the contemporary workplace. It confirmed that the experience of a stalled career is evidence of some white males' negative reaction toward factors that are changing the workplace and resulting in those white males' perception of unfair and discriminatory practices. This experience is consistent with a non-event work transition (Schlossberg, 1981).

“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). The perception of having a stalled career is symptomatic of this internal discord. For a white male experiencing a stalled career, his sense of agency is reduced by a situation he does not understand and that he sees as outside himself, beyond his control.

In essence, this study examined the learning journey of white males as they experience a stalled career. The idea that we are living in an increasingly pluralistic world should challenge everyone to further development through continuous learning. For some individuals, learning represents change (Candy, 1991). Some individuals avoid learning because they fear change. For others, learning is a challenge to their basic assumptions about the world and the attendant value system that world view represents. Unfortunately, people struggle with unrealized dreams, saying, “It’s too late. I missed my chance. It can’t be,” thereby aborting any chance of a continuous learning journey. Those white males experiencing a stalled career join this chorus, primarily looking at reasons outside themselves in their quest to make sense of their stalled career transition.

The stalled career phenomenon has a negative impact on the workplace by being divisive and drawing energies away from mission accomplishment. The participants in this study perceived it as “a big issue” for organizations. Unfortunately, as Jeff notes, “The agency is not doing anything about it. I think what they need to do about it is recognize that there is a problem and then start to try to diffuse it.” Although the phenomenon is having a negative impact on the organization, management is not doing anything about it because it is not seen as an issue or, if it is recognized, it is seen as “something we can’t talk about” (i.e., an organizational undiscussable).

The conclusions in this study in no way suggest that the stalled career phenomenon should displace other issues of race and gender already evident in research and practice—chiefly, the history of discrimination against women and minorities. The

conclusions suggest, however, that white males are just as susceptible to perceptions of inequity and discrimination, and that their perceptions can manifest in negative attitudes and behaviors that are detrimental to organizational effectiveness. White males remain the biggest percentage of the American workforce. In large part, they also continue to hold positions of power and influence. The results of this exploratory study provide an imperative for understanding and addressing the stalled career phenomenon due to its own merits, as well as its interdependence with the ultimate resolution of other race and gender issues.

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Appendix A

Personal Significance of the Phenomenon

This process of inquiry in this study has marked a substantial learning journey for me both as a researcher and as a middle age white male. I have not personally had the experience of a stalled career. An incident in the mid-1980s, however, provided a pivotal point in my awareness of inconsistency or incongruence between organizational policy on EEO and an organizational agent taking questionable action in relation to an employment decision because of fear of an EEO complaint. At that time, I had worked in a variety of organizational settings and had supervised a large number of demographically diverse employees (i.e., male and female, majority and minority, young and old). I was aware of the need for fair and equitable treatment in employment decisions and I attempted to be consistent in how I managed every employee. Thus far, I had not had an EEO problem, *per se*, with an employee.

While serving as a departmental manager for a large, specialty retail organization, one of my responsibilities was managing the performance of the department's 36 member workforce. Central to the process was providing structured weekly feedback with each sales associate, including informal training and coaching on selling skills to improve sales performance. The process took time, consuming 15-18 hours per week. Organizational procedures included clear steps for providing feedback and comparing each employee's performance against an objective performance standard derived from group sales data. Group and individual sales data were posted publicly so that each associate knew the group standard and their own individual performance in relation to all other sales associates. An employee performing below standard in any week received a verbal counseling. If the employee performed below standard for any three weeks in a rolling five-week period, they received a written warning. Getting three written warnings was grounds for termination. It was an open process, so that each associate knew where he or she performed in relation to

the other associates. Consequently, as figures were posted each week every associate knew who received a verbal counseling or written warning.

Indiria, an employee who had previously been a top producer, was now performing below standard. Consistent with the policy, she received verbal warnings to improve her sales. During the weekly feedback sessions, I offered suggestions and help if she could identify anything she needed. The performance feedback process continued, without Indiria's performance improving, and with her getting a first and second written warning. During the process, I consulted the Personnel Director on more than one occasion to verify that I was proceeding as required by the policy. The Personnel Director reassured me on each occasion that I was acting correctly and that, consistent with policy, Indiria would be terminated after the third written warning if her performance did not improve. I did not want to fire Indiria, but she had left no choice in terms of following the performance management policy. If Indiria was not going to do her job, I would do my job and the Personnel Director would do her job.

Over the ensuing weeks Indiria's performance did not improve and she received a third written warning. When I went to the Personnel Director to discuss the next steps for terminating Indiria, she suggested that perhaps I was acting too hastily and that I had not provided Indiria with sufficient feedback or support for improving her performance. When I reviewed all the documentation with the Personnel Director, as I had done previously, she reiterated that I had acted according to policy. Despite the consistency in my documentation of feedback to Indiria and other associates, the Personnel Director said that she did not feel comfortable carrying out the termination according to policy. When I asked for an explanation, especially after all the time and effort I had put into the process, the Personnel Director admitted that she did not want to proceed because Indiria was "an older black female." The Personnel Director feared a discrimination lawsuit, even though the personnel action was consistent with policy.

As a result of the Personnel Director's lack of action, I felt disappointed and frustrated. I felt that the organization had expected me to follow a policy which gave each employee fair and equitable treatment around his or her individual performance. After spending considerable time and energy operating in good faith and according to company policy, I felt that the company had not backed me up—the Personnel Director left me with the impression that there was no integrity to the organizational implementation of the performance management policy. I also felt the company's lack of action or follow-through conveyed to Indiria that she could perform however, or do whatever she wanted, without suffering any consequence. Similarly, I felt the company's lack of follow-through action sent a signal to other members of the work group, who had expected Indiria to be fired in accordance with company policy. Because that did not occur, others in the work group perceived that the system had no integrity; no meaning. I lost credibility with the rest of my workforce in relation to the performance improvement policy. The system was seen as having no force or integrity. I also saw the outwardly fair and equitable policy implemented in an unfair manner, with the Personnel Director telling me to treat Indiria differently because Indiria was an older black female.

Twenty years later, the study of the experience of a stalled career also beckons to me for practical reasons. In 1988, I joined a management consulting firm which specializes in employment law compliance training. In the process, I became a subject matter expert on workplace issues related to fair employment law and practices governing EEO and AA. While working with clients on these topics, consistently and increasingly I would hear from white males, as well as women and minorities, about the frustration expressed by some white males over their lack of career progression. These individuals did not blame their lack of career progression on women and minorities, yet they perceived that women and minorities appeared to continue to progress in their careers. It became clear that these white males saw themselves as *stalled*. My interest in understanding these white males' stalled career transition became pragmatic. How could I gain a better understanding of those white

male training participants who did not “get” EEO, AA, and diversity programs—who did not see these programs as something for them? How could I help client organizations better deal with the impact of these frustrated white male employees?

Personal observation during training initiatives provided an indication of the stalled career phenomenon. One example came from a review of a series of 10 multi-day diversity training workshops in which training participants used case studies to discuss diversity issues. In each class, participants chose four cases to discuss from among a roster of 12 cases that depicted a broad range of workplace situations and included multiple factors of diversity (e.g., education, race, gender, occupation). One case study focused on a white male who, frustrated over AA and his own lack of career advancement, wants to establish a white Advisory Support Council. This case study was the second most consistently chosen, having been selected by the participants in six of the 10 sessions.

A similar personal observation came in the synopses of a large scale training initiative on EEO and AA. The training site was an organization with a workforce comprised of 62% white males. During the AA discussion in each training session, many white male participants suggested that AA causes the organization to discriminate against white males and to lower the qualification standards to increase its representation of women and minorities. White male participants questioned the need to have representation in the organization’s workforce, suggesting that the AA mandate for representation perpetuates racism and sexism. Additionally, a central theme in the discussion was the difference between policy (i.e., the actual AA program regulations) and practice (i.e., the way the regulations are interpreted and implemented within the organization). The white male participants’ general attitude toward AA was negative and their general belief was that the program should be discontinued. A surprising number of white female participants appeared to share or support the white males’ perspective.

Personal communications with EEO and AA officers, diversity program managers, and HR practitioners surfaced the phenomenon of backlash from white males as a

workplace problem—interfering with the accomplishment of their functional missions.

Document review showed that some organizations have conducted ‘Administrative/Internal Use Only’ studies confirming WMB and citing examples of underground newsletters, e-mail discussion groups, and anonymous letters generated by angry white males. In all instances, the impact of the phenomenon was described as negative, draining energies away from effectively accomplishing the organizational mission. I chose to explore the more subtle, and what I perceived as the more common, aspect of backlash in the form of a stalled career.

Appendix B

Information Sheet for Participants

People have generally counted on the expectation that hard work pays off in steady career progression. This traditional career assumption, however, no longer holds true in today's workplace. The diminished headroom and increased competition for fewer positions has intensified the situation. Within this changed workplace, some white males perceive themselves as "stalled"—their career has plateaued while they perceive women and minorities in their professional cohort continue advancing. This study will describe the experience of middle age white males who perceive themselves as having (had) a stalled career. I am conducting this study because a number of white males have suggested it is necessary—that something needs to be done to describe the situation so that it can be addressed.

As a study participant, you will be asked to participate in three interviews with me. The interviews will be recorded and each will last approximately 90 minutes. These recorded interviews will be transcribed and analyzed to produce a description of your experience. You will have an opportunity to review and comment on the interview transcription and the description of your experience. All data collected in this study will be confidential. No one will be able to identify you from the data collected and analyzed, or in the written narrative for the study. Your name will not be attached to any information provided.

The benefits of participation to you include identification of general and specific strategies for career development, including both problem-focused and emotion-focused strategies. There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts to you, other than the interviews may involve sharing personal insights and descriptions of your life and career experience. There are no costs to you.

Your participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason. There is no penalty for not participating or withdrawing.

This study is being conducted by Martin B. Kormanik, Executive Leadership Program, Graduate School of Education and Human Development at the George Washington University. He may be reached at (voice) 703/683-8600 ext. 20, (fax) 703/683-8606, or (e-mail) kormanik@erols.com for questions or comments. You may also contact the George Washington University, Office of Sponsored Research at (202) 994-6255 if you have questions or other feedback.

I have read this form and agree to participate in the study.

Appendix C

Standard Informed Consent Form

People have generally counted on the expectation that hard work pays off in steady career progression. This traditional career assumption, however, no longer holds true in today's workplace. The diminished headroom and increased competition for fewer positions has intensified the situation. Within this changed workplace, some white males perceive themselves as "stalled"—their career has plateaued while they perceive women and minorities in their professional cohort continue advancing. This study will describe the experience of middle age white males who perceive themselves as having (had) a stalled career. I am conducting this study because a number of white males have suggested it is necessary—that something needs to be done to describe the situation so that it can be addressed.

As a study participant, you will be asked to participate in three interviews with me. The interviews will be recorded and each will last approximately 90 minutes. These recorded interviews will be transcribed by a professional transcriber or by the researcher. Based on the transcript data, the researcher will produce a description of your experience. You will have an opportunity to review and comment on the interview transcription and the description of your experience.

The benefits of participation to you include identification of general and specific strategies for career development, including both problem-focused and emotion-focused strategies. There are no costs to you, and there is no remuneration for participation in the study. There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts to you, other than that the interviews may involve sharing personal insights and descriptions of your life and career experiences. In order to fully convey your experience, the final narrative may include lengthy excerpts from the interview transcripts. All data collected in this study, however, will be confidential. No one will be able to identify you from the data collected and analyzed. Pseudonyms will be used in the narrative. Your name will not be attached to any information provided to the public.

Your participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason. There is no penalty for not participating or withdrawing.

This study is being conducted by Martin B. Kormanik, Executive Leadership Program, Graduate School of Education and Human Development at The George Washington University. The study is being conducted as dissertation research in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education. Data collected in the study may also be used in the preparation of subsequent papers, symposia presentations, and other publications. Mr. Kormanik may be reached at (voice) 703/683-8600 ext. 20, (fax) 703/683-8606, or (e-mail) kormanik@erols.com for questions or comments. You may also contact the George Washington University, Office of Sponsored Research at (202) 994-6255 if you have questions or other feedback.

I, _____, have read this form and agree to participate in the study.	
_____ Signature	_____ Date
_____ Witness	_____ Date

Appendix D

Initial Interview Protocol

First Interview

This interview is part of a study on work transitions of middle age white males. I want to thank you for your participation, because your responses are very important. For this reason, the interview will be recorded and I will be taking written notes throughout the process. All your responses will be confidential, and there will be no attribution in reporting the results of this study. Pseudonyms will be used when quoting from the transcribed text. There will be three interviews. In this first interview, I will be asking for demographic information and then some broad questions about your life and work experiences. These will be general questions, and your elaboration is important and appropriate. What questions do you have on the process at this time?

Interviewer:

Data:

Start time:

End time:

Location of interview:

Participant #:

Occupation:

Date of birth:

Age:

Place of birth:

Race: White

Gender: Male

Family status:

Sexuality:

Tell me about yourself. Who is . . . ?

Tell me about your job.

What is it like working in this organization?

Tell me about your career progression.

What factors in the work environment have helped you get ahead?

What factors have interfered with your career progression?

Why do you think your career has stalled?

That is all the questions I have for you at this time. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your work experiences?

Do you have any questions for me?

Well, I thank you again for your time. I'll see you at the second interview.

Second Interview

There will be similar introduction and rapport-building in the second interview.

During our first interview, you mentioned an experience with Tell me about your experience with [this transitional event].

Tell me more about what it is like to work in [this organization]. What does it take to get ahead? What is valued? What is taboo, or gets you into trouble?

When did you first start thinking about your career path?

What were your expectations for your career?

How have you coped with the factors that have interfered with your career progression?

Why do you think others are getting ahead and you are not?

What kind of support have you received from others during your career?

How helpful have your professional peers been?

To what extent have you solicited and received support from white male peers?

To what extent have you solicited and received support from female peers? Minority peers?

That is all the questions I have for you at this time. Do you have any questions for me?

Well, I thank you again for your time. I'll see you at the third interview.

Third Interview

There will be similar introduction and rapport-building in the third interview.

During our first interview, you mentioned an experience with

A series of questions will be asked about the participant's life transitions experiences, and the state of his life aspirations and expectations. They will be similar to the following, based on the particular context:

What did you think about your experience with What went through your mind? How did that make you feel? To what extent do you still have some of these feelings?

How were you able to move beyond these feelings, or cope with your experience?

How did these experiences affect your relationships with others?

How did these experiences affect your sense of control over your life?

To what extent did the experiences cause you to change your behavior?

How do you think these experiences affected you as a person?

Did you have any particular life dreams regarding your professional life? How do you feel about those dreams at this point?

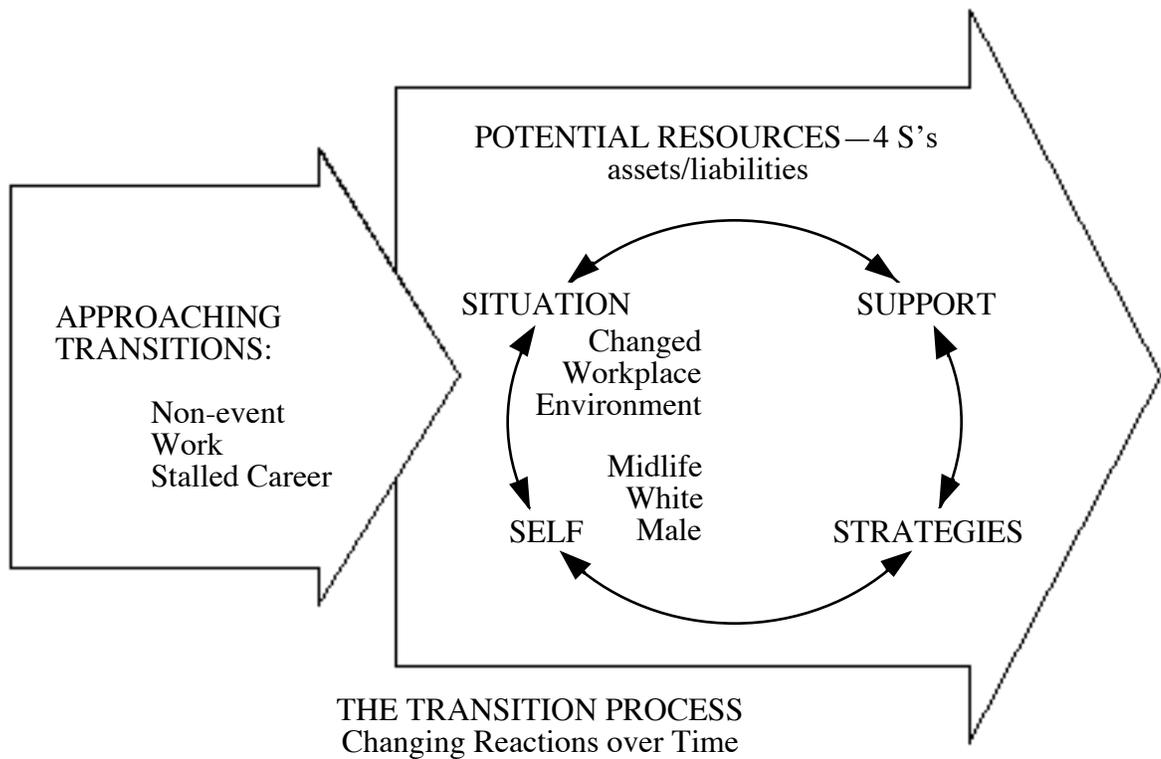
What is the meaning that you make out of your stalled career experience?

That is all the questions I have for you. Do you have any questions for me?

I thank you again for your time. Your participation in this study has been very helpful.

Participant:

Date:



Appendix E

Revised Interview Protocol

First Interview

Name:
Date:
Start time:
End time:

This is a study of the work transitions of white males at midlife. Specifically, the purpose is to describe the stalled career transition experience, where white males perceive they are not advancing or getting ahead and at the same time they perceive women and minority colleagues continue getting ahead. The stalled career of white males is distinct from the general feeling of a plateaued career experienced by many individuals regardless of their race or gender. Your responses are really important. That's one of the reasons why I'm recording this and I'll be taking some notes throughout the process. All of your responses are confidential. There is no attribution—that's why I'm also using an alias for each subject I talk with. There will be the three interviews. This will involve three interviews and each are roughly 90 minutes. The first interview focuses on general information—you, your work history—how you got to where you are and how. Between the first and second interview I'll transcribe the information, and will come back with some follow-on questions to get clarity on a few of the issues, and we'll talk about several different things in terms of how you have navigated, or how you *are navigating* this stalled career transition. The third interview focuses on describing your experience with your stalled career transition and the meaning it has for you. Many of my questions will be general, open-ended questions, so the extent to which you elaborate, it is important and appropriate.

What's your occupation?
What's your date of birth?
Your age now?
Place of birth?
Would you classify or identify yourself as white?
And your family status?

Let's start real big picture. Who is? Tell me about yourself.

How did you end up in your current job?

When was the first time in your employment history where you didn't feel like you were getting ahead. What caused you to feel that way, or to perceive that? How long were you at that grade? Is that normal? How does that compare to other colleagues—other white males? Women? Minorities? Were there other people not getting ahead at the same time? What caused you to feel that way or to perceive that?

What's your sense of your career progression?

How do you like your job?

What is it like working for this organization?

Tell me your understanding of how some of your women and minority colleagues got to be where they are. Compare that with your experience. Why do you think this is?

To what extent did, or do you use other white males as a support network for your career advancement? To what extent did, or do you use women or minorities as a support network for your career advancement?

To what extent did, or do you use other white males as a support network for coping with your stalled career transition? To what extent did, or do you use women or minorities as a support network for coping with your stalled career transition?

What factors have helped you or in general help people get ahead in your organization?

How big of a factor is being a woman or being a minority?

How about things that have interfered with or impeded your career progression?

I thank you again for your time today and I look forward to the second interview. Your participation in this study has been very helpful.

Second Interview

Name:

Date:

Start time:

End time:

Let's look at the transcript of the first interview. Any questions right now?

What have some of your thoughts been in regard to your stalled career experience since we last talked, if anything?

Remember, I want to make a distinction between those feelings of what is commonly called a plateaued career and the idea of the stalled career. In other words, you, as a white male, have felt that you were no longer getting ahead but perceived that your female and minority colleagues were. Tell me about the feelings that brings.

Has anybody ever said something to you about the quality of your work or your work performance?

Why do you think this is happening to white males—this stalled career?

Whom have you talked to about your stalled career transition experience? When you talk to other people about your stalled career transition, what is it that you're looking for?

To what extent have you talked with your white male colleagues about all this? What have they said, or what do you think they would have to say? If I would go in and talk to other white males, what would I hear?

How do you react to your white male colleagues who share your perceptions? Do you challenge them? How have your white male colleagues been supportive of your stalled career transition? How do they react to you? Do they challenge you?

How about your women and minority colleagues? To what extent have you talked with them about all this? How have your women and minority colleagues been supportive of your stalled career transition? What have they said, or what do you think they would have to say? If I would go in and talk to women and minorities in your agency, what would I hear?

I'm wondering about the system versus the individual. Do you sense your stalled career is caused more by the system (e.g., policies, laws, programs) or by individuals (e.g., management, selecting officials)?

How would you compare your competency with the competency of those women and minorities that you see advancing or getting ahead? How did they get there?

What were your expectations for your career?

When did you first start thinking about your career path and the idea that you were stalled?

How did that realization occur? How did you come to know or understand this?

What was going on inside? How were you feeling?

We're talking about a stalled career transition—the perception that you are plateaued while women and minorities are getting ahead. Where would you say you are in this transition? Would you say you are at the beginning of it, moving through it, or at the end of it?

Follow on tag questions

What have you found out?

How were they different?

When? What year? How long?

Where did you go from there?

How did you react when he said that?

How did that make you feel?

What does that mean?

Is it the same thing or are they different?

What was that all about?

So where do you see that on the scale 1–10?

What has caused this change?

Is that just your perception or the general perception?

How long have you felt this way?

That is all the questions I have for you for now. Do you have any questions for me?

I thank you again for your time today and I look forward to the third interview. Your participation in this study has been very helpful.

Third Interview

Name:

Date:

Start time:

End time:

At this point in time do you have any questions? Anything in particular you thought about during the past week relevant to your stalled career experience?

Why do you think . . . shared that with you? Why do you think he shared *that* story?

How much longer do you think you will stay in your job?

What about the options that you talked about some of your colleagues have taken to address their careers? Could you do something like that? Have you? Why/why not?

Is it the system or is it the individuals that work in the system that has most affected your experience? Do you feel that it's management—specific managers who carry out policy—or is it the policy itself?

What sense do you make out of your stalled career experience?

How is this not a universal thing that everybody feels? How is this different for white males?

When you experienced the stalled career, what helped you get beyond it? How did you cope?

Going back to your life dream in terms of your career, how do you feel about that now? How did this stalled career affect your dreams? What happened with those life goals—life dreams?

How do you think this stalled career transition affected you as a person?

How has this stalled career transition affected your sense of control? Where is your sense of control now?

To what extent has your experience with a stalled career caused you to change your behavior?

I've got an image in my mind in relation to the emotional reaction to the situation. On the one hand is 0—passive behavior, don't do anything, where if somebody wants to use you as a doormat, they can—and on the other hand is 10—aggression, I'm not just getting mad, I'm gonna get angry. To what extent did you move on this continuum in response to your stalled career experience? How low and how high did it go or has it gone? Do you ever think of going above a 10? What would have pushed you?

What has caused all this change in the workplace? How has that affected *your* experience?

So you've got all these other people getting ahead and you've got all these other things happening in society and in the workplace. So where does that leave you?

What was the reaction, or what was the relationship of support or whatever that you got from coworkers? In terms of support from your coworkers, what would you have liked to have seen them do?

Was there any difference in the support that you got from other white males versus the support that you got from women and minorities?

What could the organization have done to support you?

In the grand scheme of things going on in your agency, how big of an issue is the perception of a stalled career? What causes you to say that? Compare it with another issue that you'd say is not as much of an issue.

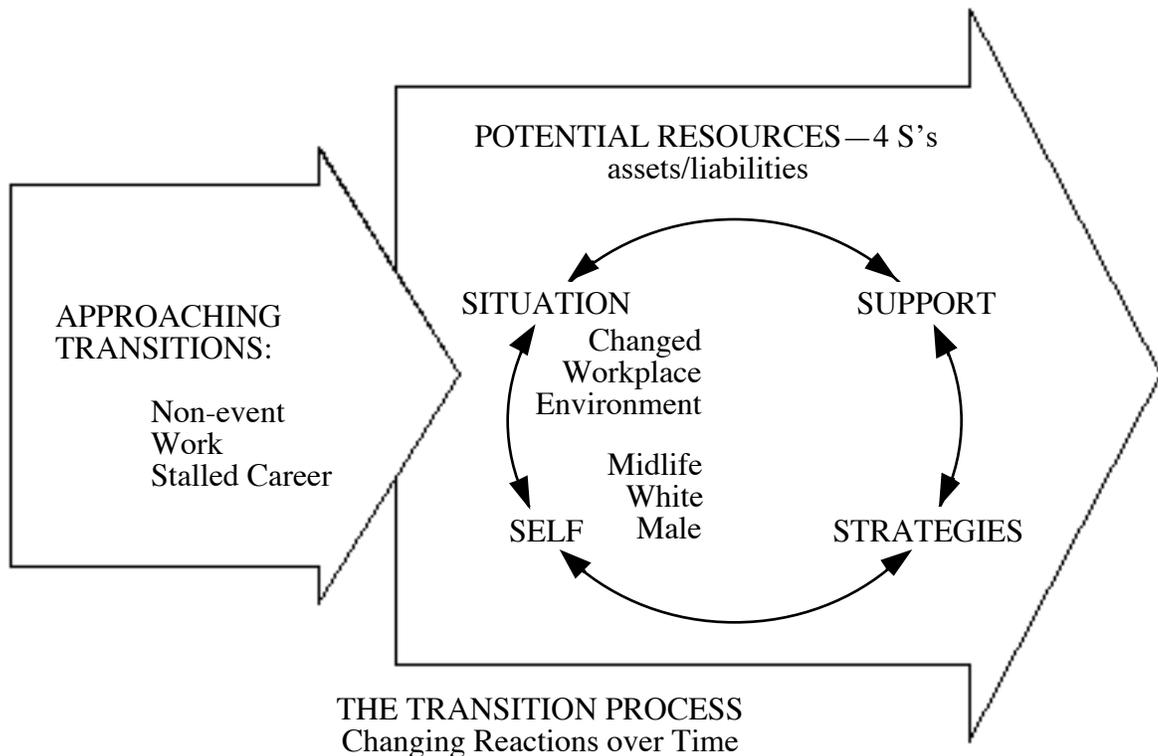
We have talked a little bit about there being the situation—this stalled career, that there is you yourself, there are supports—things outside of you, and then there are strategies—things that you can do. Supports could be others or an organization, whether it's your agency or other outside entity—a therapist, support group, whatever. Activities, actions, are the strategies piece. How did these factors play out when you were working through your stalled career transition? What were things, if any, what were interfering with your ability to use your resources to get through the transition?

Let's say you just went to a restaurant or you just went to movie. You went through that experience, and you're leaving the restaurant or you're leaving the movie theater. You have talked about moving through the stalled career transition. Let's say you're coming out of that transition like you're coming out of that restaurant or that movie theater. You're coming out of the transition of a stalled career. What do you make of the experience—that stalled career transition? What makes it different for a white male? What relevance does being a white male have in what happened? How is that different for anybody else that's not white male?

How big of an issue do you think experiencing a stalled career is for white males? What's the organization doing about it? What are the consequences of not doing something about it?

That is all the questions I have for you. Do you have any questions for me?

I thank you again for your time. Your participation in this study has been very helpful.



Appendix F

Textural-Structural Descriptions for Each Participant

Mel's Textural-Structural Description

My last performance appraisal was outstanding. There were no complaints or negative comments about my performance, but right now my career is dead in the water. I'm being passed over or ignored while other people, by nature of their sex or race, manage to get things that I didn't or couldn't because of management implying unofficially, "We have to promote those people. You may be worthy, but you're the wrong sex, wrong color." Things are supposed to be neutral, based on qualifications, experience, longevity in the job, knowledge. But another factor that you don't have comes in. And it's not because of your *lack* of knowledge or *lack* of qualifications. There's no fair competition for jobs. The same with holding people accountable for their work. It's a double standard. Even my black female boss agreed. White males are treated differently.

It's part of being PC. The agency is pushing women and minorities. White males are being told kind of like, "You're not going anywhere. We need minorities to fill quotas. We have to have more division chiefs that are female and black, or female and Hispanic." Management promotes women outside of normal career paths, without regard for their job performance and their capabilities. Some people are part of affirmative action themselves and want to help their brothers and sisters. They're looking out for another woman or another black person. Even when something is supposed to be decided by grade or seniority, they're gonna file a complaint if a white guy gets it. You think, "I just don't see how that person got that job or keeps that job. They're lazy. They're this. They're that. What have they done to earn it?" Just because they're *who* they are. I'd like to be able to get something just because of who I am—not whether I know what I'm doing.

The situation makes me feel crappy, but it's not going to change my performance. I'll still show up. I'll still do the wonderful job that I do, but I won't go out of my way to do anything more than I would be inclined to do if the situation were different. With this

situation, it's like, why bother? I'm not going to bust my chops when I know the rewards that I think I should get are not coming. When you know what you're putting in and what your capabilities are and you match them up with what someone else's done or not done, versus the positive things that I've done, you say, "There's no justice." It hurts. So your incentive to excel goes out the window. When my boss told me she didn't think my attitude was good, I said, "My attitude is based on how I'm getting rewarded and what I see in my future based on my input. You've had no complaints about me or my work product or my interactions with others in the agency. I'm doing my part, and you haven't seen fit to back me. So why should I have a good attitude?"

It's hard to look at minorities and not feel some disconnect. Having a conversation about this issue with my boss would be really difficult. She'd probably say, "Not true. Whoever got it got it on their merits." And what do you say to that? It's not PC to say, "I know what's going on and I wish I could get away with what you get away with."

At least once a week I talk about this with other guys in passing. In a staff meeting, we counted up the black faces and the white faces, and found more were black. We all feel pretty much the same way—commiseration support. It's a commonly felt issue, and you're empathetic because you've been through it. "I know what you've been going through. I know where you're coming from. We don't really have a chance. Isn't this a crock of shit!" But, we can't talk about it in the open. So you think about this and then you go on your merry way.

This doesn't make any sense to me and other guys in this situation. Sometimes you can't make sense out of anything. It leaves you having to decide whether you want to continue in a nonsensical environment or move on and hope that, where you alight the next time, the situation doesn't happen again. You know, of course, there's no guarantee. You can't deny this is happening—block out the reality—because it's there. And most peoples' goal at the end is not so much where I'm going to be. I don't expect it anymore, because of getting passed over for what they've denied me that I strongly feel I earned.

This experience gets you to wake up and smell the coffee quicker. People can't make decisions for you. You have to bite the bullet and move along. If you don't, you get mired in this, "Woe is me," self-pity. I think in trying to fight my way out of this I've hit the whole spectrum, from thinking that my boss was going to back me because she said she was, to fighting it on my own, to thinking I had changed her attitude so she was a little more willing, to thinking, "She's got the strings and she's playing me like a puppet." Then you go back down to the other end and you say, "Shoot! What an asshole I've been. I thought I was working in an environment that I would be judged on my merits and my work product. And that I would have as good a chance as this other person who happens to be black." So, you know, disillusionment.

I could protest or complain, but nothing would happen. It's frustrating and disappointing that the agency wouldn't support me. If you don't have support of management, then it doesn't happen. You can only do so much for yourself. It's like, discretion is the better part of valor. Like maybe let's just drop this before you stick your foot in your mouth and you wind up having more problems. Maybe it's not worth all the grief just to push a point. Nothing more can be done. You have to know when to just quit. That may not satisfy you. You can't really say, "Hey, I affected the situation and maybe it won't happen again."

I feel that this situation is totally out of my control. The only sense of my control now is that I can walk out. That's what I'm doing, saying, "Hey, screw it. I don't have a chance so let's do something else." I'm letting go of the feeling that, you know what's happening isn't fair to you and that you can't really do much about it. You finally get to the point that you might as well just move on and try to either find yourself another situation or just accept the fact that in the current environment in this agency, it's happened and it's going to continue to happen. And saying that the emotional energy, the mental energy, the physical energy, the time that you may spend doing this maybe could be channeled to someplace more productive.

My personality is the thing that's enabled me to say, "That's it. I'm not going to put up with anymore." I think I'm independent and self-reliant. I'm not going to do something just because it's the thing to do. Now I know what side of the bread the butter is on and financially, if I want to take a leap of faith, I could do it. That makes a big difference. I'm a survivor.

Robert's Textural-Structural Description

I don't understand what is happening. It's strange. The system is corrupt; the employment contract is a lie. The white male has no rights and it is not fair. Women and minorities are getting ahead without having the required experience or qualifications. They are getting sponsors and mentors, where the white males are not. They are using the system. They know how to work the system. They—management, the union, coworkers—are cutting deals. Management does what they want to do. They are not supporting white males. Support from others—from women and minorities, from white male colleagues—is gone. Coworkers are making fun of me behind my back.

As a result of this experience, there has been a personal toll; a tangible impact. It has changed me, draining my energy. I have a loss of interest in things I used to do. I've lost the ability to focus on things. I feel really depressed. This is definitely going to also have a negative impact on the organization; on accomplishing the mission. I have been trying to do some moving on—trying to find some strategies for dealing with this, like going back to school. There is the possibility of this being a learning experience. There may be some benefit to me in the long-term. Upon reflection, I do have a sense of hope that there will be some positive outcome.

Martin's Textural-Structural Description

I've gotten four top-block appraisals. So I have to assume from that that my bosses think I've done an okay job. So this situation is very strange; not normal. I've played by the rules, but the organization is no longer playing by fair rules. Or it changed the rules. It's screwy because doing a good job, getting good appraisals for doing the job, doesn't amount to a whole lot. Doing a good job is overshadowed by management's push to promote women.

A friend on a panel mentioned that it looked as though basically diversity was one of the driving forces in the thing. He mentioned that he had heard that if you are a woman or a minority, there was no justification required, and that apparently our higher headquarters had sort of laid those as the ground rules. I don't think anybody is specifically saying, "We want a woman" necessarily. If there are women or minorities available, I think they're looking for a much higher percentage. Probably if 25% of the people applied were women that one out of the four would get the job. They'd be happier if two out of four got the job. If I compete against a woman and she is better qualified she'll get it. I think 10-15 years ago that was not necessarily a given. Now there's more of a push just to increase the numbers, whatever it takes, for minorities and women, just to get those numbers up to a higher level. The numbers of women in the workforce have gone up considerably over recent years over what it used to be. And maybe it's to cover for past transgressions that they weren't given an equal opportunity in the past.

Management is the problem. Scuttlebutt is that the director has been courting certain women to try and get them to apply for higher jobs. He's anxious to increase the number of women. He is obsessed right now with diversity and he's going to get some women and minorities or whatever into some key positions. And I don't think it matters too much who might be there already. I don't know what's driving the director, if he's getting pressure from above to have a few more women and a few more minorities. I think they're either looking for the path of least resistance or whatever will make the powers above happy.

I think right now it's the system that has most effected me. I think within the area I'm working there is an awfully aggressive push for diversity and I would assume it probably is across all of the government. But, I think it's the managers that carry out the policy; that run the system. It's just total hypocrisy. I want the chance to compete on merit, but it feels like the deck is pretty much stacked against the white male. I'm a victim of diversity. With its push for diversity, management has lost its focus on getting the job done. It's a crazy situation that doesn't make sense.

I feel I'm being shoved off to the side, cast off, screwed over, violated. It's like somebody stuck a knife in my back. It's not a wholesome situation. It's very disconcerting, disgruntling, demoralizing. There's not a thing I can do about it. Other guys feel the same way and had similar reactions. I've tried to have a middle of the road reaction by confronting management. But management has ulterior motives and does what it wants. I feel betrayed. I could file a complaint, but it wouldn't matter. It would only be to see them squirm.

I really never had an experience in the past where I felt like diversity had impacted me negatively, but I really do now. And I can see how people would get upset about it and disgruntled. The situation has made it hard to get motivated to support management. I get by from the satisfaction of doing a good job. I want to keep working, contributing; doing something meaningful, productive, constructive, and creative. But I've got less enthusiasm due to the bitter taste in my mouth.

Jeff's Textural-Structural Description

I first started thinking about the idea that my career was stalled after the first or second year with this organization when I started looking around and seeing who was moving; who was moving up, who was moving out. Why? What are the motivations? Stuff like that. Things have changed. Women and minorities have gained power, and I underestimated the lack of my own power. Now, I'm somehow "less-than" because I am a white male. White males have been dominant in the work environment; perhaps the cause of discrimination. Because I'm a white male, I'm seen as part of that group; the blanket of white maleness that needs to be ripped apart. I'm being singled out and separated, pushed off to the side, left out in the cold, with one strike against me before I get started. There seems to be this general thing of discrimination. Reverse discrimination, that's probably the way it ought to be termed, because I don't know however else to word it.

Management is focusing on promotion of women. I realized that if you stay in the organization, you're not going to get anywhere. And so, if you want to go somewhere as far as grades go then I have to get out. They're pushing to get the numbers of women in the different grades up, and the consideration of qualifications and anything else I don't think they're taking that into consideration. It almost feels like the standards for the position have been lowered to meet the minorities. I know of one individual in eight that's been promoted to a 13 in the last five years that is a white male.

I'm told they have to consider whoever else is on the list, whatever their ethnicity or gender, and then make a determination based on that. And then it's, "I really want *you*, but I have to consider these others, and when I make that determination I have to also write a letter to justify why I chose you over them. And it has to be centered around, not that you're male and they're female or whatever. It has to be based on qualifications, even though it's kind of made up." I really believe that the women that were promoted over me were getting to a 13 because they were being mentored by the director, the deputy director. And being given a lot of opportunities. Someone in a mentor position should pick people

that demonstrate that they're capable of doing the work, and it shouldn't matter what sex they are or what race they are. I don't know that I would say that it's policy to increase the numbers of women and minorities. It just seems to be what's happening. I mean, management has said, "This is what we want to do." When it comes right down to it, they do it however they want. It's not about the system. I think it's the individuals who work in the system who understand the system. They know how to manipulate it; use it to their advantage.

That's not right; out of the ordinary. It's frustrating. Bringing this up, I almost feel like I'm discriminating. I can't help it that I was born a white male. I've not discriminated so why should I be punished or have to suffer? It's senseless. It's not fair. I've got a clear perspective on how it *should* be. And then there's how it *is*. I don't understand it. I'm not asking for special treatment. I just want to be considered equally, where everyone gets the opportunity.

Being held back hurts. I feel used, angry, abused. I'm not looked at for what I can do, my capabilities, but for who I am. I'm just a peon. Nobody is pulling for me. It's hurt my self-esteem; lowered my self-image sort of thing. Management doesn't see this problem, even though they are the ones creating it. I can't say anything because of reprisal. I don't trust management. Other guys provide support because they are experiencing the same thing. Yet, we don't really have a say. There is nothing that I or other guys can do to change the situation. A lot more white males are going to "go Postal" with the frustration.

This situation portrays white males in a bad way. We don't want to believe that we're actually living discrimination, or being discriminated against intentionally. I think it has to do with ego and I think it has to do with white male ego—white males' perceptions of themselves. I'm saying that because I am a white male and this is what I sense. We don't like to complain. We don't like to appear weak. Saying that this is happening to us is a chink in the personality.

The situation has diminished my career expectations and goals. I don't need to butt my head up against a wall, knowing I'm not going to get anywhere. Work doesn't define who I am. I'll get by by focusing on other things. This is not about me. It's about management. It's their problem. I'm coming to grips with the situation, being empowered enough so I can get into a position where I can take care of myself and move on.

George's Textural-Structural Description

All my evaluations indicated that I was well above average in my performance. Many were top ratings. But then the rules changed. One's qualities, like race, the ability to politic or be PC, became more important than the ability to do the job. It's for "show" rather than performance.

There's a quota system with the agency forced to have so many women and blacks to fill out the profile even if it means selecting unqualified women and blacks. White guys need to drop out. There's a different standard for blacks and whites; a double standard. It's inconsistent. But it's never written down. Management lies and delays until they get caught. It's institutionalized. This is the wrong age for being a white male. Somebody had to pay the price, and now it's the white males' turn.

The opportunities that have been given to blacks have put them in a position to help their own and to impart to whites the same frustrations that blacks have had. Women and blacks are using the system; playing the race and gender card to get their way, or using affirmative action as a tool to get ahead. Getting ahead should be done on your own merits and not somebody doing stuff for you. But now that's not the reality.

The logic of the system just doesn't make sense. There should be a natural hierarchy, rather than one forced based on race and gender. This situation is more a product of the PC society that's been created. White managers are perceived as racist or are assumed to be racist. Decisions get made into a racial issue. Some white managers do things so that they are not perceived as racist. I don't think I'm racist, but I had to fight that belief. A detractor was my run-in with the one black employee and giving a less than sterling evaluation to another black employee. What I'd seen, heard about, or experienced, what I was asked to do or forced to do, the inconsistencies are ridiculous. It's ludicrous; just plain stupid foolishness.

There is a common acceptance about this with other white males. They'd be able to identify with it. Sure, it would be more of a locker room rather than a serious discussion of

the merits. Otherwise, you don't talk about it. It's not okay to talk about it. This is going to impact the agency because it won't be able to recruit and train quality people, and there is going to be a loss of knowledge and experience because of people leaving. Because people can't do the job, there will probably be a greater loss of life.

The experience made me disillusioned. Stressed. No control, so I couldn't change the outcome. I wasted 12 years of my life. It ended when I left the agency. I realized I wasn't going to go anywhere so I took two years till I was eligible to retire. I could deal with the emotional energy drain by getting my focus on what was important to me. I have no regrets over my career. I've reconciled this as a life phase. You don't change your values, but you accept some of the stuff you can't change. I view it as experiencing the realities of life and I now choose to not worry about it.