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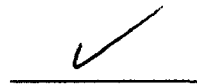
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REINVENTING SELVES: TALKING ABOUT EMERGING IDENTITIES DURING
MIDLIFE

by

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B.S. Eastern Oregon University, LaGrande, Oregon, 1995

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Arts

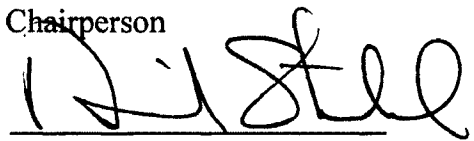
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Reinventing Selves: Talking about Emerging Identities during Midlife

Chairperson: Dr. Patricia Covarubias



This study examines the ways in which people talk about career-related transition at midlife and how such talk exposes a unique cultural identity. Utilizing an Ethnography of Communication approach, the researcher examines how speech systematically shapes and defines identities during transitory stages of career-related change. The present inquiry provides insight into the distinct culture, or shared values, beliefs, and norms of those persons who are seeking new beginnings following many years in the workforce. Eight different types of identity markers, revealed by middle-aged individuals through their communicative practices, are introduced. Additionally, this study proposes and explores one code of communication used to express identity– the code of accomplishment – as constitutive and reflective of the ways in which career-changers define themselves at midlife.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Little did I realize at the onset of this project the tremendous amount of time and energy such an endeavor would entail. Writing this thesis has been a wonderful adventure – a life-changing experience – for me. I have received incredible support from beginning to end.

I am particularly grateful to my husband, Tom. I could not have completed a project of such magnitude without your ever-present encouragement and support. I thank you for having the patience and understanding to stand by me.

To Patricia Covarrubias, my thesis chairperson, thank you for your guidance and support throughout the course of this project. I truly appreciate your insight and perspective and will be forever grateful to you for expanding my knowledge and appreciation of intercultural communication. To my committee members, Betsy Bach and Mary Groom Hall, thank you! I could not have asked for a better thesis committee. I enjoyed working with you and am appreciative of your support and affirmation of my work.

To the twenty-four men and women I interviewed, thank you for your willingness to share your stories of transition with me. I thoroughly enjoyed meeting each of you and was energized by your courage and determination. I marvel at my good fortune in having attracted such a fantastic group of study participants.

To Beverly Carlin, my mother-in-law, and friends, Bob Page and Jim and Marilyn Tutwiler, thank you for assuming the occasional care and feeding of my husband while I was away at school. To my parents, Albert and Bonnie Anderson, thank you for your supportive emails and phone calls. And, last but not least, to my canine companions, Kelly and O'Shea, thank you for keeping me sane by making sure that I got plenty of exercise!

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Chapter One: Introduction

From the man in his early fifties who only recently has returned to school to complete his lifelong goal of earning a college degree following his retirement from a thirty-year high-powered international career, to the woman in her mid-forties who finally purchased her own business after years of managing someone else's, the situational particulars of midlife career-related change are indeed diverse and wide-ranging. These situational particulars, in turn, affect how those persons undergoing transitions define themselves within the process of change. These self-definitions, which, as the present study shows, implicate challenges, contradictions, and opportunities that must be managed by the transitioners because the ways in which people define themselves through their communicative utterances and behaviors can trigger significant social consequences.

In order to apprehend what identities are negotiated, we can look at the ways in which people-in-transition talk about undergoing change. Talk serves as the locus for studying how such transitory stages are experienced. Moreover, despite the diversity of the individuals undergoing transition and the singularity of their situational circumstances, when the ways in which such middle-aged people-in-transition talk about their experiences of change are examined from an ethnographic perspective, as Philipsen (1992, 1997) would predict, culturally significant patterns and themes emerge. In this study, I discuss how talk is used as the means by which middle-aged American women and men undergoing change express a sense of their specific personhood. Utilizing the "ethnography of communication" as conceived by Hymes (1962, 1972, 1974) and Speech Codes Theory as posited by Philipsen (1992, 1997) and elaborated by Carbaugh (1989,

1995, 1996), Covarrubias (2002), Katriel (1986), and Fitch (1998) to examine talk about transition, I present eight different types of identity markers and one code of communication, which I call the code of accomplishment, activated by study participants. Moreover, this work expands the knowledge of and appreciation for how such transitory life changes are expressed and enacted in everyday life through human communicative interactions.

As one who is in the midst of my own career-related identity struggle, I can well appreciate the difficulty and the rewards of “changing horses in the middle of the stream,” as the old saying goes. In other words, successfully altering the status quo under less than optimal conditions is not an easy feat to accomplish. Indeed, transitioning from one career to another at midlife presents its own unique set of challenges and opportunities. My particular personal experience has demonstrated that for some of us the process of career transition is not the tidy, uncomplicated formulaic undertaking that some authors of popular self-help books on career change (Adrienne, 1998; Cantor, 2000; Hudson & McLean, 2000; Wieder, 1998) would lead us to believe. The process of transition, whether it involves a career change or lifestyle makeover, can be difficult, particularly at midlife, a developmental stage “traditionally noted as a time of questioning” (Dziegielewski, Heymann, Green, & Gichia, 2002, p. 66) marked by increased introspection and the reevaluation of priorities. Making a career change means rethinking one’s working identity and the older worker may well have an established career identity, which, in turn, is sacrificed to the change (Newman, 1995).

A metaphor frequently used in popular literature (Ibarra, 1999, 2003; Sheehy, 1995; Spayde, 2004) to describe the concept of professional/personal change related to

one's work identity is career "reinvention." One is said to be "reinventing oneself" when he or she undergoes the process of career change. In other words, reinvention refers not to a single event but rather to the process one goes through when changing from one occupation to another and from being one kind of person to another. For the middle-aged, a new beginning also means having to construct for one's self a fresh set of particular features to go along with that new persona. This self-reconstruction gets worked in and through communication mediated social interaction.

Gail Sheehy (1995) coined the phrase "Second Adulthood" to define the stage of life one enters following the empty nest, layoffs, early retirements, menopause, serious illness, and widowhood. Characterized as an opportunity for self-assessment and radical transformation, Sheehy's notion of second adulthood promotes action over inertia when it comes to change. In a recent interview for *Utne* (Spayde, 2004), Sheehy stated that within a person's life span, "there's really time for three different careers" (p. 65). According to Sheehy, a person can reasonably assume that he or she will change careers or "reinvent" him or herself at least once during each 20-year period, beginning at age 20. And, to the extent that a person's profession is central to his or her identity, rethinking one's career, in turn, leads to a redefining of one's self.

As this study will evidence, people make identity claims by conveying images of who they perceive themselves to be by what they say, to whom, how, when, and for what purposes. This particular study focuses on the individual's socio-occupational self or that particular facet of identity dealing with one's image of who he or she claims to be relative to his or her occupation. Accordingly, the present inquiry, driven not only by middle-aged men and women in transition but also by my own desire to understand how socio-

occupational identity is shaped and reflected through talk, provides insight into the ways in which individuals undergoing pivotal career-related change use talk to reveal emerging identities at midlife. The literature review that follows the study preview below elucidates the salient themes arising from the present study. Specifically, I have included a discussion of “turning points” and their significance to this particular inquiry as well as an explication of the concepts of identity, culture, and community applicable to this work.

Preview of the Study

My discussion of emerging identities of middle-aged people undergoing career-related transition will be presented according to the following chapters. The present chapter consists of the introduction, literature review, and rationale for completing this study. Also included in this chapter are my research questions. Chapter Two describes the methodology I used to study the meanings ascribed to participants’ communicative practices. In Chapter Two, I discuss the details of my fieldwork and the interview protocols used, my method of data collection and analysis, and my commitment to and enforcement of data validation measures. Chapter Three addresses my findings relative to the eight different types of identity markers implicated by study participants through their talk. In Chapter Four, I discuss the speech code of accomplishment as performed through talk about midlife career-related transition. Finally, in Chapter Five, I summarize my findings and discuss some of the implications and limitations of this study.

Literature Review

Research confirms that events leading to change in one’s life, referred to as “turning points,” carry with them social implications (Baxter & Bullis, 1986; Bejian and

Salomone, 1995; Breese & O'Toole, 1995; Bullis & Bach, 1989; Clausen, 1997; Covarrubias, 2002; McAdams, Josselson, & Lieblich, 2001; Leonard & Burns, 1999; Rönkä, Oravala, & Pulkkinen, 2003; Sheehy, 1995). For example, Covarrubias (2002) identified "turning point realignments" in interpersonal relationships between Mexican industrial workers as marked by changes in the ways in which such workers address one another, "enabl[ing] communication partners to redefine their relationships" (p. 81). Relationships, she found, could either be brought closer together or distanced through the strategic use of the Mexican Spanish *usted* (formal *you*) and *tú* (informal *you*). By switching the particular pronouns used to address one another, Covarrubias noted that workers marked "pivotal" or "turning points" in their relationships with each other, moving from a less to a more intimate relationship or, in contrast, using the moment to purposefully create social distance.

Similarly, Bullis & Bach (1986) noted that graduate students' organizational identification levels were variously impacted by numerous self-identified "turning points" in the students' relationships to the educational organization to which they belonged. Correspondingly, Breese and O'Toole (1995) found that "turning points" in relation to life circumstances subsequently triggered a reassessment of identity in their study designed to examine the issues and events that led 221 middle-aged women to enroll in college. Researchers found that women who had experienced an external life transition such as job loss or divorce underwent a "significant turning point that [led] to reconsideration of their identity" (p. 17) or how they "defined themselves in every day life" (p.12). Being in transition from one life circumstance to another, it was determined, was a causal factor in the decision to attend college for the majority of the women

participating in the study. Moreover, researchers found that in meeting the challenge of incorporating a previous identity into their present self-concept, participants “noted repeatedly that what they did before attending school continued to affect their current status of student” (p. 18). For example, one participant indicated that, “My role as a caregiver has greatly influenced my choice of nursing as a major” (p. 18), while another participant talked about her choice to major in social work because, as she said, “I associate well with other people, I have ‘been there’ so I can relate to battered women, welfare recipients, etc.” (p. 18), thus illustrating the effect of the women’s past experiences on the formation of their new identities. Situations and life events prompted these women to rethink who they wanted to be and, in turn, led them to seek college degrees as a necessary step in the process of reinventing themselves.

Identity

As new work role definitions emerge, identities shift, resulting in new ways of conceiving of and communicating about oneself in relation to others (Breese & O’Toole, 1995; Bronson, 2003; Hecht, 1993; Ibarra, 1999, 2003; Sheehy, 1995). For example, Breese & O’Toole (1995) found that the women in their study who had experienced job loss experienced intensified feelings of uncertainty regarding the self, along with a sense of self-doubt and loss of self-confidence. A key indicator of the presence of shifts in these women’s self-concepts was “the direct or indirect announcement to others that a transition was taking place and needed to be addressed” (p. 18). For example, some of the women mentioned to others that they planned to attend a university outreach program, thereby publicly signaling their intentions to explore educational advancement opportunities. Through these revelations, the women were able to begin conceiving of

and presenting themselves as potential students rather than as women who had lost their jobs.

The experience of midlife transition precipitated by turning points, such as losing or changing a job or profession, returning to school, or retiring, is reflected in how people present and define themselves in their daily lives. In fact, in Euro-American society, identity is so closely linked to one's career as to constitute one of the first topics of conversation that comes up when two people meet each other for the first time (Carbaugh, 1996; Ibarra, 2003; Bronson, 2003). Inevitably, one is asked, "What do you do?" This implicit link between what one does and who one is suggests that if an individual's occupation changes, so too, will her or his sense of self. As Studs Terkel (1972) observed in *Working*, his classic documentary of how people talk about their jobs and themselves, "No matter how bewildering the times; no matter how dissembling the official language, those we call ordinary are aware of a sense of personal worth – or more often a lack of it – in the work they do" (p. xxx). And, it is this particular sense of self or identity that emerges as people talk about their work lives.

Identities are constructed and negotiated through social interaction (Burke, 1969; Callero, 2003; Carbaugh, 1996; Goffman, 1959; Hecht, 2002). That is, people make identity claims through the ways in which they present themselves to each other in conversation. Moreover, socially constructed identities are not limited in number or duration. Rather, identities can be both "provisional," lasting only "for negotiable time spans" (Covarrubias, 2002, p. 64), or more durable contingent upon the situation or context within which peoples' social selves are shaped, reflected, and constituted through their talk. Peoples' identities, then, are as numerous and varied as the many social roles

they assume (Callero, 2003; Carbaugh, 1996; Hecht, 1993; Stryker, 1980; Trethewey, 2001) and the self that is socially constructed will be “as multidimensional and diverse as the social relationships that surround it” (Callero, 2003, p.127). For example, people variously present themselves to others by enacting social roles such as parent, teacher, friend, sports fan, athlete, neighbor, and so on. When these social roles become internalized, they are said to have become a part of the self. “Social interaction thus produces the resources for constructing the self, which, in turn guides and patterns behavior defining social structure” (Callero, 2003, p.125). The loci available for constructing the self include speaking resources such as rituals, narratives or stories, social dramas, the use of thematized key terms, and the particular words used to describe talk (Philipsen, 1992). Who a person is, then, relies in part on the way in which he or she interacts with others, or uses the available resources for speaking, in situated social scenes (Carbaugh, 1996). In other words, the revelation of possible selves through communicative practices is contingent on the context within which the speaking occurs and how one uses communication symbols to construct and convey that self.

For this particular inquiry, I have relied on the interpretation of identity as one’s claims of “self” that are conveyed through one’s interactions with others in situated social scenes. I treat identities as selves “created and subjected to particular conversational dynamics” (Carbaugh, 1996, pp. 23-24). Whether student or job seeker, career changer or retiree, the possibilities for reinvention of one’s working identity at midlife are numerous and varied. Indeed, as communication directly reflects and constitutes the type of person one is and becomes, what one does for a living and how she or he talks about it, particularly in the midst of transition from one career to another, provides rich

opportunity for ethnographic study. For example, a person who conveys a sense of frustration at not being able to find work that pays well enough to support his family, reveals a sense of who he is via his talk. He presents himself in conversation with others as a person who believes he is responsible for meeting his family's need for financial support, a potential breadwinner. Through his conversation, the interlocutor reveals an aspect of his identity. And, in doing so, he distinguishes himself as belonging to a particular community of people who recognize and value the role of breadwinner.

Culture and Community

When I use the terms “culture” and “community” as referents to one's social identity within this study, I am referring to communal claims of identity made by members of culturally distinctive groups or “speech communities.” What makes a group of individuals a “speech community” is not necessarily a shared ethnicity or nationality, but rather its members' abilities to convey and interpret to one another shared beliefs, values, and norms of behavior through their communicative practices. Moreover, membership in any particular speech community distinguishes identity as communal. In other words, “these communities define a repertoire of identities that are jointly held/remembered and taught to new members” (Hecht, 1993 p. 80). Culture then, in this respect, provides the context for what is said or not said, what is meaningful or not meaningful, what is valued and not valued and so on by a particular society of interlocutors.

A “speech community” can be defined as the “shared knowledge of rules for the interpretation of speech, including rules of interpretation of at least one common code” (Hymes, 1962, p.19). Membership in such communities exists to the extent that the

“unwritten” or tacitly understood rules for speaking and norms of behavior are shared (Philipsen, 1992, 1997). Any particular group of individuals may share use of a particular “speech code” or “historically transmitted, socially constructed system of symbols and meanings, premises and rules, pertaining to communicative conduct” (Philipsen, 1992, p. 124). Codes consist of the words and phrases used by people in everyday conversation and the local personal and social meanings ascribed to them. The concept “speech codes” helps elaborate the basic premises that communication is fundamentally a socio-cultural practice and partly constitutive of socio-cultural life” (Carbaugh, 1995, p. 255).

Scholarly research conducted since Phillipsen’s own early ethnographic work has been applied both within and across cultural communities and situational contexts. Talk is considered cultural in that it both reflects and constitutes the shared beliefs, values, premises, and rules of a particular people in a particular place at a particular time. What people say and how they say it differs from culture to culture. “Repeatedly, ethnographic studies have demonstrated that the choice to speak or not, in a particular way, to whom, and for how long, and so on is not random but patterned and patterned in systematic ways” (Carbaugh, 1995, p. 244). And, it is this notion of the patterned use of words and phrases and their interpretations, which are historically grounded and shared, that informs my method of investigation. The ethnography of communication, when practiced in a theoretically rigorous manner, is a productive way to apply and develop communication theory (Carbaugh, 1989, 1995, 1996; Covarrubias, 2002; Katriel, 1986; Fitch, 1998; Philipsen, 1992). A more thorough understanding of how career-related transition is experienced at midlife, as revealed from an ethnographic perspective, enlightens

individuals as well as organizations who deal with middle-aged populations. In the following section I discuss the theoretical, practical, and political value of this study.

Rationale for this Study

Research on communication and midlife transition has theoretical as well as practical and political value. In the following paragraphs I discuss the importance of this research from each of these perspectives. First, I will address the theoretical implications of my research. The present investigation into the communicative practices of the middle-aged, for the purpose of identifying the speech code or codes implicated through the social meanings ascribed to talk about transition, affirms and expands on Philipsen's Speech Codes Theory (Philipsen, 1992, 1997). The ethnography of communication as conceived by Hymes (1962, 1972, 1974) and Speech Codes Theory as posited by Philipsen (1992, 1997) and elaborated by Carbaugh (1989, 1995, 1996), Covarrubias (2002), Katriel (1986), and Fitch (1998) informs my theoretical grounding. Speech Codes Theory captures the relationship between culture and communication (Griffin, 2000). This study meets one of the primary objectives of ethnographic studies of communication, which is to achieve an understanding of the communicative life of people, that is, what is significant and important to them as they communicate (Carbaugh, 1995). Specifically, this study extends Philipsen's (1992) and Carbaugh's (1994, 1996) research on the "Nacirema" culture. The term "Nacirema," which is "American" spelled backwards, originated with Horace Miner (1956) and was used by Philipsen to label his research participants who were "middle-class, college educated Americans" (1992, p. 5) living throughout the U.S.A. Philipsen distinguishes the Nacirema as a people who value the individual self, which is nurtured by "open, supportive, close speech" or

“communication,” (p. 73) over the communal self. For the Nacirema, “communication” is the preferred mode of meaningful interaction in contrast to “mere talk,” which is considered “relatively more distant, neutral, and routinized” (p. 74). Subsequent studies of Nacirema discourse (Carbaugh, 1994, 1996) have extended Philipsen’s pioneering research. The present inquiry seeks to further elaborate on the extant body of knowledge about the Nacirema by providing insight into how this particular Euro-American society uses communication as identity markers while undergoing career-related transition at midlife.

The practical value of this study is evident when one considers the importance of middle-aged women and men to society. After all, it is the middle-aged mothers and fathers and daughters and sons who are responsible for the care and nurturing of the young and the elderly. Success or failure, then, of middle-aged individuals to thrive in midlife affects the well-being of others, which in turn impacts society as a whole. Our future demands that we better understand this diverse and growing segment of the United States population.

A number of metaphors including such terms and phrases as “midlife crisis,” “menopausal,” “baby boomers,” and “empty-nest syndrome,” (Gullette, 1998, p. 23) have been used to describe the experiences of middle age, although little actual documentation exists to lend scholarly support to such claims. Our beliefs about what happens to people at middle age are based on less than perfect knowledge and contain many unproven premises that perpetuate our “cultural legacy of falsehood and myth about midlife” (MacArthur Foundation Human and Community Development Research

Project, 2002, ¶ 1). In other words, limited studies and the treatment of middle age as a period of decline (Tretheway, 2001; Gullette, 1998) confuse rather than clarify the actual experience of middle age. For example, conclusions concerning the midlife crisis are “often accompanied by disclaimers because much of the existing research has been based on small sample size or only on men” (Bejian & Salomone, 1995, p. 57). Furthermore, in contrast to the notion of midlife as a period of decline as would be suggested by the term “crisis,” research on the middle-aged has also described midlife in positive terms as a period of growth and change, that is, a time for personal renewal and the crafting of new identities (Bejian & Salamone, 1995; Tretheway, 2001; Gullette, 1998). Thus, gaining a better understanding through ethnographic inquiry of how turning points influence the emergence of new identities at midlife sheds light on the practical issue of how this stage of life is actually experienced.

Finally, this study has political value. By 2015, according to a recent study (RoperASW, 2002) on older worker trends, conducted for the American Association for Retired Persons (AARP), 20% of the United States workforce will be 55 or older. Moreover, 69% of the individuals completing the AARP survey indicated a desire to continue working beyond the typical retirement age. But, AARP reports, these older workers want to work on different terms than what they have experienced in the past—they want more flexibility and autonomy. While the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) has never attempted to actually track the number of times the average person experiences a change of job, results of a longitudinal study of persons born from 1957 to 1964 are revealing. Researchers found that the average number of jobs these individuals held during the twenty-year period of study was 9.6. Despite the fact that job

duration typically increases as one ages, “these baby boomers continued to have large numbers of short-duration jobs even as they approached middle-age” (BLS Media Release, 2002, p. 1). Therefore, it will be contingent upon policy makers to thoroughly understand the personal, economic, and legal ramifications of an older workforce in order to advocate for legislation that supports rather than hinders the personal and employment needs and desires of the middle-aged.

Indeed, there are some wide-ranging implications arising from the present study. Much is to be gained from a better understanding of the needs, desires, fears, and expectations of middle-aged persons undergoing transition, as, statistically, such changes could potentially affect nearly one-third of the United States population. Institutions of all sorts – business and professional – and even the middle-aged themselves could benefit from the insights provided by this study into how such changes are enacted and experienced. Consider, for example, how such knowledge would assist in the transformation of a college classroom geared primarily toward the learning habits and styles of traditional college-aged students to one that provides a richer experience for a more age-diverse student population.

College students over the age of 25 are less likely to persist and attain a degree than are students who enroll at a traditional age (U.S. Department of Education, 1997). Moreover, research indicates that various factors, including students’ perceptions of and satisfaction with the college experience, either promote or hinder the success of the nontraditional student in post-secondary educational institutions (Dill & Henley, 1998; Donohue & Wong, 1997; Leonard, 2002; Morris, Brooks & May, 2003). Certainly, achieving a more thorough understanding of the process of midlife transition would

increase the likelihood of reaching a satisfactory resolution to the issue of how best to adapt classroom education to meet the needs of older students, a group who comprise a substantial percentage of the higher education student body (Donohue & Wong, 1997). Greater knowledge and understanding of how identities, for those individuals experiencing pivotal career-related transitions at midlife, are shaped, reflected, and expressed may, in turn, lead to improvements directed at middle-aged populations in a number of areas including national employment policy, educational reform, health care, pension reform, and tax administration policy.

Whether by choice or by circumstance, middle-aged men and women will continue to remain in the workforce in greater numbers than ever before, increasing the likelihood of career-related turning points and the new working role definitions such events might encourage. This study explores the ways in which the speech community of middle-aged people undergoing career-related transition talk about their experiences of change and its impacts on their sense of “who they are.” Specifically, I present the answers to the two research questions detailed in the following section.

Research Questions

My research questions are geared toward obtaining a more thorough understanding of the ways in which identity at midlife is shaped by career-related transitions. Specifically, how do career-changers talk about themselves and the experience of change and what meaning does such talk hold for this particular group of people relative to emerging communal identities.

To that end, my research questions are as follows:

RQ1: How do middle-aged people undergoing pivotal career-related transition use communication as identity markers?

This question assumes that humans express a sense of who they are through the ways in which they communicate with one another. What is said or not said, to whom, when, where, and why set the stage for an analysis of the underlying social meanings relative to emergent communal identities as reflected in the communicative practices of those observed.

RQ2: What speech code or codes about identity is/are implicated in the ways middle-aged people talk about the process of career-related transition they are experiencing?

This question seeks to delineate culturally based understandings about what is considered significant and important to a particular group of people at a particular time and place. Accordingly, this question, based on Philipsen's (1997) proposition that speech is distinctive and that "wherever there is a distinctive culture, there is to be found a distinctive speech code" (p. 135), seeks to expose culturally unique ways of speaking, which are indicative of participants' shared beliefs, values, and accepted norms of behavior.

Definition of Terms

In order to establish a common understanding of certain terms used in this study, I present the following conceptual definition for identity markers, occupation, and turning points.

Identity markers: The terms used to mark or designate role definition interpretations gleaned from the analysis and coding of participant data (Baxter & Goldsmith, 1990). Identity markers are abstracted as “I am” statements. An example of an identity marker statement would be “I am goal oriented.”

Occupation: An activity that serves as one’s source of livelihood and is used within this study interchangeably with the terms “career,” “job,” “profession,” and “work.” This definition is taken from The American Heritage Dictionary (1985).

Turning points: Events or circumstances leading to change in one’s life. This definition is grounded in literature (Baxter & Bullis, 1986; Bullis & Bach, 1989; Covarrubias, 2002).

Chapter Two: Methodology

In Chapter Two, I present the theoretical and methodological perspectives I used to complete this study. Then, I discuss my fieldwork strategy, including a discussion of participant selection, data collection and analysis techniques, and the measures I used to ensure the validity and reliability of my findings.

Conceptual Framework and Methodological Perspectives

To accomplish my research objectives I conducted an ethnography of communication, a qualitative study that involved naturalistic observation, interviews, documentation, coding and analysis, and interpretation of communicative activities of middle-aged adults engaged in everyday activities. Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995), Geertz (1973), Hymes (1972), LeCompte & Goetz (1982), Lindlof and Taylor (2002), Rudestam (2001), and Strauss & Corbin (1990) served as guides to my field work approach while Carbaugh (1989, 1995, 1996), Covarrubias (2002), Katriel (1986), Fitch (1998), and Philipsen (1992) informed my theoretical perspective. Culture, the culture of middle-aged people undergoing career-related transition, provided the context for my research. The unit of analysis for this study is the speech community (Hymes, 1967; Philipsen, 1992).

A conceptual framework served as a guide to facilitate the collection, analysis, and interpretation of my data. Specifically, I used the Hymes (1972) **SPEAKING** framework to situate, collect, and organize my observational data. The **SPEAKING** heuristic addresses the **Scene** or physical location of the interaction being observed. It includes a description of the **Participants** involved in the interaction and describes the **Ends** or motives of the speaking act. It orders the sequence of the speaking **Acts**, speaks

to the **Key** or spirit in which the communicative act is performed, and includes the **Instrumentalities**, media or channels of communication. It addresses the **Norms** or rules for speaking and interpreting interaction, and includes the **Genres** or special forms of interaction.

While Hymes' **SPEAKING** framework supported my inquiry and analysis, I based the development of my field notes on Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995); my methods for conducting qualitative research on Lindloff and Taylor (2002); my data coding strategies on Strauss and Corbin (1990); and my approach for ensuring the reliability and validity of my research on LeCompte and Goetz (1982).

The ethnography of communication is a field of study, which relies on detailed and accurate description of the contextual significance of people's actions as reflected and constituted communicatively. Geertz (1973) advocates a descriptive approach known as "thick" description. Thick description refers to the highly detailed inscription of the interpretation of behavior based on how the participants of a culture explicate their symbolic system through public actions and social discourses. In order to accurately describe, interpret, and inscribe observed relationships between social practices and systems of meaning in a particular culture or speech community a researcher must be a "naturalist, who watches, listens, and records communicative conduct in its natural setting" (Philipsen, 1992, p. 7). Cultures are distinguished by speech practices, which reveal patterns and themes unique to the social life of those being studied. My research mode of operation, then, was to observe, listen to, record, and interpret the speech practices of the culture of middle-aged American men and women undergoing career-related transition.

Selection of Participants

Research participants were selected via word-of-mouth referral and recruitment. Qualifications of those eligible to participate included men and women roughly between the ages of 40 and 60 who, by their own declaration, considered themselves to be experiencing some form of career-related life transition. Such transitions included changing jobs or professions, going back to school, becoming unemployed, working fewer hours, or retiring from paid employment.

Twelve men and twelve women between the ages of 37 and 61 were interviewed in the Montana cities of Helena, Missoula, and Polson. My primary concern in accepting potential interview participants was the individual's own perception of her or his transitional status. I wanted to interview persons who believed themselves to be in a state of career flux and therefore did not base my participant selections on my own or others' interpretations of whether a potential interviewee was undergoing career-related change. In fact, volunteer participants who, while more than willing to participate, clearly did not consider themselves to be in the throes of transition were turned away. In one case, an individual indicated to me that he considered his transitory stage to be over. A few years ago he quit his job as a biologist to enter law school. He has since graduated and is now employed as an attorney. While he did not dispute that he had indeed experienced a highly significant career-related transition, he now considers himself to be firmly ensconced in his new profession and therefore "finished" with his transformation.

Then, there is the flip side to the transition experience: the person who may not presently be in the middle of a change in job or profession yet still considers him or herself to be in career-related transition. A number of participants who were

interviewed had actually experienced their career changes as much as one to three years earlier. A few of the interviewees simply wanted to make a career change. This is an important distinction because it points out that career-related transition for any particular person is not necessarily defined by an actual physical change in one's employment circumstances: rather, the underlying motives and expectations of the individual are what create the experience of transition for him or her. Consequently, I used the question, "Do you consider yourself to be undergoing career-related transition?" as a litmus test for participant selections. Those individuals who considered themselves to be in transition, then, were accepted into the participant pool. It should also be noted that, with the exception of one person who was downsized out of his job, all of the participants in this study considered themselves to be voluntarily undergoing career-related transition.

In order to protect the anonymity of those who volunteered to take part in this study, I refer to all participants referenced throughout this study by a P+ a number. Furthermore, information that would make it possible to identify a participant has either been deleted or modified from its original form. For example, the letters "XYZ" have been inserted in place of specific names of locations or workplaces. In this way the participants' identities are protected while at the same time readers are able to recognize that the insertion of "XYZ" constitutes a privacy protection measure applied on behalf of the participant. For additional information about the participants, please refer to Appendix A, which consists of a full list of all study participants including their sex, ages, educational backgrounds, and transition status, that is, what professions they are transitioning to and from.

Data Collection

The ethnographic techniques I engaged in order to collect data for this study were participant observation and interviewing. Field observation and interview protocols were based on Lindlof and Taylor (2002). Participant observation proved to be somewhat challenging because middle-aged adults can be observed in most any location and at any time of the day or night. Finding middle-aged men and women talking about career-related change or identity issues, then, required the keen antenna of a purposeful sleuth. Fortunately, this was not difficult for me because I am middle-aged myself and therefore spend a great deal of my time with such individuals. However, because the speech community chosen for observation consisted of its membership of middle-aged men and women undergoing career-related change rather than a particular venue, opportunities to observe were potentially unlimited. The ages of the participants, their career circumstances, and the fact that they happened to be residing in Montana at the time of my research, were the determining factors upon which speech community membership was based.

The notion of a socially, rather than physically, bounded speech community assumes that what joins people together is a shared set of norms and rules for communication that govern social interaction rather than the physical delineation of a particular locale. So as to protect the integrity of my findings, therefore, I was particularly mindful of choosing my observational venues. In order to observe interactions in naturalistic settings, a variety of public settings, including meetings geared toward older individuals as well as those likely to be experiencing career-related change were sought. For example, I became a member of a local conversation café

group comprised primarily of middle-aged attendees. I also enrolled in a class on marketing service-based businesses at the Dickinson Lifelong Learning Center in Missoula and became involved in Phoenix, the on-campus organization for non-traditional students attending the University of Montana at Missoula. Time was also spent observing a few of my participant interviewees as they went about their daily routines. To further support my quest for observational data, I drew from opportunistic observation at various social events both in Helena and Missoula. Settings in which observation occurred included restaurants, stores, parks, schools, government and business offices, hotels, and private homes. In short, I remained alert to utterances related to the subject of midlife transitions throughout the duration of my research. Such observations were used in addition to and in support of the data collected from participant interviews.

Semi-structured one-on-one interviews, each lasting from an hour to an hour and a half, were conducted with twenty-four participants. Interviews were conducted in order to obtain answers to specific questions related to the participants' views of the transition they considered themselves to be experiencing; what it meant to them, and how it has impacted the way in which they describe themselves. A semi-structured interview process was used because having a set of standardized questions to ensure research validity and reliability enabled greater flexibility to improvise as necessary. Use of such an interview protocol also provides greater opportunity to encourage free flowing conversation (Lindlof and Taylor, 2002). Basic demographic information such as age, sex, marital status, number of children, and level and type of education completed was also collected in order to construct more complete participant profiles.

My interview instrument (see Appendix B), an interview consent form (see Appendix C), and a subject profile form (see Appendix D) are included.

Each participant signed a participant consent form prior to the initiation of the interview. Participants were fully informed of the implications of their participation and of their right to be treated with respect and dignity. To that end, all participants were informed that their participation was completely voluntary, that they could withdraw from the project at any time without penalty, and that all information provided would be tape recorded and transcribed and de-identified in order to guarantee anonymity and ensure confidentiality. Interviews were conducted at a time and place convenient to the participant, generally taking place at a public location such as the library, a coffee shop, or, in the case of a couple of participants, at their places of business. All interviews were face-to-face, audio taped, and fully transcribed for analysis.

During the interviews, I took great care not to influence participant responses. While I realize that the interviewer always has some impact on the direction an interview takes, I made a conscious attempt to keep quiet and let the participant do the talking. While this practice seemed somewhat unnatural for me, it was a highly successful interview maneuver. Interview participants, for the most part, were eager to share their stories and an occasional encouraging nod of the head or a “really?” uttered now and then seemed to be all that was needed to keep the conversation afloat.

Following the data analysis stage of this study, I met with a small group of participants for the purpose of conducting follow-up interviews in order to validate my findings. In order to accommodate participant work schedules and family responsibilities, I also conducted a number of follow up interviews by phone and in

person at a location of the participant's choosing. My primary aim was to be as respectful of participants' limited time as possible while at the same time obtaining the confirmation required to validate my results.

Data Coding and Analysis

I transcribed each interview as soon after its occurrence as possible so as to minimize potential recall difficulties, which are more likely to occur with the passage of time. Informally, my data analysis began with the creation of my notes and interview transcriptions, however, it was not until all of the interviews and field notes were fully transcribed that I began my formal analysis of the corpus of accumulated materials. To do this, an open coding scheme as described in Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995) and Strauss and Corbin (1990) was utilized. No pre-established categories were used. Hymes's (1972) framework was used to facilitate the interpretation of the data. Strauss and Corbin (1990) served as a guide for my coding and analysis.

My initial formal review consisted of a thorough re-reading of the transcribed materials, approximately 300 pages of single-spaced text, in its entirety. A second reading, with special attention given to the identification of reoccurring themes, phrases, and terms, resulted in the development of twenty-two high level thematic categories. Utilizing basic Microsoft Word capabilities, I again combed through the data, this time color coding text according to category. I then developed separate documents for each core theme, copying and pasting the relevant passages into each document. Ultimately, through this process of repeated refinement, eight core descriptive categories pertaining to turning point identities emerged from the data: change-driven, purposeful, discerning, fearful, autonomous, productive, dutiful, and time-driven.

Protocols described in this section were used to code, categorize and analyze the data obtained from my research. By far one of the most time consuming stages of my research, data coding and analysis proved to be a highly rigorous yet extremely valuable and necessary component of this study. Because I so thoroughly and carefully analyzed and interpreted the data, I am confident that my findings provide an accurate portrayal of the identity claims expressed by the men and women who participated in this study.

Validity and Reliability

Reliability, or the likelihood that independent researchers would generate the same results given the same set of circumstances, is key to establishing the credibility of any research endeavor utilizing the ethnography of communication (Hymes 1962, 1972, 1974; Philipsen, 1992). The researcher must address issues of both internal and external reliability. Internal reliability pertains to whether other researchers would categorize the data into the same categories of analysis. External reliability refers to whether independent researchers would produce comparable constructs in the same set of circumstances (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982). To support claims of reliability, I am providing a detailed accounting of the research methods utilized including observation practices, interview strategies, and data coding and analysis techniques.

Validity concerns the accuracy of the findings or the extent to which the researcher's results accurately depict the human experiences under study. Internal validity speaks to whether the observations and methods used to evaluate them accurately measure such phenomena, while external validity pertains to whether such findings can be compared across groups (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982). To support claims of validity, I have been particularly vigilant with respect to my observations and

interpretations. Cross validation procedures included careful analysis and cross-checking of the data to the conclusions drawn in order to identify inconsistencies. Also, in order to confirm my interpretations and conclusions, feedback from participants was asked for and received. And, because of the potential of my presence during the interview process to influence participant disclosure, I specifically sought validation of the identity marker categories I had abstracted from the data, thereby reducing the likelihood of erroneous construal.

Summary

This chapter elaborates the methodology and theoretical perspectives that I followed in conducting research for this study. The works of Emerson et al. (1995), Carbaugh (1989, 1995, 1996), Covarrubias (2002), Katriel (1986), Fitch (1998), Le Compte and Goetz (1982), Hymes (1962, 1972, 1974b), Lindlof and Taylor (2002), Philipsen (1992, 1997), Rudestam (2001), and Strauss and Corbin (1990) served as my guides for data collection, interpretation and analysis. Finally, I discuss the procedures I have followed in order to ensure the validity and reliability of my research. What follows in Chapter Three are my findings relative to the eight different types of identity markers implicated by study participants through their talk.

Chapter Three: Identity Markers Emerging From Talk about Transition

In this chapter, I discuss identity markers emerging from participants' talk about career-related transition. In answer to my first research question, which asks: How do middle-aged people undergoing pivotal career-related transition use communication as identity markers? I present eight different identity markers or role definitions abstracted from the analysis and coding of participant data. For purposes of this study, one's "identity" refers to that particular part of one's self related to what he or she does for a living, or what I refer to as one's socio-occupational identity. As stated earlier, identity refers to the persona that the self-in-transition co-constructs with other humans in interaction. What follows is a discussion of these eight identity markers including the supporting ethnographic documentation of pertinent utterances. Each section, with the exception of the one entitled "Time-Driven," is approximately equal in length, limited only to those quotes which best represent the specific identity category. However, because of the considerable amount of relevant data pertaining to the "Time-Driven" category, that particular section was lengthened to adequately address this predominant and important subject. Additionally, in order to achieve a common understanding of the identity marker classifications, a definition of the meaning associated with each particular marker is provided at the beginning of every section. Each of these definitions emerged from participant expressions. I now turn to my discussion of the eight identity markers abstracted from participant data. The specific identity marker label headlines each section.

Change-Driven

The term change-driven is used in the context of this study as a descriptor for one who seeks change as a remedy for boredom, tedium, or the lack of challenge. Study participants often described their career transitions as having been precipitated by dissatisfaction with the routine nature of their work. It is important to note that participant work circumstances ranged from mid- to high-level white-collar occupations. For example, careers spanned from grant writing, to managing a nonprofit organization, to the piloting of a commercial 747 airplane, demonstrating that the type of job held appeared to have little impact on participants' desires, as P14 explained, "to try something different." Motivated by a preference for variety and challenge, participants portrayed themselves as change-driven.

When talking about the program manager job she was anticipating quitting, P7 expressed concern that she was "just not challenged" any longer. She had grown "bored" with the lack of "intellectual challenge" that she said she craved. She indicated that she just "need[ed] to be stretched more." Likewise, another participant, P3, indicated that, before he took early retirement from his career of nearly 25 years, he was "starting to lose interest" in his work as a fire fighter. He said that he had been concerned that his lack of interest might influence his ability to effectively carry out his job, circumstances that he indicated his retirement had pre-empted.

Other participants also talked about being "bored" with their work. P19 returned to school for retraining, following a fairly successful business career as an information technology consultant, because, as he put it, "I have a lot of experience in the business context and like I said before, to me, that's just boring. I don't find it challenging

anymore.” P8 echoed P7’s, P3’s, and P19’s sentiments. In spite of his professed fondness for his former position with the fly fishing division of a major national retail corporation, he explained, “I loved my job but it just wasn’t challenging.” After seven years at XYZ Corporation with little chance for advancement, P8 said that he “just needed something a little bit more challenging.” Correspondingly, P12, a commercial airline pilot, noted, “We had our own aircraft so we used it for personal stuff, but doing it for money was tedious, monotonous, [and] boring. Sitting around waiting for people, you’re just a glorified taxi driver in a lot of ways.” P12 said that he had entered the field of aerospace engineering following his stint as a commercial pilot. He indicated, however, that even that job still did not “fit the bill,” because, as he added, “You know, I think I was bored . . . I kept trying for more challenging things in my life.” And, like P12, several other participants also talked about having a desire to do something new or different, or more challenging.

In reference to his decision to return to school for a master’s degree in linguistics, P14 explained, “I went back to school because I got tired of what I was doing and I thought it was time to branch out and try something different, a new challenge.” He thought it was time for a change, a change precipitated by years of doing computer-programming work, which he described as “wrote.” Indeed, the ravages of having done the same thing over and over come to bear in the long term as P24, organizational consultant and nonprofit agency manager, attested. She remarked in jest, “I’ve worked with ten million boards and fifty million board members and hundreds of staff people and it’s just like, oh man, same old stuff, different day.” She explained, “I don’t find this [work] particularly stimulating anymore just because I have a whole arsenal of tools and

this is all such familiar territory to me.” P24 observed that she perceived herself to be “in a cycle of just repeating the same thing and expecting different results.” She added that she felt that her most recent work experience confirmed for her that it was “time for a change.” Accordingly, P24 had submitted her resignation with no particular plan in mind other than to avoid doing the same kind of work she had been doing for so many years.

Like P24, P3 also indicated a desire to do something other than fire fighting after nearly 25 years on the job. He said that he could have remained on the job for several more years but that he realized that “life is fleeting and that [he] wanted to do something different.” So, this notion of being “bored” or “losing interest” after so many years of doing the same thing was considered by a number of participants to be a determining factor in their decisions to seek changes in their careers.

Participants’ talk clearly evidenced indications of a people who can be said to be longing for change. The repeated use of words and phrases such as “challenging;” “something else;” “something different;” “something new;” “something fulfilling;” “something more;” “tired;” “lose interest;” and “bored;” expressed within the context of talking about work needs and desires, conveys a clear sense of collective identity as men and women who seek variety in order to ward off the effects of boredom caused by familiarity. For many participants, then, answering the call for change meant transitioning from an established long-term career in one profession to an entirely different line of work.

Purposeful

The term “purposeful” is used in the context of this study as a descriptor for one who deliberately and intentionally plans and executes change (The American Heritage

Dictionary, 1985). Participants talked frequently about “goal setting,” and “planning,” indicating that they had not made decisions on the “spur-of-the-moment,” or “pulled something out of the hat.” On the contrary, a number of participants described themselves as “goal oriented” persons who had carefully considered and planned their career transitions. P14 illustrates this notion of deliberation in explaining his decision to return to school. He said, “I didn’t pull something out of the hat, you know. These are things I have thought about for a while.” Such comments typified the way in which participants described the planning that went into their transitions.

P20, who, along with his wife, moved several hundred miles across Montana to accomplish his career change, echoed P14’s sentiments about not having “pulled something out of the hat.” He explained, “we didn’t decide [to move] on the spur-of-the-moment. It took us a year to decide it was time.” P19 indicated that he, too, took a year to orchestrate his eventual return to college. He stated, “It took me a year to get here [to the University of Montana in Missoula] with all of the planning.” He acknowledged that living out of state had made it more difficult for him to sort out all of the available information and to complete the tasks necessary to enable his move to Montana to attend college. Correspondingly, P21, another non-resident student, indicated that he had been “planning” his return to school for two years. His discussion of the extent to which he planned his transition from law enforcement officer to returning college student exemplifies the type of deliberation with which such endeavors were approached:

I think it would have been a whole different scenario if I got off the bus and just did it. I thought about it. I gave it a lot of thought. I put it down on paper. You know, it’s like writing a paper. I must have had a hundred drafts of what I would have liked to do and what do I need to do to make it come to fruition. Now, that’s what I did, you know. It wasn’t a spur-of-the-moment thing.

Indeed, participants clearly presented themselves as men and women who approached their transitions deliberately and intentionally. They spoke specifically about setting and following through on goals, a strategy they said they had used to successfully plan and implement their transitions.

P4 labeled his general approach to life as “organized.” He indicated that when he wanted something he “would set a goal and make it happen.” And, having approached change in this manner all of his life, he reported ease in using these same tactics to achieve his transition from employee to independent consultant. Similarly, P2 also referred to himself as being a “goal oriented” person as evidenced by the numerous goals he explained that he had set and had ultimately achieved throughout the course of his life beginning as early as high school. He said:

When I was young, I had goals in life. The first thing was, I remember being in high school, and I wanted to be a draftsman and an architect. I achieved those goals. . . . You know, it [my career] was catch-as-catch-can and what happened over the years was I got smarter in the business world and I set some goals.

P2 elaborated a number of professional and personal financial goals he had met during his lifetime, including early retirement at age 52. He stated that each time he achieved one goal, he would set another.

P3 also described himself as someone who always had “set goals.” He referred to his inclination to set goals as a “habit.” He said, “I have a habit of setting a goal and when I accomplish it, then, I lose interest in what I am doing and move on. . . . Then, I need to set another goal of some sort.” P3 explained that, for him, goals serve as “motivator[s]” inspiring him to take action. Without a goal, he explained, there is nothing to motivate him. He added, “If, I have a goal or a need, then I’ll fulfill the need.”

So, for P3, goal setting is considered necessary to inspire or to motivate him to follow through with his plans.

Clearly, the process of goal setting in order to achieve results, whether personal or career-related, was a predominant conversational theme. Moreover, a number of participants mentioned that the career transitions they were currently undergoing were actually goals they had set for themselves at some time in the past and only now, at midlife, had been able to actively pursue. For example, P1 indicated that she had always wanted to earn a bachelor's degree. She referred to the degree as her "original goal."

She said:

I always wanted to get a college education, to finish my college education. So, since I had saved money and I was deciding what to do with it, this was the time to spend it, and spending on education seemed like a very positive thing to do. This seemed to be the time to do it.

Indeed, at midlife, P1 was finally pursuing what she referred to as "a lifelong goal" of completing her college degree. And, while P1's goal centered on education, others talked about career interests they had "always wanted to pursue." For example, P8, a former fly fishing guide turned retail business owner, indicated that he had "always wanted [his] own business." Likewise, P12, a former commercial pilot turned health foods store proprietor said that he had "always wanted to have some kind of a retail store." That these individuals were pursuing the work that they had always wanted to do, in itself, demonstrates a deliberateness of action typical of one who acts intentionally.

Certainly, participant talk of "planning" and, in particular, of "setting goals" in order to achieve results points to a high degree of "purposeful" behavior. Goal setting is second nature to participants. And, having spent a lifetime achieving through deliberate action, it follows that they would, in turn, approach their midlife career-related transitions

in similar fashion. Clearly, participant utterances implicate a “purposeful” group of people who accomplish their goals through deliberate planning and execution.

Discerning

The term “discerning” is used in the context of this study as a descriptor for one who exercises sound judgement (The American Heritage Dictionary, 1985). For participants, decisions surrounding major life events such as changing jobs, becoming self-employed, retiring, or going back to school, involved a fair amount of speculation and risk since it would be impossible to know with absolute certainty how such choices would ultimately play out. Nevertheless, participants unequivocally expressed trust that they had made the “right decisions.” In fact, not a single participant expressed dissatisfaction or regret about the transition-related decisions he or she had made. On the contrary, participants embraced their career moves as having been the “right decisions,” made not on the spur-of-the-moment but with deliberation and in spite of the potential risks involved. They are “discerning” and therefore trusted that the career decisions they had made were the “right decisions” for them.

Participants clearly expressed that they recognized the risks they were taking, yet they appeared not to be daunted. P24 acknowledged that quitting her job with no prospects for employment was a risky move, however she explained,

I am really into this whole thing of just walking forward in faith. I’ve never starved to death. I’ve never been without shelter or clothing or any of that stuff. And, so why should I think that is going to happen now. It just doesn’t make any sense.

P24 believed that her decision was sound because she trusted that she would be able, as she put it, “to cobble something together for myself to do.” She added that she did have a couple of “plan B’s” in case her first option didn’t work, suggesting that she had given

her decision to resign considerable thought and was comfortable in moving forward with it. Thus, while leaving stable employment was certainly viewed as risky, participants expressed trust that their basic needs would somehow continue to be met as they moved forward in transition. And, participants who had left or were planning to leave their jobs were not the only ones who talked about the risks associated with their decisions.

Individuals engaging in new business ventures also mentioned risk as a consideration of the decision-making process.

Career changers who opted for self-employment ventures were quite frank about the level of risk they were taking on. Retail business owner, P8 talked about the tremendous investment required to keep his business afloat. He indicated, "Everything is on the line. . . . This is my future. This is everything all wrapped into this thing I've created. It's the real deal." He did not mince words when he described his risk, however, he also softened the impact of his remarks by adding that "considering our sales, considering our growth, it's, for me, it's a safe gamble." Thus, for P8, the decision to invest heavily in growing his business was perceived, not necessarily as a risk, but as a positive strategic move based on sales and growth indicators. Moreover, in confirmation of his sound decision making skills, P8 said, "It [the business] has been phenomenally worth it. It has been one of the most rewarding things. I wouldn't change anything." By indicating that he "wouldn't change anything," P8 affirmed the business decisions he had made.

Another business owner, P16, also expressed concern relative to the financial risk he had assumed by opening a new business, then added, "There is a certain amount of risk in anything you do, but, if you don't take it, you'll never know." Thus, taking a risk

was deemed by P16 as merely a necessary step in the process of change. And, determined to achieve their career goals, “discerning” participants indicated a reluctance to let potential risks stand in their way. Furthermore, many participants affirmed the actions they had taken by claiming to have made the “right decisions.”

Consider P10’s discussion of her decision to leave her job as a college professor in order to return to school for the training necessary to pursue a new profession:

Oh yeah, this is definitely the right thing. And, you know, it’s one of those things that when you start on the right path everything kind of falls into place. So, that’s been the case for me. It just feels like this is right. . . . It was the right decision to take the leave and work toward this other direction.

So, for P10, the fact that “everything kind of [fell] into place” signaled to her that she had made the “right decision.” And, like P10, other participants also spoke of “being on the right path” and of “things falling in to place.” In fact, P11 spoke at length about how “everything just falls into place” when the “right thing comes along.” She cautioned, however, that “you can’t force it. . . . The transition can be hard but you shouldn’t have to force yourself, because it might not be the right thing.” Thus, for P10 and P11, having “things fall into place” served as validation that they had made the “right decisions.” Nevertheless, as some participants found, things do not always just fall into place.

However, even when faced with a dose of resistance, as P2’s situation illustrates, trust voiced in one’s decisions didn’t appear to falter. In talking about the difficulty he had experienced in finding a part-time job, P2 lamented, “I thought it [the transition from early retirement to a new career] would be a lot easier.” He added, “I don’t have any regrets, though. I’d do it again the same way.” Thus, while things hadn’t exactly turned out as planned, P2 continued to express confidence in his ability to exercise good judgement.

P22 expressed similar confidence in her judgement in spite of the uncertainty of not knowing where this “right path” would lead. She explained:

I just feel more like I really know that I am on the right path. I feel like I’m making decisions. I have no idea what the outcome will be but the decisions I am making feel really good.

Moving forward despite the uncertainty of not knowing what she would do to make a living once she resigned from her current job felt like “the right path” and thus affirmed P22’s decisions, thereby strengthening her resolve in spite of not knowing how things might turn out.

Within the present context of career-related transition, participant utterances implicate a “discerning” group of men and women who trust that they have made the “right decisions.” Terms and phrases such as “the right decision,” “the right path,” “the right thing,” “faith,” “things fall into place,” and “safe gamble,” give force to an identity claim of trust in one’s judgement. Moreover, expressions such as “I don’t have any regrets,” and “it had been worth it,” and “I would do it the same way again,” lend further support to the notion that one had indeed exercised sound judgement.

Fearful

The term “fearful” is used in the context of this study as a descriptor for a person who expresses fear of the uncertain outcomes of his or her decisions. While, as discussed above, participants indicate that they have carefully planned and executed the right decisions, fear often follows closely on the heels of discernment. While one may have lauded his or her actions as “the right thing” to do, expressions of fear were just as likely to be uttered as were refrains of having exercised sound judgement. P14 described the feeling quite clearly as he talked about his wife’s assessment of him as he was getting

ready to return to school to earn a second master's degree at age fifty. He indicated, "My wife said, you know, you look like a deer in the headlights. And, it was so true. It was like, wow, I have jumped off into the deep end and it's sink or swim now." The phrase "a deer in the headlights" refers to the manner in which a deer will often react at night when approached by an oncoming vehicle. Rather than run away from the vehicle in order to avoid harm, the deer tends to become completely immobile, generally staring in the direction of the oncoming light source, giving the impression of being too scared to move out of harm's way. P14's fear resulted from his concerns about whether he would be able to handle the rigors of graduate school. He expressed feelings of doubt about whether, at age 50, he would be able to "do" academic work. He indicated that he felt a "lot of anxiety leading up to those first quizzes and exams."

Another participant, P1, who at age 56 had returned to college to complete her bachelor's degree, expressed similar fears about moving from a small Montana community to Missoula to attend school. She talked about "breaking fear barriers because there was a tremendous fear of things in Missoula." She added, "It was, like, am I going to run out of money, am I going to have to go home and feel defeated because I'm overwhelmed with all of this." To P1, college life "was a totally different world than the world [she] had been in" prior to moving to Missoula. She compared her college experience to that of her son's. She said, "He had a lot of good memories of going to school and my first semester was just all terror." P1's words expressed a clear sense of the fear she had experienced as a 56-year-old college student. Even P10, the college professor, expressed a fear of becoming a student again. She said that she had experienced "some freak-outs about going back to school." When I asked her to explain,

she replied, “I am actually afraid, I am a little more afraid that they are going to expect me, I don’t know what they are going to expect me to be.” The “they” that she was referring to were the professors who would be teaching her classes. She was concerned that perhaps their expectations of her might be overly high since she herself was a professor and she indicated that her fear was that she might not meet their expectations. She added that she “had some fears about how that [was] going to play out,” clearly implicating a sense of foreboding. And, while P1, P14, and P10 reported feeling fear, other participants talked about feeling both exhilarated and frightened all at once.

P5, who transitioned from a salaried position to self-employment, elaborated on her fear about not making enough money:

One of the things that comes up, not so much, I’ve learned to recognize it better, is the whole thing about the fear factor, about not making enough money. You know, you don’t have a necessarily steady income and there are things that come up unexpectedly and I have really recognized that when I get scared that I’m not going to have enough money, then everything just seems to slow down. And, when I keep telling myself that this is fun and the money’s there and the cycles will just keep going, it just keeps going.

P5 admitted her fear of not making enough money from self-employment while at the same time acknowledging the cyclic nature of her business. Not making enough money was often at the crux of the concerns expressed by people in the throes of career-related transition, however, the way in which such fears were discussed was not always straightforward. Accordingly, P7, anxious to find a new job before quitting her current one, expressed her feelings of fear as being “a little shaky.” She acknowledged that transition made her “feel powerful” though the length of time it was taking for her to find a new job made her feel “kind of shaky.” Others also expressed their fears in a round

about way. Consider P8's discussion about fear in relation to starting a new retail business:

A couple of people have asked me about fear. I don't feel fear. I feel stress. You know, I'm not really afraid of failure. I'm not.... It's lack of control. It's just putting it in someone else's hands to, putting it in the hands of my potential, my community to support what I do.

Thus, while P8 didn't claim to be necessarily fearful, he did admit to being stressed about his lack of control. He later acknowledged, however, that if business were to dry up and "people weren't coming through the door" and "my phone wasn't ringing," that he "would really be terrified." As P24, the nonprofit agency manager who had given notice to her employer that she would be quitting her job remarked, "Transition is very scary." Indeed, talk about making major life changes wouldn't be complete without some references to "fear," "anxiety," and even "terror." But, as P24 added, "at least it is one of those times that you know that you're really alive. [and you think], oh, do I really want to be doing this. Or, should I withdraw my resignation." P24's experience of fear could be described as both "scary" and exciting in the sense that it caused her to really feel alive or exhilarated even though she also admitted to being scared.

Participants defined themselves, then, as both determined and fearful through their talk. While they reported clearly believing that they had made the right decisions relative to the changes they were undergoing, they admitted that they were not immune to fear. Talk about "breaking fear barriers," "freak-outs," "anxiety," "fear," being "scared" feeling "alive," and "a little shaky" peppered their discussions about the process of change. Nevertheless, despite their resolve to forge ahead, participants explained that they did so cautiously and not without a certain amount of fear.

Autonomous

The term “autonomous” is used in the context of this study as a descriptor for one who values independence and self-reliance (The American Heritage Dictionary, 1985). Participants expressed a strong desire for autonomy, particularly at what they commonly referred to as “this stage” of their lives. They described themselves largely as people who, in the past, may have been more tolerant of organizational dysfunction simply because they viewed working within such a structure primarily as a means to an end. Accordingly, having experienced working in organizations, many of them expressed a preference for self-employment over working for someone else. Overwhelmingly, participants expressed a preference for autonomy in their work circumstances.

Participants indicated that they want to have more control over their work lives. P5, a self-employed life coach, extolled the virtues of being one’s own boss. She explained, “I like being my own boss. I really like being away from the political stuff that goes on in just about any organization I know.” She added, “the life that I have now is totally of my choosing.” For P5 and several other participants, the dream job is to have one’s own business, to be one’s own boss. Over and over again, participants stressed the importance of being independent, of doing something for themselves, of experiencing autonomy on the job.

One participant attributed his quest for autonomy as a reaction to the bureaucracy to which he had belonged for so many years. Having just terminated a 28-year career as an employee in a nonprofit organization, P6 was enjoying his newfound freedom at the time that I interviewed him. He described how he was “learning to live in [his] own skin and be independent and have [his] own perspective outside of that organizational

structure that [he] worked in for so long.” He talked at length about the fact that he did not want to work in “that environment” anymore. He described his post-organizational life in positive terms. He said, “I feel like I have some autonomy. I am in control of my own fate and I’m not the robot anymore that’s punching out homeless contracts for the local homeless shelter every five minutes.” For P6, “autonomy” and “control” became the “right thing” for him. P7, a woman planning to quit her job as a nonprofit agency program manager, echoed P6’s distaste for bureaucratic organizations. She explained, “I don’t want to work with bureaucracy anymore. . . . I am the one who is choosing which direction I want to go with my life. That’s very empowering to me.” For many, like P6 and P7, years of working in organizations had taken their toll. P21, a retired law enforcement officer, indicated that when he retired he said to himself, “I’m hanging up that gun and badge and it’s over with and its now time for me.” He summed up his midlife career aspirations as follows:

I’m going to work for myself. [I’m] not going to work for anybody else again. I’ll have my own little home office. . . . Back then [in my former career] I was a cog in the wheel. I had a boss. I had to answer to somebody. Now, there’s only one I answer to and that’s me.

For P21, early retirement signaled an opportunity for him to pursue the autonomy not afforded him in his former career in law enforcement.

On a similar note, P20, a former classroom teacher explained, “I like being able to call my own shots. . . . It’s nice to be able to dictate what you want to do without having to hassle with the administration at school about getting time off for doing this or going here.” Transitioning from the classroom to the more autonomous role of an entrepreneur suited P20 well in that he indicated that he was finally able to experience the “flexibility” that he preferred. Accordingly, for many of the participants I interviewed, working for

others within an organizational structure was relegated to a “been there, done that” experience not likely to be repeated in the future. In other words, participants who had previously worked in organizational settings expressed reluctance to return to similar work environments. Moreover, as a number of participants explained, being able to “work for myself” or “having my own thing” was clearly presented as the optimum work experience.

P8 accounted for his self-employment aspirations as the answer to a lifelong personal goal. He said, “I just always wanted to have my own thing.” This drive to have one’s “own thing” was a common refrain among participants. P13 expressed a determination to mold her newly purchased retail business into a reflection of herself. She referred to her bakery as a venture that “over the years has to become a reflection of who I am, besides just a reflection of what everybody else is here because they’re gonna come and go.” Again, the theme of having one’s “own thing” or something that would be a “reflection of who I am,” was emphasized. P19 entered the world of self-employment early on in his career as an independent information technology consultant. He referred to having one’s own business as being “different” than being an employee and his comments definitely reiterated this notion of autonomy. He said, “It’s a lot different when you’re a business owner. You make your own rules and other people live by your rules. You get used to that.” P19 indicated that, as a student, he missed the flexibility he had enjoyed as an independent consultant. Indeed, participants didn’t mince words when talking about the importance they placed on autonomy. Terms and phrases such as “I want,” “my own,” “self,” “something for myself,” “do what I want,” and “call my own shots,” were variously used to describe their career ambitions. As P5 put it, “I just can’t

do it this way [referring to her former government job] so I have to do it my way and I have to make it work.” For P5, as well as the other business owner study participants, the attainment of autonomy was a significant motivating force for choosing to work for one’s self over working for others.

Productive

The term “productive” is used in the context of this study as a descriptor for one who realizes useful tangible results in exchange for time and effort expended (The American Heritage Dictionary, 1985). Participants talked as if they were preoccupied with “doing” and “producing.” They spoke at length about the need to always be “doing something.” Moreover, they also stated that they wished to be adequately remunerated for their efforts. The notion that one must do something for gain in order to be perceived as productive was implicated repeatedly in participants’ talk about career-related transition.

For some, not being gainfully employed constituted “doing nothing.” “Well, I’m too young to do nothing,” remarked P6 in answer to my question about his future work plans, the implication being that age is somehow related to doing nothing, and that one must be of a certain age in order to be allowed to “do nothing.” When P3 retired from the fire department at age 51, he said he did not consider himself to actually be “retired” as in no longer planning to ever work again for pay. He explained that he doesn’t even use the word “retirement” to describe his employment situation because of the negative connotation of “doing nothing” that he perceives is associated with the term. When asked what he does for a living, he indicated that he avoided the issue by telling people “I drive bus [a part time, occasional post-retirement job] and I’m real busy.” He explained

that when he tells people he is retired, they expect an accounting of how he spends his time. But, if he tells them instead that he drives school bus, he said, “That tends to put a smile on peoples’ faces. They tend to think oh, he’s not a doing-nothing kind of guy. He’s driving school bus.” In other words, he is considered to be productive and being productive is a socially acceptable use of one’s time while doing nothing is not. P9, another retired job seeker, spoke at length about his concept of “doing nothing:”

I can’t do nothing. I’m not the kind of person who can sit around and do nothing day after day. I have to do something. If I sit around, too much, then I’m going I should be doing something, I should be doing something, a product of a catholic school and lot’s of things there. But, I find that if I am doing nothing, then there’s sort of a feeling really that I should be and that people should be doing something rather than just sitting on their butts. No, I really believe that. Now, sitting and reading a book, that’s not doing nothing. If I say doing nothing, I mean, for example, if you spend a whole day watching television. That would be doing nothing. And, I feel you have to be pretty low on the great chain of being to spend a whole day doing nothing.

P9 not only derided the act of doing nothing, he also vocalized his definition of “doing nothing,” thereby providing clarification of his conception of what it means to him to “do nothing.” The mere fact that the subject of “doing nothing” would merit such a protracted discussion in the first place says something about the value placed on “doing something” or producing “tangible results.” And, for most participants, being productive means working for pay.

As P11 put it, “You have to work in order to make money” and “You have to make enough money to survive and live off of.” Doing and producing is apparently such an accepted way of life that values and beliefs about it were frequently expressed in day-to-day conversation. For example, P15 explained her attitude toward work prior to her decision to change careers as one of apathetic acceptance: “You go to work, you’re supposed to work, and, you hear that from everyone. You’re not supposed to enjoy it,

just do it.” In other words, work is its own virtue and it shouldn’t matter whether it is enjoyable. In fact, for another participant, P10, the notion that one has to work was so strongly embedded in her belief system that the mere thought of not working, even though she later realized that she really didn’t have to, paralyzed her with fear. She recounted the circumstances leading to her acknowledgement that she really did not have to work:

I remember the first time Jean [my personal coach] said to me ‘Well, do you have to work?’ you know, and that was just this summer, or late summer, early fall. Do you really have to work? And, I would not even allow myself to consider that, you know. And then, as soon as that came up and I started to consider it, [I experienced] just extreme anxiety about not having a job. And, so we had to work through with her and with my husband about what that meant and why. Because, I actually don’t have to work right now. We’re at a position where he is doing so well that I can do it, but for me there’s all kinds of other things tied up to having a job and separate income that I had to identify and go through.

P10 had never really considered not working for pay, at least not until it was brought to her attention during a coaching session. And, realizing that she in fact did not have to work, allowed her to consider other career options such as re-training for a new profession.

Another participant admitted feeling guilty about not being productive. After she quit her full-time job as an employee of a nonprofit organization, P15 even admitted “feeling guilty of not being at a workplace from 8:00 to 5:00.” She felt she was not “being productive” enough, or at least as productive as she believed she should be.

Another participant, P20, confirmed his commitment to productivity when he declared, “I don’t plan on quitting work, you know, and retiring. I don’t know what I would do.”

Again, the emphasis was on being productive, doing something, producing something tangible. P2 expressed concern that he was expending a lot of effort trying to establish a

not-for-profit venture that had not yet produced any income. His primary concern was that he wasn't "accomplishing" anything because, as he put it, "I don't have any tangible results." According to P2, he could only be said to have accomplished something if he could claim "tangible" results. And, for P2, achieving "tangible results" meant producing income. According to P2, completing the tasks necessary to bring his venture to fruition would only be considered an accomplishment if and when it began to produce income.

For P2 and for most participants, then, productivity was described as not simply the act of "doing something," but of "doing something" in return for some type of tangible gain, which typically was defined as adequate pay for the time and effort expended. Participants talked at length about "doing," about accomplishing material, visible, tangible results. Terms and phrases such as "doing," "accomplishment," "I have to be doing something," "I can't do nothing," "I can do it," "just do it," "tangible results," and "being productive," implicate a penchant for activity leading to results. Clearly, the prevalence of remarks relative to the notion of producing tangible results demonstrates the value placed on productivity within this society. Indeed, through their talk, middle age men and women define themselves as productive people.

Dutiful

The term "dutiful" is used in the context of this study as a descriptor for one who expresses a clear sense of duty towards meeting his or her financial obligations to family and society. And, as "dutiful individuals," participants indicated that they do not take their fiscal responsibilities to family and society lightly. For example, they talked at considerable length about "raising their children," "paying off debt," and "saving for retirement." Milestone life events such as having one's last child leave home or paying

off the mortgage were frequently mentioned factors leading participants to either postpone or proceed with career transitions. Consider P6 who attributed his reluctance to quit his job on the fact that he felt obligated to pay for his son's college education. He explained, "I felt it [paying for my son's education] was my obligation and I did it and I am proud of myself for doing it." He added:

Once he [my son] hit about 26, things started clearing up for me as far as, you know, and I, fortunately, am debt free now. That was a big decision, or that was a big influence, too, you know, carrying debt and then feeling like you have to stay put and then you lose your mobility because, you know, you've got to stick in there and pay it off and get through that.

P6's comments implicate a clear sense of duty towards meeting his financial obligations prior to quitting his job. Likewise, another participant, P7, talked about how much more difficult transition was for her at "this stage of her life" because, unlike P6, she still had minor children to raise. She explained, "It's about my family and it's about their needs and I have different financial priorities than I did the last time I went through transition." She explained that funding her children's college educations, as well as her own retirement, were among her top financial priorities.

Bakery owner and single parent, P13 indicated that she had, in fact, delayed making the transition from employee to business owner because of a sense of duty to her family. She explained, "While my kids were in high school and young and at home I didn't feel like I could obligate myself to owning my own business because no matter what happens, you have to be there." She explained that she considered being at home in the evenings for her children her greatest priority and that owning a business while her kids were still living at home would have taken up far more of her time than she would have been willing to commit. She clarified, however, that as a "breadwinner" she was

“very conscious of making a living” for her family and that once her kids had left for college she had decided the timing was right for her to go into business for herself. She explained, “It’s what I need to do in order to keep the house, pay the bills, have three kids in college, and do the things that I do.” So, for P13, while being with her children at home initially prevented her from transitioning to self-employment, paying for their college educations subsequently provided the impetus to become self-employed because she stated that she believed that she could earn a better living as a business owner. P9, like P6, P7, and P13, also mentioned fiscal responsibility as a factor in his decision to make a career change. He attributed his lack of concern about leaving his job to having paid off his debts. He said,

I didn’t have any real reservations about quitting, really. We had finished paying for our house and so on, and we’re not in debt for anything, so that makes it possible to do some things we might not be able to do if we had, you know, fifteen years to go on our mortgage or something like that.

So, for P9, being free of debt played a role in the timing of his transition. Meeting his financial obligations allowed him the freedom to choose to leave his job.

A related financial concern cited by participants pertained to saving for retirement. The duty to fund one’s own post-employment years was mentioned as a significant factor for a number of participants. Some participants, like P 20, who said, “I don’t plan on quitting work and retiring,” didn’t express being as concerned as others about setting money aside for the future. However, for many, being able to transition to a new career while at the same time building a retirement nest egg was mentioned as an important consideration. As P4 put it, “I’m still young enough to where these are the income earning years, [I’ve] got to be doing that and saving for retirement.” Likewise, P16 expressed concern about being able to put aside enough money to fund his

retirement. He explained that he had been thinking about retirement and what he was going to do when he retired, provided that he could actually afford to retire someday. And, while good intentions might exist, retirement planning wasn't necessarily uppermost in the minds of some participants who chose to transition. For example, P14 said that his parents would be appalled if they knew he had given up a government pension in order to "do something different" career-wise. He explained,

My parents died about six years ago and they probably would have disapproved severely, but it wouldn't stop me. I mean, I went back to graduate school and they thought that was kind of stupid, too, you know. But, you know, to them the most important thing would be to continue in my state job and collect a pension. To them, the pension was the most important thing on earth, you know, stability and I guess that's completely the opposite of my thinking. Maybe I'll find out when I'm 70. I don't know.

So, for P14, giving up the government "pension" so highly valued by his parents was, for him, a small price to pay for the opportunity to seek training for a new career.

Nevertheless, while retirement planning might not be the highest priority of all participants, the fact that some of them talked about their decisions not to let it prevent them from changing careers, suggests that it was not an altogether insignificant or nonexistent consideration.

Through participant declarations of "raising children" and "paying off debts" and "saving for retirement," a picture of the "dutiful" person emerges. Participant talk about such responsibilities evokes images of a person with a clear sense of duty toward one's family as well as to one's own self. And, it is this "dutiful" person who accounts for how such financial obligations have been and will continue to be met despite the uncertainty of change. Viewed as having the potential to either enable or restrict choice, it is this

sense of duty that comes into play when discerning individuals consider implementing their career transitions.

Time-Driven

The term “time-driven” is used in the context of this study as a descriptor for one who views time as a resource, which must be managed, scheduled, and spent wisely. In fact, this notion of time as a commodity is so deeply internalized that for the participants in this study, career transitions were largely all about time, how it is spent, who controls it, and what product results from its expenditure. Conversations peppered with terms such as “age,” “young,” “old,” “structure,” “part-time,” “full-time,” “hours,” “days,” “weeks,” “years,” and “time,” as well as phrases such as “I’m still young enough,” “the 8:00 to 5:00 routine,” “too old,” “too long in the tooth,” “too young,” “life is too short,” “eight hours a day,” “40 hours a week,” “stage of life,” “trapped by time,” and “getting older,” implicate a high degree of concern about time. The prevalence of participant references to and about time clearly point to a group of men and women who described themselves as “time-driven.”

Four separate themes relating to time emerged from the data: time as a function of age and aging, time as an expendable resource, time as something to be managed or scheduled, and time as a biological function. I will first address time as a function of age and aging.

Participants talked about age both in terms of time elapsed and time remaining. Much of their conversations relating to age centered on what they viewed as age appropriate milestones. For example, one of the participants, P1, who returned to school to complete a college degree at age 56, expressed concern about not having “started

earlier.” She added, “I have to say, at first, I almost felt, within myself, apologetic because it took me [so long to return], because of my age, that I am going to school among all these kids.” Clearly, P1’s focus was on being “too old” or age inappropriate to partake in this particular life event. Another participant, 55-year old P24, expressed that she considered herself as being “too old” for the type of demanding work that she was doing. She said, “I am getting a little too long in the tooth to have enough energy to do this.” Correspondingly, P8 implied that he was “too old” to be single. He explained, “I’m 37 years old and one of the main reasons why I’m my age and single, you know, I have this terrible affliction of loving to get on the water. And, it’s pretty stoic, it is kind of a reclusive way to spend your time.” In talking about “getting on the water,” P8 was referring to the sport of fly-fishing, an activity he described as not conducive to finding a marriage partner.

Others indicated that they thought they were “too young” for a particular event to have occurred. P3 explained that he took early retirement from fire fighting and while the total number of years he had worked prior to retirement were on par for his occupation, his age, 50, would be considered “in some circles too young” to be retired. Likewise, P11 talked about being quite young to already have grown children. She said, “I’m in my early forties and my husband and I, I mean, we were young parents to be in our forties and seeing our kids out of the house.” P11 indicated that she viewed being young parents as an advantage because having the kids raised and on their own at such an early age allowed her and her husband more time to focus on building their retirement nest egg. This belief that certain life events should occur within specified timeframes in one’s life was clearly conveyed through much of the discussion regarding age.

Another way in which participants broached the subject of age was to talk about the number of years of their lives remaining. The belief that time is limited, and that decisions need to be made, and actions taken before it is “too late” relative to one’s age, was a commonly expressed concern among participants. Forty-year old P4 told me that while he wasn’t “going to get caught up in the aging thing,” he did “sometimes think, [in relation to his age and the total number of years he plans to work] Well, that’s about 15 to 20 more years worth of work time [remaining].” He added, “That’s the only thing I think about with regard to age is time remaining, provided good health.” So, for P4, aging was considered significant only to the extent that it signified a countdown of years left to work. In fact, time remaining in the workforce was a frequently mentioned concern. As stated by 44 year-old P7 in reference to her mother’s recent death, “Life is short,” and to participants expressing concern about the limited amount of time they have remaining, life indeed appeared to be too brief. Forty-seven year-old P22 expressed a sense of career urgency. She explained:

I think also that one of the things that happened for me at midlife was I have to figure this out, that it’s the first time that I’ve not just [thought] oh, I’ve got all the time in the world. You know, it’s like, oh, I could be a concert pianist or a brain surgeon, or open my own restaurant. But, it’s like, no, you really don’t have time to do all those things. If you want to be something, you actually have to narrow the scope a little bit and say, I’m going after this.

P22’s sentiments about not having enough time to aimlessly pursue a variety of career interests are apparently not isolated to this particular study. Gail Sheehy, author of *New Passages* (1995), was quoted in a recent interview for *Utne* (Spayde, 2004) as saying:

Well, they [people in their 40’s and 50’s] don’t really have a midlife crisis now. They might have a mini one, but it’s kind of a deadline crisis – when you realize that if you don’t find your passion and define your life, it’s going to be too late.

This notion of a lack of time remaining resonated with other participants as well. Many expressed a particular urgency with respect to being able to accomplish all of the things they wanted to do before a particular deadline arrived. P17 expressed concern about what she described as “not having enough time.” She talked about how, at age 55, she was feeling “trapped by time.” She elaborated, “There isn’t enough time to be able to do what I want to do because there is so much that I want to do all of a sudden being over 50 and now being 55, it’s like my life is half over and I haven’t done all these things I wanted to do.” This sense of “not having enough time” was a commonly expressed concern among participants. And, not only did they convey a sense of urgency about using their limited time remaining wisely, they also talked at length about how they utilized their time in order to maximize their efficiency.

The second time-related category concerns time as an expendable resource, that is, a commodity. Participants were particularly explicit about the number of hours they preferred to spend working. Many, like P2, indicated a preference for part-time work. He explained, “I’m trying to get a job doing something but I don’t want a 40 hour a week job.” He wanted work that would supplement his income while he attended classes. Others indicated a preference for time/schedule flexibility. P5, a self-employed life coach, noted that she preferred a flexible schedule by saying “I can work, and sometimes do, 14 or 15 hours in a day. But, I can also take a day off when I want to and I do.” She, like many other self-employed participants, viewed such flexibility as one of the perks of being in business for herself. And, while a number of self-employed participants talked about working long hours, they appeared not to mind doing what they believed was necessary to keep their businesses afloat. In fact, business owners, while acknowledging

an expenditure of time far outweighing immediate return on their investments, overwhelmingly conveyed an “it will all be worth it down the road” attitude. New business owner, P16 admitted, “I don’t think I do very well eight hours a day in an office.” This seemed puzzling to me at first because I knew he was probably putting in far more hours than that on his new business venture. However, when talking about all of the hours he was spending on setting up his business, he explained what I later found to also ring true with other business owners I interviewed:

I think a lot of people think, well, you know, that I’ll have all this time and I don’t think that’s true. I mean you have freedom of schedule a little bit but you don’t have time to do, I mean you probably have to spend more time doing working, if you call it work, and that’s the key, do you call it work or do you love to do it. And, if you love to do it, you’re going to be there 18 hours a day anyway. But, if you think you’re going to get a lot of money by doing a little bit of stuff, then that’s not, that’s just not going to happen.

The point here, of course, is whether time spent is perceived as “working” or “doing what you love to do.” And, as P16 implied, spending time doing what one loves to do is not the same as working in the literal sense, that is, merely laboring in order to produce results. P8, another business owner, reiterated P16’s sentiments regarding the number of hours spent on his business. He explained, “As a business owner, you work a lot of hours. I never, ever, get tired of it.” He added, “It’s what I thrive on.” Indeed, talk about time spent at work, whether considered pleasurable or otherwise, figured prominently in participant conversations. Moreover, what is significant here is not whether one claimed to be working four hours a day or 14, but rather the fact that these time-focused discussions occurred with such frequency. This preoccupation about time and how one spends it implicates something about this particular group of participants. It demonstrates that they are time-driven. And, as further evidence of this claim, I noticed

that they not only concerned themselves with how time is spent but also that they talked at great length about the structuring of their days to coincide with how they believe time should be spent.

The third time-related category pertains to the scheduling of daily activities. Talking about the structuring of activities proved to be a recurrent subject of my discussions with participants. Former teacher, P9 indicated that one of the most difficult adjustments for him to make following his retirement from teaching was losing a structured time environment. He explained:

I don't think too many jobs are as tied to a clock as teachers are. [As a teacher] you have a really highly structured use of time and one of the things that I sometimes think is difficult is dealing without that structure and having to decide for myself when I'm going to do something, when I'm not going to do it, and when I'm going to start and when I'm going to stop.

So, for P9, no longer being tied to a prescribed schedule had required more of an adjustment than he had initially anticipated. This preoccupation with the effective management of one's time was mentioned by a number of participants. And, while some, like P11 who indicated that the most difficult part of her transition was organizing her time, longed for better time management skills, others talked about how they had creatively utilized scheduling to improve productivity.

P18 admitted that as a student she struggled with time management. She explained that in her former role as an employee she had had more control over the setting of deadlines than she does as a student. "When it comes to school," she explained, "there's a deadline for a paper or something – that's different. I am not deciding what day it gets done." Indeed, getting used to meeting someone else's deadlines had proved difficult for her. She said, "I am having to focus on time

management and getting stuff done when it's due." P18 indicated that she was implementing some "different strategies" in order to more effectively manage her time. Procrastination was causing her to become needlessly stressed and she had realized that this was something she could remedy with better time management skills.

The fourth and final time-related category is the consideration of time as a biological function. Participants talked about how their productivity was influenced by their personal biological clocks. In other words, they expressed sensitivity to the ebb and flow of their own bodily rhythms. For example, some people may experience bursts of energy at night, whereas others feel more alert during the early hours of the day or vice versa. Everyone has his or her own corporal rhythm referred to as a biological clock. Managing tasks in harmony with one's cyclical biological tendencies, that is, exerting oneself during peak periods and resting when the body is less energetic, was reported by some as an important scheduling consideration.

Former consultant turned college student, P19, described how he had scheduled his classes, according to him, "more towards the way I was operating at the business." He added, "I like to work later in the afternoon and into the night, so one thing I do, because I like to concentrate on math, I made sure I put math early in the morning." The reason for scheduling his most mentally demanding class early in the day was geared to mirror his time allocations during his life as a consultant where he tackled the mentally draining tasks of paperwork early in the day. He recalled acknowledging to himself that he was most alert in the morning and, therefore, he said, "I'm just going to put my math class real early. That way I'll learn how to concentrate on that just the same way I did at work, the tedious stuff." So, for P19, understanding his biological rhythms allowed him

to maximize the use of his time through appropriate scheduling. Other participants also mentioned the biological aspects of time.

P6 talked about how the “eight-hour [work] structure” of his former job was “getting to him.” He explained “From the time I was a kid, I think my biological clock was always set on, you know, my high energy period is about nine o’clock at night.” He pondered the fact that for his entire 28-year career he had “made himself do something that was not [his] rhythm.” He laughed as he remarked in jest, “I need to be a night guard at the capitol or something,” the implication being that finding a professional job with late evening office hours might present quite a challenge. Similarly, P22 talked about organizing her work around her peak energy fluctuations. She described her reluctance to work a typical eight hour day:

I had said that I wanted to leave my job at XYZ and I wanted to be able to work from home and not work eight hours a day in an organization. And, I did that. So, I quit my job and the job that I have, I can work from home. I need to work full-time, probably, just to make the money that I want to. But, I don’t ever want to work again where I have to be someplace day to day. That doesn’t fit for me. You know, my energy level, I can be high energy level and highly productive sometimes and other times not, so I really like that flexibility.

P22 regarded the ability to arrange her work schedule in sync with her biological clock to be an attractive feature of her employment situation. Other participants also indicated a preference for scheduling work outside of the typical eight-hour day. Indeed, the consideration of time as a biological function had provided those participants an opportunity to maximize its use through synchronization of energy with activity.

New business owner, P16 also mentioned his biological clock. He credited it to his tendency to wake up early in the morning. He said, “Four o’clock in the morning seems to be my time. . . . It’s amazing, my biological clock just wakes me up.” P16

admitted, however, that the excitement generated by opening up a new business was the more likely cause of his early morning awakenings. He compared the experiences of waking up to go to his former job with his present situation. He said, "You know, my other job, I worked at eight o'clock and it was hard to get there at eight o'clock. And, with this one here [the new business], I am up at six waiting to go out the door." And, of course, since he claimed that his biological clock was waking him up at four o'clock, he reported no problems arriving at work on time.

Time, whether past or remaining, spent or saved, managed or wasted, proved, for participants, to be an important and valuable commodity worthy of much discussion. Participants in this study expressed a great deal of concern for time. Words such as "age," "young," "old," "structure," "part-time," "full-time," "hours," "days," "weeks," "years," and "time," as well as phrases such as "I'm still young enough," "the 8:00 to 5:00 routine," "too old," "too long in the tooth," "too young," "life is too short," "eight hours a day," "40 hours a week," "stage of life," "trapped by time," and "getting older," provide insight into the ways in which participants understand, value, and use time, and indeed, point to them as being "time-driven." The commodification of time emerged as a particularly salient and predominant theme among middle-aged career changers. For study participants, time is treated much like cash, as a valuable asset, not to be wasted. The more control one has over how he or she spends his or her time, the better. And, although some participants expressed difficulty operating outside of time constraints, not a single participant voiced a preference for stricter controls on his or her time.

Summary

Chapter Three responds to the research question: How do middle-aged people undergoing pivotal career-related transition use communication as identity markers? In this chapter I presented eight identity markers implicated by participants through their talk. Supporting evidence of my claims was also supplied in the form of participant utterances. By uncovering and interpreting the communicative practices of middle-aged men and women who are undergoing career-related transition, I have identified a group of people who present themselves as change-driven, purposeful, discerning, fearful, autonomous, dutiful, productive, and time-driven.

A society of middle-aged men and women who prefer variety to the mundane emerged. Boredom and monotony were among the reasons they cited for seeking new careers. They talked of longing for a change, something different, a new challenge, and described how they carefully weighed their career options and then acted with purpose through deliberation and the establishment of goals. Claims of having made the right decision and of harboring no regrets affirmed their discerning nature. Participants voiced trust in their decision-making capabilities and despite the potential risks involved, they moved forward, persevered, and experienced fear.

Utterances depicting fear were as commonly vocalized as were expressions of having done the right thing. Thus, while confident that they had made the right choices, participants nevertheless acknowledged being fearful of the unknown, for example, whether they would make enough money, be a good student, or find a job. Despite the amount of planning and preparation involved, implementing the transitions so eagerly sought after proved a scary proposition for some. Yet, not a single participant voiced

regret or indicated that they would have done things differently if given another chance. The prospect of a new beginning, of exercising control over their work lives was deemed far too attractive to prevent participants from moving forward with their plans.

Participants talked about their notions of work, that is, what type of employment situation would best suit them, and revealed a strong preference for autonomy. They spoke of being in control, of having something of their own, of working for themselves rather than for an organization. And, whether going it alone or working for someone else, participants expressed a need to always be doing something productive, of achieving tangible results for their efforts. Participants are conscientious not only about how they spend their time and whether they consider themselves and others to be productive, but also about their fiscal responsibilities.

Participants expressed a sense of duty to their families and to themselves. Some discussed placing their transitions on hold because of the potential impact of a career change on their ability to produce an income or devote enough time to their families. Likewise, the absence of family care-taking or financial responsibilities was often mentioned as a catalyst for transitions. A number of participants indicated that they had, in fact, waited until their children were grown or their homes were paid for before transitioning from one employment circumstance to another. Such milestones were among a number of factors signaling to participants that it was the right time to make a change, not surprising for a group of people driven by a tremendous sensitivity to time.

Participants clearly evidenced a preoccupation with time. Many talked about their ages and the sense of now or never that had produced in them a sense of urgency to fulfill their career and personal aspirations before it would be too late. They talked about how

they spent and managed their time and voiced a preference for having more control over their time. Some participants even talked about the benefits of aligning their daily activity schedules in accordance with their biological clocks. Indeed, whether their career transitions involved retiring, going back to school, changing jobs, or buying a business, time provided the backdrop against which all other considerations appeared to evolve.

Chapter Four: The Speech Code of Accomplishment

Chapter Three examined the eight different types of identity markers study participants implicate through their talk. In Chapter Four, I respond to my second research question, which asks: What speech code or codes about identity is/are implicated in the ways middle-aged people talk about the process of career-related transition they are experiencing? First, I will explain what speech codes are and how they are used by members of particular societies as a means of communicating with one another. Then, I will discuss my findings relative to the code of accomplishment as implicated in the ways in which study participants talk about career-related change.

Speech Codes

For the purposes of establishing a common understanding, I will begin by explaining what I mean when I refer to speech codes. In general, speech codes consist of the words and phrases used by people in everyday conversation and the local social meanings ascribed to such language by interlocutors. More specifically, Philipsen (1992) defines codes as “historically transmitted, socially constructed systems of symbols and meanings, premises, and rules, pertaining to communicative conduct” (p. 124). Codes, then, is the system of means by which communicants convey what they believe in and value, as well as what behavior is expected, desired, or proscribed in certain contexts that reflects and constitutes those beliefs and values. Furthermore, to the extent that such beliefs, values, and norms of behavior are shared by interactants, speech can be said to be “cultural.” In other words, it is the shared nature of such beliefs, values, and rules of behavior that constitute a particular culture or society/speech community (Hymes, 1962). And, to the extent that such shared beliefs, values, and norms of behavior vary from

society to society, speech as a reflection of culture is said to be “culturally distinctive” (Philipsen, 1992). Accordingly, speech codes can be recognized as distinct communicative practices understood and activated by particular users of cultures.

Extracting a Speech Code

In order to extract a speech code, the ethnographer must carefully observe the communicative practices of a particular community so that he or she can recognize and interpret localized meanings of words and phrases that convey statements of belief or value and rules regarding norms of behavior. Such communication preferences are sometimes characterized by ethnographers and others as “rules for speaking” (Carbaugh, 1995, p. 245). Speech codes are enacted by people in everyday conversation through the use of locally understood terms and phrases as a way of communicating premises or beliefs of existence, and of what is considered good and bad as well as rules for acceptable behavior (Philipsen, 1992). Therefore, in order to abstract a code in use by a particular society of people, the ethnographer must be able to identify the communicative practices that convey such premises and rules. One way to do this is to take note of reoccurring terms and phrases and their social meanings.

Another method of identifying a speech code is to elicit the rules for communication that govern social conduct. Questions the ethnographer must consider are: what would an outsider, or someone not familiar with the code, need to know in order to be able to communicate within this society; and what speaking taboos are conveyed by this society through their communicative practices? This process of identifying salient terms and phrases and their local meanings in relation to the formulation of premises and rules for conduct can then be evaluated for the presence of a

speech code. With these guidelines in mind, I will now discuss the code of accomplishment, as enacted by study participants through their talk, specifically as this code embodies the eight identity markers addressed in the previous section.

The Code of Accomplishment

In Chapter Three, I included a discussion of an identity marker entitled “Productive,” the primary thrust of which was to document utterances supporting the identity claim of “I am productive.” I defined the term “productive” as a descriptor for one who accomplishes tangible results in exchange for time and effort expended. During the course of my research, I realized early on that the notion of how time is spent and whether one is or is not productive, and what that says about him or her in the speech community of middle-aged career changers, implicated certain premises and rules for communication. In other words, I detected the conditions of a speech code. Furthermore, subsequent observations and inquiries confirmed that certain cultural premises and rules for communication govern the communicative practices of men and women undergoing career-related transition when it comes to the treatment of one’s time.

As the earlier discussion on “productivity” illustrates, among middle-aged men and women experiencing career-related change, productivity is highly valued. Spending one’s time wisely, that is, accomplishing something tangible or receiving adequate return for time and effort spent on task is considered wise, whereas wasting one’s time or not getting an adequate material return on one’s investment of time and effort, is considered foolish. For example, P2 indicated that when he told people what he was doing, that is, going to school, looking for part-time work, and setting up a not-for-profit business venture, people would respond to him with the question, “Well, do any of those pay?” P2

indicated that until he could claim to be receiving an income he wouldn't feel as though he was accomplishing anything despite his busy schedule. Accordingly, there are certain unwritten and tacitly understood rules governing what one should or should not say or do when asked to account for how he or she spends his or her time if one wishes to avoid unwelcome reactions. As a semi-retired woman I observed during my fieldwork explained, "I feel like I have to justify how I spend my time." She added that people would tell her that they "didn't understand" how she spent "all of her time," and that she didn't appreciate feeling compelled to have to account for how she spends her time. In my own experience, I recall similar moments prior to entering graduate school. I felt as though I had to justify the time, effort, and expense of obtaining a graduate degree to people who wanted to know, and many did, what I was going to do with my education. To them, it did not make sense for me to give up a career in order to temporarily relocate to another town to attend school and to endure the emotional, mental, and monetary costs of obtaining a graduate degree unless the ultimate gain or accomplishment would be worth the investment required. And, to this day, I am still fielding inquiries about what I plan to do when I finish my degree. People want to know. As my data suggest, they want to know so that they can reconcile this question of whether I have spent my time wisely, that is, whether I have accomplished a tangible return on my investment.

Typically, in American society, this accounting of one's time is solicited in the form of what Po Bronson (2003) refers to as the "Inevitable Cocktail Party Question: What do you do?" (p. 219). Taken literally, one might respond with an accounting of the actions completed on a particular day or perhaps answer by asking, "What do I do about what?" However, the fact that the question is so commonly understood in American

culture to mean, “What do you do for a living,” in itself implicates a speech code. And, for men and women who are in the midst of career-related change, the question of what one does is often not an easy one to answer considering the high value placed on productivity or the accomplishment of tangible results.

One of the taboos of communicative behavior in this particular culture is that it is not socially acceptable to admit that one is not doing anything, at least not until one is old enough to be considered to be legitimately retired from paid employment. Moreover, as was illustrated in Chapter Three’s earlier discussion of productivity, admitting that one is retired might even provoke unwelcome remarks. Recall that, retired firefighter, P3 indicated that he wouldn’t use the term “retired” when asked what he did for a living because he said that it made him appear to be a “doing-nothing” kind of guy. He reported that he did not believe that it was socially acceptable for him at his age to be unemployed, regardless of the fact that he had worked a full career and was legitimately drawing a pension. He therefore would tell people that he worked for the local bus lines in order to avoid such scrutiny even though he said that he only drove bus sporadically and did not consider it to be his occupation.

When asked how they usually responded to the question, “What do you do,” not one participant indicated that he or she responded by saying “I don’t work” or “I am retired” without qualifying their answers. For example, P1 indicated that she had gotten tired of hearing “some jerk saying, ‘Is that all you do all day?’” when she would introduce herself as a stay-at-home mom. She said that she “felt like [she] had to give a list of the hundreds of things that [she] did all day” in order to appease her critics. Dread of similar interrogations prompted a number of participants to modify their responses to

the “What do you do” question. Some participants reported that they did not always answer the question entirely truthfully simply to avoid the questioning that would predictably follow. Others indicated that they tailored their responses according to how they thought their answers might be received. Of particular concern was how one should explain career moves that weren’t always viewed positively by others. Indeed, how one explained what one was doing or planning to do, it was generally agreed by participants, had to be approached carefully and in a certain manner so as to preempt unwelcome reactions. In other words, there are rules for speaking about how one accounts for his or her time. In the following paragraphs I explicate four rules of communicative conduct abstracted from field observations and participant interviews pertaining to how one should talk about what one does with his or her time in order to artfully avoid disapproving reactions from others. I also include pertinent utterances to illustrate my claims.

Rule 1: When speaking to someone about what one is doing or plans to do, information that could potentially cause an unfavorable reaction should be omitted.

A number of participants indicated that they had purposefully omitted information when telling others about the job changes they had either already made or were planning to make. For example, P24 acknowledged that she remained intentionally vague about her resignation and the fact that she did not have plans for immediate re-employment when talking about her transition to people she didn’t know well. She explained, “They don’t know anything about my history. They say ‘oh, you’re going to take a vacation, huh?’ And I’ll just say I want to spend a real summer in Montana.” Thus, by omitting information about her true intentions to actually quit her job with no employment

prospects, she successfully avoided the reactions she otherwise might have gotten had she been more forthcoming about her plans to take some time off from paid employment. P6 described his tactic for announcing his job status as “spoon feed[ing].” When asked about how he talked about his career transition to others he explained, “I think I spoon feed, I guess would be the kind of term, a little bit at a time. You know, I generally try to be honest in my remarks, but I don’t necessarily divulge everything because there’s some stuff people don’t need to know.” P6, like P24, reported that he used omission in order to preempt unwelcome reactions to his employment situation. He explained that he tried to “relay a sense that I’m ok without telling them where I’m tactically at in my thinking with different projects.” In other words, he would tell them enough to alleviate any concerns they might have without revealing what he considered to be more information than he believed they needed to know, thereby averting any negative commentary concerning his employment status.

Rule 2: When speaking to someone about what one is doing or plans to do, one should use humor in order to deflect unwelcome reactions.

Humor is a particularly useful way to deflect uninvited responses to one’s career announcements because it has the potential to be both entertaining and effective in deterring negative feedback. For example, semi-retired teacher P9 explained that he generally tells people that he is a “recovering teacher and that he is in a full-time recovery program.” He added, “I’ve always found that if you can find a lighthearted way of telling people what you do, that it helps to get them to laugh.” Talking about a former career also directs the conversation away from one’s current employment status. For example, as P9 explained, talking about being a former teacher encourages people to focus on what

he used to do rather than what he is or is not doing or plans to do. In a similar vein, P6 indicated in jest that he sometimes referred to himself as a “minister without portfolio.” He laughed and added, “[That’s] a little diplomatic term that means I have no specific responsibilities.” Again, approaching peoples’ inquiries in this manner helps steer the conversation away from talk about one’s present employment status. And, while humor may not quell peoples’ questions entirely, it was reportedly considered a good tool for at least changing the subject.

Rule 3: When speaking to someone about what one is doing or plans to do, one should be deliberately vague or equivocal in order to deflect unwelcome reactions.

Equivocation is a particularly useful technique to use when one wants to avoid feedback by implying that he or she is being productive despite the reality of the situation. Participants reported using various labels including “franchise holder,” “consultant,” “self-employed artist,” and “historical interpreter” to describe their occupations even though none of those who reported using these titles claimed to be actively involved on a full-time basis doing these types of jobs. In fact, one participant, P9, uses the title of “historical interpreter” as a way to advertise a fledgling self-employment venture. He described his business as one in which he presents a program on the Lewis and Clark era, complete with costume and artifacts. He said that when people ask what he does for a living he tells them that he is an “historical interpreter,” which in turn prompts them to ask, “What’s that?” He said, “Then, I launch into a commercial for what I’m doing.” So, for P9, using an unusual occupational title is a strategic way for him to imply productivity and encourage questions, which in turn provide him an opportunity to plug his Lewis and Clark performances.

Another participant, P6, indicated that he was a “franchise holder” although he didn’t have a store up and running. His franchise was an investment, not an occupation. Another participant, P15, left a social work position in order to become a self-employed artist. However, in order to earn a more stable income she accepted a job as a coffee barista, which, she reported was quite a shock to people who knew her as a social worker. She explained that while she was spending more time working at the coffee shop than she was doing her artwork, she continued to refer to herself as an artist, primarily to avoid people’s reactions to her choice of career change from a professional social worker to a coffee maker. For P15, like P9, introducing herself as a self-employed artist not only preempted inquiries about how she spent her time but also provided an opportunity for her to talk about and advertise her artwork.

Rule 4: When speaking to someone about what one is doing or plans to do, one should be silent in order to deflect unwelcome reactions.

In certain instances, silence can be an effective way to avoid talking about one’s occupational status. For example, P2 described how he avoided talking about his lack of a college degree with his former colleagues by simply leaving the room when the subject arose. He explained that if the discussion turned to schooling he would generally excuse himself under the pretense of having to use the restroom or take an important phone call, thus relieving himself of having to disclose the fact that, unlike most of his coworkers, he did not have a college degree.

Simply remaining silent even though remaining present also works for questions directed at one’s occupational status or other such topics that one wishes to avoid. I recall a circumstance in which I was with my husband and another male friend. We were

in a swimming pool and were talking about a subject that piqued the interest of a male bystander who joined in our conversation. Inevitably, the person who joined us asked, “What do you do?” The two men in my company responded to the question and I purposely remained silent. While I experienced some discomfort about ignoring the man’s question, he did not press for an answer from me and eventually the conversation drifted off to another subject. So, I would conclude that, in some instances, remaining silent can indeed be an effective way to dodge the “what do you do” question.

Whether omitting information, using humor, equivocating, or remaining silent, a number of participants reported that they do tailor their messages in order to either avoid or elicit certain reactions. As P24 explained in reference to her career transition announcements,

One of my siblings and his wife are very security oriented so they’re kind of worried about, you know, how are you going to make money and what are you going to do next and this and that. . . . Some of the other people in my family are like, oh this is great, you really need to get out of there and figure out something else that is not going to make you crazy and sick. So, there’s quite a variety [of reactions] and you always try to package the message in a way that’s going to work to keep the people who are in to security at bay a little more. I have years of experience in these things. So, I just package it in a way that doesn’t really lead them to enter in to it with me in terms of a discussion.

For P24 and other transitioning participants, the code of accomplishment is activated, then, through this act of “packaging” one’s messages strategically so as to elicit or avoid particular responses to the question of how one spends one’s time. And, in a society that values productivity, activating such a code allows presumably under- or un-employed people to preempt unwelcome commentary about how they spend their time.

Summary

In Chapter Four, I responded to my second research question, which asks: What speech code or codes about identity is/are implicated in the ways middle-aged people talk about the process of career-related transition they are experiencing? I explained what speech codes are and how they function within particular societies. Then, I discussed the code of accomplishment, activated by study participants as a way of avoiding unwelcome reactions to career announcements involving a perceived change in one's level of productivity. Chapter Five includes a summary of my findings and a discussion of the implications and limitations of the present study.

Chapter Five: Discussion

In Chapter Five, I summarize my findings, address limitations of this study, and reflect upon my own midlife transition relative to what I have learned from this work.

Summary of Findings

My research objective has been to provide insight into the ways in which the speech community of middle-aged Euro-American men and women undergoing career-related transition reveals emerging identities at midlife through their talk. Specifically, this inquiry has been concerned with responding to the following research questions:

RQ1: How do middle-aged people undergoing pivotal career-related transition use communication as identity markers? and **RQ2:** What speech code or codes about identity is/are implicated in the ways middle-aged people talk about the process of career-related transition they are experiencing?

This study has provided insight into the ways in which middle-aged individuals undergoing transition use communication to express a sense of their specific personhood. Using the Ethnography of Communication (Hymes, 1962, 1972, 1974b) and Speech Codes Theory (Philipsen, 1992, 1997; Carbaugh, 1989, 1995, 1996; Covarrubias, 2002; Katriel, 1986; and Fitch, 1998), I have identified and documented culturally significant themes and patterns emerging from middle-aged Euro-Americans' talk about career-related transition. Specifically, I have isolated a distinctive speech code unique to the speech community of middle-class, college educated Euro-Americans previously referred to in this study as the Nacirema. As stated earlier, the Nacirema are distinguished as a people who value the individual self, which is nurtured by "open, supportive, close speech or communication" (Philipsen, 1992, p. 73) over the communal self. This study

discusses eight identity markers and one speech code, the code of accomplishment, which demonstrate the ways in which communication mediated social interaction is used as a resource for constructing and conveying one's sense of self.

Implications of the Present Study

As this study demonstrates, working for pay, that is, accomplishing something productive with one's time, is highly regarded by this particular society of middle-aged career-changers. None of the participants I interviewed mentioned actually leaving the workforce permanently, at least not in the foreseeable future. All of them expected to transition into some form of work for pay. Even those individuals who were already officially retired from one career expressed a desire to continue working in order to supplement their retirement benefits. And, while talk of saving for one's retirement implies an eventual cessation of employment, I am left wondering whether this particular group of people, who so clearly identify themselves as being productive, actually will, as long as good health permits, ever choose to voluntarily permanently terminate their employment.

Indications are that many of them won't. According to a recent article published in the Helena Independent Record (Andrews, 2004), the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics indicates that "the one group [of people] that is working more than ever is people older than 60" (p. 7E). While increased longevity, good health, and a desire to remain in the workforce account for some of the increases in the numbers of older employees, many older people are working because they need the money. Of the 1.5 million jobs created since August of 2004, about a third went to older people - 250,000 jobs went to people 60 to 64 years of age with approximately the same number going to people 65 and older

(Andrews, 2004). My data support this trend also. Moreover, AARP (May, 2004) reports that “older Americans are the ones most likely to leave their jobs and join the ranks of the self-employed. . . . Americans age 50 and older make up 40 percent of the self-employed in the U.S. and about one in three self-employed workers begin working on their own at or after age 50” (p. 32). My data also support this trend. Whatever the reasons, economic or otherwise, people are continuing to work on into their 60’s and 70’s. And, many of them are becoming self-employed. As noted by Gail Sheehy in the article on her interview for *Utne* (2004), people can now obtain business start-up loans in their 50’s “because the banker knows they’re probably going to be knocking their brains out until they’re 75” (p. 65). Clearly, the U.S. is experiencing an unprecedented rise in the numbers of older workers.

While Department of Labor officials predict a shrinking workforce in the years ahead (USDOL, 2001), data available on older workers, including this study, do not appear to lend support to this notion of future labor shortages. The implications of a never-ending supply of labor could be far reaching. If workers in their 60’s and 70’s do not terminate employment as anticipated, job, rather than labor shortages, will be the most pressing employment problem facing the U.S. in the coming years. Add to that, a desire on the part of older workers to work part-time or intermittently, leading to the question of whether an older job seeker willing to work part-time with limited benefits might be so fiscally attractive to employers as to usurp employment opportunities for younger men and women. And, what about the economic implications of a lifetime labor force? Will we see a growing disparity in wealth between those individuals who are drawing retirement benefits while continuing to work and those who have no means of support

other than social security? Will the cost of living be so high that most people will be forced to continue working in order to subsist? Whatever the case, if lifelong employment becomes the norm, the Nacirma penchant for productivity is certain to bode well for those who have it. With the notion of lifelong employment in mind, I now turn to a discussion of the implications for educational institutions.

Lifelong employment will create greater opportunities for educational institutions to capitalize on the re-training of older students for new careers. The adaptation of academic programs to accommodate the older student is already taking place as evidenced by the proliferation of online degree programs and evening and weekend classes geared toward working adults. Two-year trade programs offered by community colleges will also continue to grow in popularity as more and more people seek re-training for new careers. And, as student populations become more age diverse, colleges and universities will be required to focus more attention on meeting the needs of the older student in order to maintain enrollments. Indeed, lifelong employment will greatly influence the future direction of higher education in meeting the demand for a qualified workforce.

While certain aspects of lifelong employment, such as the opportunity to improve one's finances and remain active and involved in the workplace throughout one's life, may appear attractive to middle-aged and older persons, consideration should also be given to the down side of continuing to work. Envisioning a labor-driven aging society begs the question of who will be there to educate and nurture our youth as grandparents typically do. After all, a working grandfather and grandmother will, predictably, enjoy fewer opportunities to spend time with their grandchildren. The social implications of

working grandparents are important to take into account, particularly when one considers the positive impacts of mentoring one's children and grandchildren. Time devoted to work is time not otherwise spent with family and in the community. Families, as well as organizations that rely on volunteerism, have much to lose when working for pay translates into less time for altruistic endeavors. And, what about time for reflection? Will working until one literally can no longer physically do so forever preempt one's opportunity to just relax and "do nothing?" Only time will tell the true impact of lifelong employment, however, one thing is certain: retirement as it was once understood as a time of leisure and reflection is fast becoming a relic of the times.

Limitations of this Study

Two general areas merit discussion under the subject of study limitations: the snapshot effect of conducting this study at one point in time and the issue of enduring verses emerging identities. I will address the snapshot effect first. As mentioned earlier in this study, career-related transition is a process consisting of multiple life events or turning points. While all of the participants in this study acknowledged that they were undergoing career-related change, each person was, understandably, at a different stage in the process of transition. For example, some participants had only recently begun their transitions, whereas others were a year to several years into the midst of their transitions. From my own experience of undergoing a transition that has spanned over the course of five years, I can personally attest to the fluctuations in the ways in which I have communicated my ever-changing identities during this period of time. That being the case, some might question the validity of using what I am referring to as a snapshot approach with respect to participant observations and interviews. By snapshot approach I

mean capturing each person's interactions at one point in time during the course of his or her transition. To that concern, I reply that it would be impossible to observe or interview each participant at the same stage of his or her transition. Furthermore, if this approach had been flawed no patterns and themes would have emerged from the interactions observed. In other words, a speech code for interacting in this particular speech community would not have been discovered. The fact that such themes and patterns emerged from the data, as I have documented elsewhere in this study, clearly indicates that this particular group of participants does share a speech code.

The second concern relates to the identities abstracted from the data. Some might question whether these particular identities or features are indeed a reflection of one's self at middle-age or whether these attributes represent more stable or enduring features of the participants' selves. For example, one might question whether the participant identity markers I have identified represent newly formed identities or identities that were present prior to one's entry into his or her midlife transition. In order to determine whether the identities emerging from the interactions of middle aged individuals undergoing change would vary significantly from those who are not in transition, another ethnographic inquiry would have to be conducted on a similar group of individuals not undergoing transition for purposes of comparison. In the meantime, the data clearly indicate that for this particular speech community at this particular time in their lives, the identities showcased in this study are valid representations.

Personal Reflections

I chose to focus my research on the interactions of middle-aged men and women undergoing career related change primarily because I was experiencing my own midlife

transition. Consequently, I was interested in how other people had weathered changing careers at midlife, or, more specifically, how such turning points had influenced their perceptions of themselves and, in turn, how they presented their newly formed identities to others. What I discovered was a reflection of myself mirrored through the interactions of my fellow Nacirema participants for I, too, am a middle-class, educated American.

I come away from this research endeavor with a great deal of admiration for those people with whom I interacted and observed. It takes a lot of courage to step outside of the familiar bounds of an established life situation in order to realize one's desire for change. I recall remarking to my thesis committee chair, Dr. Covarrubias, about how surprised I was during the course of my research to interact with so many individuals who had assumed what I perceived to be fairly significant risk in order to achieve their midlife career ambitions. I told her that I did not think that I would have had the same amount of courage as I observed in many of the study participants. Imagine my reaction when she replied, "So, you don't think quitting your job and moving to Missoula to attend school for two years was a risk?" I had to admit that I had indeed made a bold move, but, like the men and women I encountered during my research, I was purposeful. I knew what I wanted to accomplish and planned accordingly. And I believe that I made the right decision. Yet, I, too, have moments of fear when I think about the future and what lies ahead.

Soon, I will no longer be able to introduce myself as a student for I will have graduated and thus terminated my provisional identity as a student. And, knowing what I know today, from my research, about the rules for responding to the "what do you do" question, I realize I must craft other new socio-occupational identities for myself. For the

first time in my adult life I have no idea of what I will say when asked what I do. It is doubtful, however, that my response will be one that could be interpreted by some to mean that I am a “do nothing” kind of person. For, like the participants in this study, I, too, value productivity and expect to continue working for pay for many more years in order to prepare for the time when I will no longer be able to work.

In many ways, this study has reflected back to me the identities I have also expressed as I wend my way through the twists and turns of my own transition. And, as this chapter of my life comes to a close, marked by the completion of my master’s thesis, I realize that, for me, going back to work at a typical eight-to-five job in a dysfunctional organization is no longer an attractive career choice. My desire for work flexibility and autonomy begs for expression and must therefore be acknowledged in order for me to achieve a truly satisfying work life. I am grateful to those who shared their stories with me, for it is my recollection of their positive energy and enthusiasm that I call upon to see me through the tough times when I ponder what the future holds for me. If their successes are any indication of what is in store for me, I have a great deal to look forward to in the coming years ahead.

Participant	Sex	Age	Education Level	Area of Study	Transitioning From	Transitioning To
P1	F	56	A.S. Degree	Business Management	Homemaker	Student
P2	M	53	Some College	N/A	Oil Industry Manager	Retired/Student/Entrepreneur
P3	M	55	Some College	Journalism	Fire Fighter	Retired/Seeking Work
P4	M	40	B.S. Degree	Business/Accounting	Auditor/Information Technology	Independent Consultant
P5	F	61	B.A. Degree	Psychology	Government Employee	Life/Corporate Coach
P6	M	55	B.S. Degree	Political Sci/History	Nonprofit Agency Employee	Seeking Work
P7	F	44	Some College	N/A	Nonprofit Agency Employee	Seeking Work
P8	M	37	Some College	English/Geology	Fly Fishing Guide	Retail Business Owner
P9	M	57	M.A. Degree	Counseling	Teacher/Counselor	Retired/Seeking Work
P10	F	45	Ph.D. Degree	Psychology	College Professor	Student
P11	F	43	A.S. Degree	Accounting	Retail Salesperson	Realtor
P12	M	46	Some College	Engineering	Pilot	Retail Business Owner
P13	F	46	B.A. Degree	Home Economics	Retail Sales Manager	Bakery Owner
P14	M	52	M.A. Degrees	Geograph/Linguistics	Government Employee	College Instructor
P15	F	42	B.A. Degree	Liberal Arts	Social Worker	Artist
P16	M	54	M.A. Degree	Latin	Grant Writer	Restaurant Owner
P17	F	55	B.A. Degree	Liberal Studies	Government Employee	Retired/Seeking Work
P18	F	43	Some College	N/A	Guest Lodge Operator	Student
P19	M	41	Some College	Computer Science	Programmer/Systems Analyst	Student
P20	M	51	B.A. Degree	Music Education	Teacher	Retired/Sales/Entrepreneur
P21	M	47	Some College	N/A	Law Enforcement	Retired/Student
P22	F	47	M.A. Degree	Organizational Developm	Nonprofit Agency Employee	Seeking Work
P23	F	51	Some College	Elementary Education	Housekeeper	Student
P24	F	55	Some College	N/A	Consultant/Nonprofit Manager	Seeking Work

APPENDIX A: PARTICIPANT LIST

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Structured Interview Instrument

1. What does the term transition mean to you?
2. In what ways do you consider yourself to be experiencing transition?
3. What was your life like before you underwent transition?
4. What role(s) did you play prior to undergoing transition?
5. How did you define your sense of self, i.e., who you are prior to undergoing transition?
6. What factors or events lead you to where you are today?
7. In what way has the transition you are experiencing alter your sense of self, i.e., who you are?
8. How do you define yourself today?
9. What role(s) do you play today?
10. What do you see as instrumental in forming your present identity?

APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW CONSENT FORM

SUBJECT INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM

Title: Reinventing selves: Talking about emerging identities during midlife

Investigator: Marilyn Carlin, Department of Communication Studies, The University of Montana, Missoula, MT 59812. 406-829-8465, e-mail: mcarlin55@earthlink.net

Faculty Advisor: Patricia Covarrubias, Ph.D., Department of Communication Studies, The University of Montana, Missoula, MT 59812. (406) 243-4293, e-mail: patricia.covarrubias@mso.umt.edu

You are invited to participate in a research study that will examine the ways in which middle-aged men and women undergoing career-related transition talk about their experience of change and describe the impact such transition has on their perceptions of self. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This consent form may contain words that are new to you. If you read any words that are not clear to you, please ask the researcher to explain them to you. This study is being conducted by Marilyn Carlin, Department of Communication Studies, The University of Montana, Missoula, MT 59812. You may contact her at (406) 829-8465, or by e-mail at mcarlin55@earthlink.net

Purpose

The goal of this research is to achieve an understanding of the experience of transition and its impacts on one's self-concept, as talked about by men and women undergoing career-related changes at midlife. The purpose of this study is to expand the knowledge of and appreciation for how such transitory life changes are expressed and enacted in everyday life through human communication.

Procedures

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to take part in an interview designed to find out how you understand, define, and talk about the career-related transition you are experiencing, and your impressions of how this pivotal transitory life phase has impacted your sense of self or "who you are." Interviews will last approximately one hour and will be semi-structured and open-ended. Interviews will be recorded and transcribed so that I may study what we discussed. Participation in this study is completely voluntary. There are no penalties for refusal to participate. Further, you may withdraw your participation at any time. Any decision not to participate will not affect your current or future relationship with the University of Montana or the researcher.

Risks/Discomforts

There are no anticipated risks or discomforts involved in this research. If any discomfort does arise, you can decide if you want to continue and will be asked if you wish to proceed, or to terminate the interview at that time.

Benefits

Although you may not benefit directly from taking part in this study, your participation will help enhance the understanding of how midlife career-related transition impacts one's perceptions of self.

Confidentiality

The records of this study will be kept confidential. Your name will not be made public. Information that would make it possible to identify you will not be included in any report, published or otherwise. Your signed consent form will be stored in a cabinet separate from the data. Research records will be kept in a locked file; only the main researcher will have access to the records. Tape recordings, signed consent forms, and transcripts will be destroyed following completion of the study. If there is anything you wish stricken from the transcript, I will comply.

APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW CONSENT FORM CONTINUED

Compensation for Injury

Although we do not foresee any risk in taking part in this study, the following liability statement is required in all University of Montana consent forms. "In the event that you are injured as a result of this research you should individually seek appropriate medical treatment. If the injury is caused by the negligence of the University or any of its employees, you may be entitled to reimbursement or compensation pursuant to the Comprehensive State Insurance Plan established by the Department of Administration under the authority of M.C.A., Title 2, Chapter 9. In the event of a claim for such injury, further information may be obtained from the University's Claims representative or University Legal Counsel" (Reviewed by University Legal Counsel, July 6, 1993).

Voluntary Participation/Withdrawal

Your decision to take part in this research study is entirely voluntary. You may choose to withdraw at any time. You may refuse to answer any question. Refusal to participate, to answer any questions, or to withdraw will not affect you in any way.

Questions

If you have any questions about the research now or during the study contact: Marilyn Carlin, Department of Communication Studies, The University of Montana, Missoula, MT 59812. 406-829-8465, e-mail: mcarlin55@earthlink.net; or faculty advisor Patricia Covarrubias, Ph.D., Department of Communication Studies, The University of Montana, Missoula, MT 59812. (406) 243-4293, e-mail: patricia.covarrubias@mso.umt.edu. If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research subject, you may contact the Chair of the Institutional Review Board through the Office of Research at the University of Montana at (406) 243-6670.

Subject's Statement of Consent

I have read the above description of this research study. I have been informed of the risks and benefits involved, and all my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. Furthermore, I have been assured that a member of the research team will also answer any future questions that I have. I voluntarily agree to take part in this study. I understand I will receive a copy of this consent form and that my signing the bottom of this page will serve as my informed, voluntary consent to participate in this study.

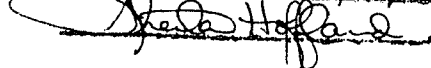
 Printed (Typed) Name of Participant

 Participant's Signature

 Date

Date Approved by IRB 1/21/04

Approval Expires on 1/22/05


 Peter Hoffman, IRB Chair

APPENDIX D: SUBJECT PROFILE FORM
Reinventing selves: Talking about emerging identities during midlife

1) Age: _____ 2) Sex: Male _____ Female _____

3) Highest level of education: _____

4) In what subject or discipline is your degree? _____

5) Have you received specialized training or education? Yes _____ No _____

6) Please explain your answer to question #5.

7) Family information:

a) Are you: Married/In a committed partnership _____ Single _____

Divorced _____ Widowed _____

b) How many children do you have? 0 1 2 3 4 5+

Other pertinent information:

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