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Discouraged Workers?: Making Sense of Unemployment in the Midst of the Great Recession

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Abstract

Past research suggests that for middle class Americans facing economic decline, the cultural repertoire available to them offers few tools with which they can make sense of their experience. Thus, when executives who have made cautious decisions in their career choices and sound investments in their personal security are laid off in the wake of unforeseen structural economic changes far beyond their control, they look to personal failings to provide explanation and meaning to their struggles. Through interviews with sixteen men and women who have faced significant long-term unemployment since the onset of the Great Recession, this research looks at whether and how this pattern has changed today. In the midst of this very public, wide reaching, and much discussed economic decline, what does downward mobility mean for Americans? Ultimately, it finds that while people facing long-term unemployment today see their problems in more structural terms than did their predecessors, they still overwhelmingly think about solutions in a highly individualistic framework.

Introduction

In the mid-1980s, Katherine Newman opened a chapter from her book *Falling From Grace* with a vignette taken from *Fortune* magazine. The story came from an article entitled “Pushed Out at 45—Now What?” and followed the triumphant tale of Joseph Rockom, a laid off Silicon Valley executive who bounced back after losing his job and helped found a successful startup. Newman explains that, “*Fortune* magazine merely echoes the deep seated and widely shared belief in meritocracy that is the major motif of executive culture in America” [27, p. 43]. The problem with this belief, reflected both in the public pages of *Fortune* magazine and in the private lives of the people she interviewed, is that “if individuals are responsible for their own destinies, there is no one else to blame in case of failure. If the market rewards the competent and casts out the inefficient, unemployment is perforce a judgment of one’s abilities” [27, p. 77]. Thus, “the displaced manager who fails to land on his feet must lack the necessary ‘confidence and determination’” [27, p. 44].

Today the conversation has changed. Pick up a copy of any economically oriented newspaper or magazine and you are likely to come across an article like one featured in the February 2009 edition of *Fortune* magazine: “The new jobless.” “Could this be you?” the tagline reads. “The recession is throwing millions out of work. What the new jobless class can tell you about what it’s like out there” [30]. In stark contrast to the Darwinian image of the strong striving for success and the incompetent slumping into failure, the article describes how the recession has brought unemployment to all types of people from all walks of life:¹ “It is the Equal Opportunity Recession, winding its way into every corner of the economy. . . *Fortune* interviewed dozens of jobless people across the US. They are old and young, rich and poor, from rural Maine and urban California. They are your neighbor or your nephew. Or they are you.” A far cry from the inadequate refuse who lack “confidence and determination,” the article casts these jobless everymen in an almost heroic light. “They may be from radically different backgrounds,” the article explains, “but these job seekers have a few things in common: frustration, fear—and resilience. They want to work.”

In a world where the unemployment rate has more than doubled within two years, where there are six jobs seekers for every one open position, and where the average person will be out of work for an astonishing 21 weeks, it is not hard to imagine why people may have come to see unemployment—and long-term unemployment in particular—in a new light [14]. By January of 2010, as many as one third of Americans were either out of work or worried about their job [14]. The country’s rapid descent into recession was not only on nervous workers’ minds, but also at the forefront of public discourse. It has been at the top of political agendas and a main talking point during campaigns, while the latest employment data and economic forecasts continue to make headlines. Meanwhile, articles such as the one found in *Fortune* keep reminding us that with so many people out of work so quickly, the unemployed may indeed be our

¹According to Hout, Levanon, and Cumberworth [14], the notion that all segments of the labor force have been hit equally hard by the recession is exaggerated by many in the media, and in fact skilled and professional workers have not faced the same hurdles as their blue collar counterparts. However, the fact that the media overestimates the impact of the recession on this groups job prospects is somewhat telling and perhaps reflective of the newfound sympathy for the unemployed echoed throughout the rest of the article.

neighbor or our nephew. The sixteen men and women interviewed in this study found that they themselves had become casualties of the Great Recession, and they now faced the challenge of finding a place and sense of meaning as part of America's new jobless class.

The main task of this study is to explore how laid-off white collar and professional workers make sense of their personal experiences with long-term unemployment and subsequent socioeconomic decline. Earlier research describes the centrality of meritocratic individualism in framing the experience of middle class managers [27]. For people in this position, individualism proved to be so powerful a cultural trope that it made it impossible to see beyond their own shortcomings in trying to find meaning in their experience. Twenty years after this work was done, however, middle class Americans are finding themselves in a very different environment. Having seen the disappearance of the once taken for granted contract of job security between employer and employee and having been barraged with public discussion of widespread economic collapse, Americans today have a number of alternative narratives at their disposal with which to make sense of unemployment and downward mobility that may not have been available to their predecessors a generation before. Their cultural repertoires may not be as limited, and as a result they may be better able to adapt to their circumstances.

The next section of this paper provides a historical overview of the Great Recession, describing the collapse of financial and real estate markets that initiated the crisis and outlining the subsequent consequences of this collapse for the economy and society as a whole. Following this overview, I offer some further background and justification for my research. I then present a section summarizing and reviewing the relevant literature on unemployment and downward mobility in the United States, followed by a section describing my methods. The empirical portion of this paper organizes my findings into two main parts—one looking at how people think about their problems, and one looking at how they think about potential solutions—which are themselves divided into subsidiary themes. I conclude my paper with a reflection on the implication of my findings, the limitations of my research, and possibilities for future research.

The Great Recession

The United States officially entered a recession in December of 2007. While recessions have been a regular part of American history, the relative suddenness and depth of this decline took both economists and the general public by surprise and has had dramatic and far-reaching effects that are still being felt around the world today. The size of the downturn—and initial uncertainty about its potential extensiveness—prompted many comparisons to the Great Depression of the 1930s and earned it the nickname the “Great Recession.” Despite the pervasiveness of the recession and the endless media attention being focused on its causes and consequences, the exact history and timeline of the Great Recession can often be confusing to the casual observer. This section will thus provide a brief historical overview of the major events of the Great Recession, focusing especially on the employment landscape throughout this period. In this way, it will provide important historical context for the experiences described later in this paper.

The source of the Great Recession is often traced back to a crisis in the housing market. Economists and other analysts generally agree that the roots of the recession are in the burst of the “housing bubble” that had been swelling across the United States for nearly a decade before peaking in 2006 [18]. During this time, home prices increased substantially as banks readily lent money to any and all potential homebuyers while people optimistically took out subprime and adjustable rate mortgages, confident that home prices would continue to increase indefinitely into the future [18]. When interest rates began rising in 2006, many people were forced into foreclosure as they were unable or unwilling to pay mortgages that cost more than the houses themselves were worth, causing an unprecedented nationwide drop in home prices and spiraling the country into what has been described as a foreclosure crisis.

The economic impact of these events was substantially exacerbated by the complicated ties linking mortgages to the financial industry. After the foreclosure crisis of 2007, investment banks and other financial institutions that had invested in these bad loans through the complex arithmetic of mortgage-backed securities, collateralized debt obligations, and credit default swaps now faced the threat of complete collapse [25]. Beginning with the imminent failure of the investment bank Bear Stearns in March, the summer of 2008 saw the beginning of a financial crisis that left many giants of the financial world either subject to government takeover, acquired by other companies under duress, or left to fail. Most notorious among this last category was the investment bank Lehman Brothers, which filed for bankruptcy in September of 2008, sending already volatile financial markets into a tailspin and leading to a global freeze in credit markets [25]. The growing intensity of the crisis prompted the US government to bailout several financial institutions with the implementation of the Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP) in October of 2008, offering loans to firms such as Goldman Sachs, Morgan Stanley, AIG, and Citigroup [25].

The result of this series of crises and collapses was the tremendous disappearance of wealth around the world. The Federal Reserve reports that, between declining home and stock market prices, \$1.3 trillion evaporated from the US economy in 2009 [24]. With declining wealth, so too came declines in consumption and investment, along with declining government revenues. The result was a global contraction of the economy, known in this case as a recession.

Economists generally define a recession as two or more consecutive quarters of negative economic growth (measured as a fall in real GDP), but for most people a recession is defined in more concrete terms, namely by levels of unemployment [12]. Thus while the fallout from the foreclosure, financial, and credit crises reverberated in stock exchanges and financial markets around the world, most people felt the impact of the recession through the toll that this economic contraction took on jobs. The first nine months of the recession were similar to more mild downturns in America’s recent history, but the next nine months sent unemployment in the US “into freefall” [14, p. 8]. Unemployment levels more than doubled in the first 26 months of the recession, skyrocketing from 5.0 percent in December of 2007 to 10.4 percent in February 2010 [14].

The recession was declared officially over in June of 2009 and, at 18 months, it was confirmed as the longest period of economic decline in US history since the Great Depression [16]. The official end of the Great Recession, however, has offered little consolation for the millions of men and women still out of work. Hout, Levanon, and Cumberworth report that in the summer of 2009, there was

a historic high of 6.1 jobseekers for every one open position and that “the ratio of jobseekers to vacancies were all at their all-time highs in the winter of 2009–10” [14, p. 17]. The consequences of these skewed ratios have been dramatic for the unemployed. Long-term unemployment has been at a record high, with half of all unemployed workers being unemployed for 21 weeks, while one quarter are out of work for over a year and 10% for two years [12]. Somewhat surprisingly, unemployed college graduates were out of work longer than the national average, facing an average of 35 weeks, or over eight months, of unemployment [14].

The Great Recession has thus been one of the most dramatic experiences the global economy has seen in decades, and for many ordinary men and women one of the most traumatic financial experiences of their individual lives. While economists see many signs of hope for the US economy, jobs continue to lag behind other indicators of economic well-being, prompting onlookers to speculate about the possibility of a so-called “jobless recovery.” However, for many people—including the men and women interviewed in this study—the recession has not been defined by availability of credit or growth in real GDP, but rather by the experience of unemployment. For millions of Americans, a recovery without jobs thus offers little cause for celebration. For them, recovery means going back to work and putting an end to their own downward spiral of personal financial decline.

Background & Justification

In a country long known as the “land of opportunity,” what does it mean to experience a long-term decline in economic status? While the promise of upward mobility has long been a central theme in American culture, the reality of life in America sometimes falls short of this cultural ideal. Many people in this country fail to climb up the socioeconomic ladder, and, increasingly, many are falling further down it. For Americans, this backslide means facing not only declining economic prospects, but also the stigma of violating a cherished cultural norm: the pursuit of the American dream and the individual achievement of upward mobility [1]. This is the rarely told story of downward mobility in America.

Using Ann Swidler’s conception of culture as a “tool kit,” this paper investigates how laid off American managers understand and cope with the personal experience of downward mobility in the context of the current economic recession. Swidler explains that culture “influences action not by providing the ultimate values toward which action is oriented, but by shaping a repertoire or ‘tool kit’ of habit, skills, and styles from which people construct ‘strategies of action’” [34]. Past research suggests that for middle class Americans facing socioeconomic decline, the cultural repertoire available to them offers few tools with which they can make sense of their experience. This is particularly true in the meritocratic business culture of the American manager. With a highly individualistic framework for understanding both success and failure, managers tend to have difficulty recognizing or accepting the role that larger structural forces play in shaping their daily lives. Thus, when managers who have made cautious decisions in their career choices and sound investments in their personal security are laid off in the wake of unforeseen structural economic changes far beyond their control, they look to personal failings to provide explanation and meaning to their experience [27].

The recent economic collapse, however, has provided a cohesive public critique of economic conditions in this country rarely seen in the past. With the bursting of the real estate bubble, controversial government bailouts of collapsing companies, and skyrocketing unemployment rates, the recent recession has not only increased the instance of downward mobility in America, but has also increased discussion about it. Public commentators decry the worst economic decline since the Great Depression, while blame is directed at greedy investment bankers on Wall Street, an overzealous government, or the inherent problems of capitalism itself. As the dominant narratives of financial well-being in America change, will private interpretations and explanations change along with them?

In the midst of this very public, wide reaching, and much discussed recession, what does unemployment and downward mobility mean for Americans? Does this narrative of nationwide hardship help ease their personal troubles and propensity for self-blame? Does it lead them to look more toward systemic problems (and solutions) than individual ones?

In looking at whether and how laid-off managers draw on narratives surrounding the current recession to bring conceptual coherence and meaning to their experiences, this study evaluates the limitations and the adaptability of the cultural repertoire available to Americans in economic distress. In this way, it will build on past research to provide a more up-to-date look at how American culture shapes and is shaped by the nation's changing economic structure.

Literature Review

My research will draw primarily on two bodies of literature, one focusing specifically on the issues surrounding white-collar unemployment, the other looking more broadly at the issue of downward mobility in the United States. Sociological research on unemployment offers an extensive overview of the experience, describing the personal consequences of unemployment as well as the macro-level economic and social context in which these consequences develop. The research on downward mobility is more limited. While several studies have quantitatively documented the rate and direction of mobility in the United States, only a handful of studies have focused on the personal experience and cultural meaning Americans attribute to this phenomenon. Combining these bodies of research, I will use the resulting framework to further investigate the material and ideological position of Americans facing unemployment and the prospect of downward mobility in the context of the current economic recession.

Unemployment in the United States: An Overview

In recent years, scholars have begun to comment on the increasingly precarious nature of work in the United States. Unemployment is a fairly common phenomenon in American society, as half of all new jobs end in the first year, and, at any given time, roughly 20% of workers have been with their current employer for less than one year [11]. As the once taken-for-granted contract of loyalty between employer and employee has begun to erode in the name of economic growth, organizational efficiency, and corporate profits, job security has come to be viewed by many as a thing of the past [36]. The result is that while worker dislocation was primarily a blue-collar phenomenon in the 1980s, unemploy-

ment in the 21st century has been disproportionately an issue of middle-class job loss, with such white-collar industries as financial services, information and telecommunications, and professional and business services being particularly hard hit [11].

The consequences of this sort of worker dislocation are manifold. Ruhm finds that not only do employees who are laid off from their jobs face lost wages while unemployed, they also face long-term consequences in their earning potential [31]. In fact, after four years, displaced workers who are working earn 10–13% less than their non-displaced counterparts [31]. At the same time, the consequences of unemployment in the new economy often go far beyond the economic impact. A report released by the Pew Research Center details some of the major changes Americans face when unemployed. In a national survey, the Pew Research Center finds that Americans who have endured long-term unemployment (unemployed for six months or more) during the recent economic downturn report disproportionately high levels of marital strain, loss of close friends, lowered expectations for the future, and lowered self-respect [23]. As more Americans face an increasingly precarious job market, they also face the financial and personal consequences that come with job loss and prolonged unemployment.

The Challenges of Unemployment at Mid-Life

As middle class and white-collar workers have increasingly become victims of job insecurity in the so-called “new risk” economy, scholars have turned their attention to the special challenges faced by laid-off white-collar employees, many of whom are facing unemployment at mid-life. Some scholars argue that the negative consequences of unemployment are more serious for skilled and professional workers because the people in this group derive their identity and self-esteem more directly from the work they do [9, 5, 20, 19]. At the same time, scholars generally agree that older workers are particularly vulnerable in today’s job market [21, 26]. Workers who grew up in an era of an implicit “social contract” between employer and employee expect loyalty from their employers, and as a result are ill equipped to deal with the challenges of a flexible economy [21].

In *Bait And Switch: The (Futile) Pursuit of the American Dream*, Barbara Ehrenreich attempts to see the human side of this phenomenon by going “undercover” into the world of the corporate job search [7]. Ehrenreich reveals through firsthand accounts the disappointment and unfulfilled promises that come with trying to find good white-collar jobs in the US today, particularly for older workers. She finds that even this supposedly more secure strata of the labor force—people who have always made the “right” decisions, worked hard, and earned college degrees—is vulnerable in the modern labor market. The result is a tremendous toll not only on people’s financial situations, but also on their personal self-conceptions [7].

In a more scholarly adaptation of Ehrenreich’s work, Mendenhall et al. conducted a large-scale qualitative study of laid off managers and executives in the Chicago area [26]. They find that the unemployed managers and executives interviewed in the study faced extreme disenchantment with the modern labor market, as many struggled and failed to revive the careers they had spent a lifetime building [26]. The study also finds that such workers almost inevitably must lower their expectations, and most encourage their children to prepare for

a more cynical and less stable life in the workforce [26]. While the middle-class and white-collar employees discussed in all of these studies have experienced unemployment, they have also been touched by a phenomenon discussed elsewhere in the sociological literature: downward mobility.

Mobility in America

Much of the sociological research on mobility has looked at rates and directions of socioeconomic mobility through time and across societies. In a comparative study of intergenerational social mobility, Beller and Hout find that while social mobility in the United States increased from the 1940s until the 1970s, this growth reversed in the 1980s and 1990s [2]. They argue that as a result of increasing economic inequality throughout American society in these decades, downward mobility has become increasingly common for cohorts born later in the 20th century [2].

Hertz elaborates on these findings in a study of recent socioeconomic mobility in the United States [13]. Analyzing data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, Hertz finds that households experiencing significant short-term (intragenerational) downward mobility have increased substantially since 1990 [13]. Moreover, he finds that this trend was driven mostly by the middle class, which is experiencing more income insecurity, while the top decile of income earners is experiencing less. Meanwhile, upward mobility was no more prevalent in relatively prosperous 2003–2004 than it was during the recession of 1990–1991 [13]. The overall picture is therefore one of increasing economic decline for the middle class, regardless of larger trends in national prosperity. The current body of research thus suggests that not only has downward mobility been a steady feature of American society for generations, but it will continue to grow in the near future.

The Meaning of Downward Mobility

While Americans have countless rituals, stories, and symbols for commemorating and celebrating upward mobility, downward mobility is not accounted for very well in American culture. In spite of the prevalence of the phenomenon itself, Americans have few narratives on which to draw that provide conceptual coherence and meaning to socioeconomic decline. Downward mobility thus not only presents problems of material hardship, but also a mismatch between cultural values and personal experience. This contradiction raises important questions regarding how people reconcile their personal experiences of decreasing socioeconomic status with wider cultural expectations about success in America.

Early research into this topic attempted to answer these questions by measuring the political orientation of downwardly mobile workers, looking specifically at whether they embraced the values of the middle class they left behind or the working class of which they were now a part. In a large-scale survey of Midwest factory workers, Wilensky and Edwards found that downwardly mobile workers—those who had originated in middle and upper class households and ended up in working class jobs—were more likely to embrace traditional notions of a classless American society with an open opportunity structure than were their stable working class peers, suggesting that downwardly mobile people are

more likely to hold onto the ideological disposition of their original class [40]. Elaborating on these findings, Lopreato and Saltzman [22] and Jackman [17] confirm that socially mobile individuals generally fall midway between their destination and their origin classes in terms of political leanings and belief in an American “success ideology,” suggesting a process by which the downwardly mobile are partially re-socialized into their new, lower class position.

While these studies provide an initial step toward understanding the cultural scripts adopted by the downwardly mobile, they are severely limited by their methodological approach. Relying on large-scale quantitative data provided by surveys and voting records, such studies can offer only the roughest of approximations when it comes to explaining how the qualitative experience of downward mobility shapes ideological dispositions and vice versa. Katherine S. Newman offers a much more thorough and nuanced treatment of this subject in a qualitative study of managers laid off after economic restructuring in the computer industry [27]. Focusing on the lack of cultural resources at the disposal of Americans experiencing downward mobility, Newman finds that middle class men are particularly invested in individualistic understandings of success in America [27]. As a result, they tend to have an especially difficult time coming to terms with their own experience with downward mobility, blaming themselves for their socioeconomic decline.

Newman thus concludes that, unlike workers from other strata of American society, the middle-class managerial workers she studied had few if any alternative cultural narratives on which they could draw to make sense of their experience. This research, however, was conducted during the 1980s, a decade marked by mixed messages of prosperity and decline [27]. The current economic collapse, on the other hand, has provided a more cohesive public critique of economic conditions in this country. A recent report from the Pew Research Center suggests that Americans in general are already becoming more skeptical of once taken-for-granted expectations that the next generation of Americans will experience upward mobility [15]. As dominant public narratives of financial well being in America change, will private interpretations and explanations change along with them? By looking at workers laid off in the wake of the current recession, this study will attempt to answer this and other related questions.

Methods

In order to get a deeper understanding of how unemployed white-collar and professional workers think about themselves and their circumstances in the midst of the Great Recession, I chose semi-structured interviewing as my primary methodology. In the interviews, I asked respondents about their background, their work history, their experiences with unemployment and searching for work, their assumptions about how others perceive them, their perceptions of opportunity both for themselves and the country as a whole, and their knowledge and perceptions of the current recession.² While most interviews were conducted face to face at local coffee shops and restaurants, many were conducted over the phone. This was done either for the convenience of the respondent or because the respondent lived out of state. Interviews lasted an average of forty-five min-

²See the Appendix for the complete interview schedule.

utes to an hour, and overall, respondents were open and willing to give forthright and complete answers to all of my questions.

In conducting this study, I sought out people between the ages of 30 and 60 years old who have earned at least a four-year college degree and worked in a managerial position for at least 5 years before being laid off. Participants were thus made up of people who have arguably made responsible decisions concerning their careers and were able to achieve some level of success prior to the recession. Additionally, participants needed to have lost a job and been unemployed or significantly underemployed (working few hours or at a job that requires skills significantly below their level of qualification) for at least six months since the beginning of the recession in December of 2007. In this way, participants were also individuals who have experienced a significant economic decline that can be tied to the current economic crisis.

Because the population I am studying is inherently dispersed and cannot easily be found through geographic or organizational frameworks, gathering a suitable sample was one of the main challenges of this project. I gathered my initial pool of respondents through direct contact and recruitment at a number of non-profit job clubs and support groups. Specifically, I recruited through three organizations: GraceWorks, located in San Francisco, CA; East Bay Professional Experience Network, located in Oakland, CA; and Joseph's People, which is found in several locations throughout Northwestern Pennsylvania. While I visited GraceWorks and EB PEN in person, I was referred to a member of Joseph's People by an interviewee and recruited respondents there through a written request sent to the group's email list. After gathering respondents through these approaches, I then used the snowball method to expand beyond this initial population to unemployed people who did not belong to such groups.

My final sample was relatively diverse, though it included some noticeable disparities. Of the sixteen people I interviewed, there were nine women and seven men representing a wide range of occupational backgrounds. Among these were the pharmaceutical industry, the software industry, the legal industry, sales, publishing, social services, accounting, and real estate. Most were in some sort of middle management position. They represent some geographic diversity, as they come from both urban California and suburban and rural Pennsylvania. They have been unemployed for as little as seven months and as much as three years, with the average respondent having been looking for work for just under a year and a half. The youngest was in his early forties, and the oldest were sixty, though the majority of respondents were in their fifties. The overwhelming majority of respondents were white. A higher proportion of respondents than might be expected were single and had no children (seven of sixteen respondents).

While some of these patterns may be reflective of larger trends that have left older people and singles more likely to find themselves unemployed in the recent recession, there is probably more to this story [35, 33, 9]. In all likelihood, this sample also reflects the types of people most likely to have the time and inclination to attend job groups and respond to requests for interviews, as well as the characteristics of the social networks to which such people belong. While I cannot argue that this is a nationally representative sample, I will suggest that it nevertheless offers valuable insight into wider shifts in the way people think about unemployment and downward mobility in this country. Part of this is

due to the fact that the sample does not differ considerably from those found in the main studies against which I am comparing my findings, studies that looked overwhelming at older white heads of household. At the same time, certain responses and patterns remained remarkably consistent across my sample in spite of the variation that does exist there, suggesting the existence of a larger pattern of change with significant implications.

In addition to interviewing participants, this study also draws on a limited amount of direct observation. Direct observation has allowed me to directly observe, record, and analyze actions and behavior that may not be reported in interviews. Though my access was somewhat limited, I was able to sit in on four meetings and lectures by the support groups and job clubs from which some study participants were drawn, allowing me to see firsthand how people in these groups talk about unemployment, the job search, the recession, personal agency and efficacy, and so on. In this way, I was also to see how people understand, prioritize, and create meaning around these topics in a setting where they naturally arise rather than being elicited through interview questions.

My study sets up a natural comparison between the managers Katherine Newman studied in the mid-1980s and managers today. This comparison suggests a micro-macro link between the changing nature of work and success in America and the ways in which Americans make sense of their personal socioeconomic experiences. For this research, I also analyzed some quantitative demographic data to see how the numbers and categories of employment in the American labor force have changed since Newman's study was done, allowing me to better contextualize the environment in which individual perceptions are shaped. Such a link will help elucidate the relationship that larger structural forces play in shaping culture and vice versa.

As was discussed earlier, my research draws on Swidler's conception of culture as a "tool kit." While culture is often used generically as an imprecise catch-all phrase used in place of a variety of abstract ideas, Swidler's explanation that culture shapes "a repertoire or 'tool kit' of habit, skills, and styles from which people construct 'strategies of action'" lends itself well to the ideas I am exploring [34]. In looking at how downwardly mobile Americans make sense of their experiences, I want to see how the ways they see the world both enable and limit their abilities to adapt to their situation. In this way, culture as a "tool kit" provides an ideal construct for helping me frame my investigation.

Findings

The Great Recession has brought with it a new framework for making sense of unemployment and economic decline in America. With newspapers and pundits proclaiming the worst downturn since the Great Depression and record level job loss persisting across virtually all sectors of the economy, this very visible and much discussed crash has changed both public discourse and private thoughts on these issues. This shift is reflected in the way that people facing long-term unemployment and subsequent economic decline think about themselves and their experiences, using this narrative as a new and useful addition to their "cultural toolkit." This ultimately leads them to a more collective understanding of the problems they face, though it still leaves them with a traditionally individualistic understanding of how to respond.

Making Sense of Unemployment in the Great Recession

When discussing unemployment, the men and women I interviewed had a sense of the larger forces shaping their experiences. Whereas the downwardly mobile executives Newman studied in the mid 1980s could not “hold on to a vision of their troubles as a ‘social problem’” and instead understood rejection “as a consequence of personal defects,” the casualties of the Great Recession saw their unemployment and chances of reemployment as inextricably intertwined with the economic turmoil facing the country as a whole [27, p. 71]. Their past experiences with unemployment and subsequent lowered expectations regarding job stability led many of the people with whom I spoke to become more accepting of unemployment as an unsurprising—if still unwelcome—part of the life cycle. At the same time, they see that many of their friends and former colleagues are “in the same boat,” likewise unable to find reliable work. The result is that while all interviewees inevitably reported having some amount of frustration or anxiety at various phases of their unemployment, their distress was often mitigated by the assurance that their experience, if unpleasant, was ultimately a normal one in today’s economy.

A Familiar Situation

For many of the people interviewed in this study, this was not their first experience with unexpected layoffs or unemployment. While a generation ago, employees could rely on an implicit contract in which their employers promised them stable, secure work for life, the modern labor market offers no such guarantee [21]. According to the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979, a national longitudinal survey following the lives of men and women aged 18–23 in 1979, college educated baby-boomers had an average of 11.3 different jobs by the time they were 44 years old [37]. In this same span of time, this group experienced an average of 3.8 spells of unemployment, with a full 90.2% having experienced at least one period of unemployment in their lives and nearly a third having experienced five or more [37].

The people with whom I spoke had thus spent a decade or more working in a world where white collar and professional employment has become increasingly precarious. As a result, unemployment was not a new experience for them, but rather part of a process with which they were already familiar. Cecilia³, a San Francisco resident who worked for several years in software sales, has seen this transformation firsthand. “It’s a whole different way of living and working,” she explains, “but I am the most relaxed I’ve ever been because it’s my fourth or fifth layoff.” Many people agreed that it was easier to deal with unemployment having faced it previously. Kathy, who worked as an executive vice president at an educational software company for several years before being laid off in 2008, was not particularly worried when she was first let go. “I had been laid off from big companies before,” she explains, “so I kind of knew the ropes of how to look [for a job].” Such comments were common and reflect the statistical reality that job turnover is becoming an increasingly standard part of people’s lived experience.

For those rare few interviewees who had not faced unemployment before, there was still a sense that it is nevertheless part of a new norm to which they

³Real names have been replaced with pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality.

must adapt one way or another. Jane, a former manager in the Pharmaceutical industry who lives in Northwestern Pennsylvania, has recently come to this conclusion. After fourteen months of unsuccessfully looking for work, she has begun switching careers. “I don’t think I want to,” she explains, “but I don’t like how I felt this last fourteen months, so I want to make sure that I can prepare myself.” She recounts how in a conversation with a friend she realized that she needed to prepare for a world where jobs can disappear without warning: “I said, ‘well if I get laid off again,’ and he said, ‘It’s not “if”—it’s when you get laid off.’”

Leo, an academic librarian who is also out of work for the first time and facing potential bankruptcy, explains how his uninterrupted career has hindered his ability to cope with the reality of job instability that he thinks most Americans now face: “I think in part I’m also a little less common, just because I’m not quite the same as other people who have gone through several unemployment-ments. . . I’ve never been unemployed until now, and I think that’s hit me hard. I’ve gotten very depressed.” While Jane, who is younger and started her career later in life, has come to accept the inevitability of unemployment in her lifetime and wants to be ready with a more flexible skill set in a more diverse industry the next time around, Leo has not reacted with the same openness to change. Ultimately, however, both people have come to accept the relative normalcy of layoffs, and, prepared or not, trust they are likely to be a part of their working lives in the future.

While this was the most difficult episode of unemployment for virtually all of the people I interviewed, previous experience with unemployment still made the experience itself seem less abnormal, reducing the shock of losing a job and preparing the unemployed for what they might expect ahead.

The Collective Experience of Unemployment

For many people, one thing that separates this experience with unemployment from others they may have faced in the past is the sure knowledge that they are not alone. Newman describes the experience of the executives she studied as one characterized by isolation:

The downwardly mobile manager finds himself increasingly alone with his troubles. He loses contact with his social friends; his former business associates steer clear of his calls; his day-to-day isolation makes it difficult to reach out and form new ties. Solitude closes in from all directions and shatters the social structure that undergirds the normal life of the managerial family. [27, p. 60]

However, this is not the case for the men and women with whom I spoke. For the most part, their families are supportive; their former business associates are sympathetic; and, increasingly, many of their friends are empathetic. For the refugees of the Great Recession, unemployment is a shared experience, one they see reflected both in personal acquaintances and in that countless others within their industries and across the country who share their fate.

Virtually everyone I interviewed reported having friends or colleagues who were facing similar circumstances. When asked how her friends reacted to her situation, Vera, a social worker who lost her job at a temp agency in 2008, echoed a phrase used by many, explaining that “most of them are all in the

same boat.” Jim, a former project manager at an online travel company, likewise explains that “I think [my friends are] pretty sympathetic. Yeah, sympathetic. Some are empathetic. Some of my friends have lost their jobs.” Rather than feeling judged or looked down upon by friends and family, people feel generally supported. These supportive and sympathetic networks helped people cope and feel less alone in their struggle.

For many people, first hand experience also gave them a sense of the pervasiveness of the troubles they face. This was certainly the case for people in areas or industries with particularly high levels of unemployment after the onset of the recession. Henry, a Seattle resident who lost his job at a major pharmaceutical company and has been looking for work for over a year and a half, explains how common his recent experience with unemployment seems in light of what he sees going on around him:

I have so many other friends who are out of work, who are all like, “Oh, yeah. There’s another person and another person.” It’s been weird this time, because another time I’ve been unemployed when there were still opportunities to be found. It wasn’t at like a really low point. This time there are just so many people out of work that I know already. And I know people who have bounced out of two or three jobs since I’ve been off. Just in and out like crazy.

Margaret, who made a six-figure salary working in real estate in Northwestern Pennsylvania before the housing bubble burst, echoes this sense of the wide reaching impact of the downturn on the people in her life:

A lot of [my friends] are in a similar situation. Either their pay has been cut, or they’ve been unemployed, or are unemployed and still looking, or their positions have changed, or their aspirations to move up in the company or get raises—that’s all, it’s a whole different game. I have some friends who have not been affected at all—well, I can’t even say that. Everyone’s under a lot of pressure, even the folks who are still employed and doing well financially. The pressure is just, it’s almost crushing.

Having close acquaintances who face the same troubles leaves people feeling less alone. Far from the isolated managers described by Newman, the people with whom I spoke often felt that those around them supported and understood them, understanding that sometimes sprang from personal experience. Ultimately, the communal nature of job loss in the recession helped make these people’s situations easier to understand and sympathize with.

People tended to frame this understanding within the context of the recent recession. They see the extensiveness of unemployment and tie it to the larger economic crisis facing the country as a whole. Gloria, a former paralegal who has been out of work for over a year, explains that “I have had to find work at other points in my life and it was a lot easier at other points in my life than it has been this last time, and I think that has to do with the economy.” Leo, the academic librarian introduced earlier, also sees this tendency in his friends’ perceptions of him: “Well, some of [my friends] are unemployed too, so they have sympathy. The ones who are employed, I don’t know. My girlfriend is very sympathetic. My closer friends are sympathetic. A lot of the other ones are like, ‘Well, OK,

it's the economy. Everybody's out of work." The overall condition of the US economy provides people with a general framework for making sense of their unfavorable circumstances. Leo's friends not only remind him that he is not alone, that "Everybody's out of work," but also provide an explanation: "It's the economy." This theme emerges again and again throughout the interviews.

The people interviewed in this study are also well aware of the high rates of unemployment in the United States, and know that statistically speaking they are not alone either. Most often, they described their situation—out of work and unable to find a job for a year or more—as "typical." Cecilia, the former software sales executive introduced earlier, explains "Well there are millions of people on the local market who are out of work." This sentiment is echoed again and again by interviewees. Jim, the project manager from the travel industry, likewise points out that "The numbers say, what, there's 12 million people out of work? So that means, what, there's probably about 20 million out of work, right?" The national story of unemployment tied to the economic meltdown supports eyewitness accounts of widespread job loss. This national narrative—with its statistical support—helps people place their individual experiences into a broader context. Rather than seeing themselves as isolated, they know that their experience is part of a larger pattern affecting not only friends or neighbors, but also millions of people.

The overall result of this perspective is that while they may have been unhappy or frustrated with their experience, no one reported feeling particularly abnormal or deficient. Rather than feeling as if their friends and families were embarrassed by them or looked down on them, nearly everyone felt like people understood and supported them. In fact, many people saw their persistence in spite of the obstacles they faced or their ability to adeptly navigate through tough times as testaments to their own strength of character. Cecilia, who had been moving from one temporary position to another for several months, explains: "[My friends] think if anybody's going to get a job, it's going to be me. Because I've been so close. I'm so active. I'm so motivated." Dylan, a former publisher who had been dealing with a string of similarly precarious temp jobs, echoes this view, stating that "I think some people are just kind of like, wow, if he can't find a job that almost makes me feel good." Some people even felt that they were admired for the positive qualities they showed in the face of adversity. Kathy, the former executive vice president, explains:

I think, and I've heard this numerous times, my friends say, "You know, if I were in your shoes I would just crawl under a rock somewhere. . . It just amazes me how you just keep going at it, with what you're dealing with, with the divorce, your asshole ex-husband, and the job market. You know, you just keep optimistic and I really admire you." I would say that's basically what my friends say, that [I'm] just a role model.

While perhaps counterintuitive, these findings are not altogether surprising. Past research finds that general employment levels can have significant impact on the self-assessment of the unemployed. Crohn reports that unemployed people tend to see themselves in a more favorable light when unemployment levels in general are high than they do when levels are low [?]. This certainly seems to be the case for the men and women navigating the world of unemployment in the middle of the Great Recession.

Overall, people did not seem to feel as if their poor circumstances could or should be blamed on their own failings. All interviewees felt as if their situation was at least typical because of the recession, if not exceptional because of their own impressive handling of the obstacles they face. In this way, these people seem to be looking at unemployment and economic decline in a far different light than did earlier generations of middle class Americans. The narrative of nationwide decline thus offers a new tool in this group's "cultural tool kit," providing a means by which this group can create meaning in their experience that may not have been available to people facing similar circumstances in an earlier era of American history.

Responses: Focusing on the Self

While the people with whom I spoke had a sense of the larger forces shaping their fortunes, the language of individual responsibility still crept into their discourse. It was clear that the problems they faced were linked to systemic causes, but their critiques of these problems were often articulated in individualistic terms. In searching for a way to make sense of their experiences, several people sought new ways of attaining personal satisfaction and seeking less materialistic forms of success, while many more relentlessly looked for silver linings in the misfortunes they faced. While this helped many of my respondents find some sort of meaning in their otherwise unfavorable circumstances, it ultimately led them to seek individualistic solutions to what they knew were inherently systemic problems and left most people unable or unwilling to challenge the system as a whole.

Structural Problems, Individual Solutions

While virtually all of the people interviewed in this study seemed to see the structural underpinnings of the current recession and their own personal economic misfortunes, they were somewhat divided in what they thought could and should be done to ameliorate the problems being faced both by them and by the country as a whole. Some people felt adamantly that the government should do more to intervene on behalf of those looking for work. Kathy, a San Francisco resident who has been looking for work for nearly two years, states her opinion on the matter quite clearly:

Frankly, I think government could choose to do more. I mean, I was pretty appalled a year ago that there wasn't some huge initiative like the WPA. I mean, since I'm an artist and a business person, I have such appreciation for Dorothea Lange and just a lot of huge initiatives that just created some of the fabric of this country, and that could have happened. And I think it would have, more than anything else, I think it would have helped the morale... If there'd been some of that sort of overall belief in creating jobs, I think it would not have fallen so much on the individual.

Meanwhile, others believe that mass action needs to be taken, but not necessarily by the government. Vera, another resident of San Francisco who had been out of work for over two years, explains, "Maybe with the last election I thought it was going to come from the top down. And now I realize that we didn't do it that way in the 60s, we did it bottom up... I think it's got to be grassroots."

Those advocating for large scale change—either from the government or from organized citizens—proved, however, to be in the minority. Some respondents thought that more could be done to help ease the pain of unemployment without necessarily addressing the systemic cause of the problem. Two Pennsylvania residents, Matt, who was the sole breadwinner of his young family until being laid off eight months ago, and Jane, the project manager from the pharmaceutical industry introduced earlier, gave their solutions in the same one word answer: “healthcare.” Lisa, another Pennsylvania resident who has been out of work for a year and a half, agrees: “Separating work from health insurance and access to health care could make a huge difference.” It is not surprising that healthcare was frequently brought up by respondents living in Pennsylvania. As Matt explains, “Until very recently Pennsylvania had a low cost health insurance program that was actually just discontinued by the new governor.” In contrast, San Francisco residents still benefit from unique medical care programs available to uninsured residents of the city (healthysanfrancisco.org). While this may represent some desire to see limited change in certain state policies, it is a far cry from calling for changes to the system that many believed caused their problems in the first place.

Ultimately, most people instinctively look to how the individual might change to improve his or her own situation, usually through being more disciplined, working harder, and being more creative and entrepreneurial in the job search. Many people express these sentiments by pointing out how they have avoided bad habits they assume afflict their less responsible peers. As Cecilia, who did much to keep herself busy since losing her job, explains, “I’m competent with money and disciplined, so I would say that I’m probably less typical. I’m also pretty focused and active. A lot of people, they’re just very challenged.” Dylan, who likewise took on many temporary positions and projects while out of work, similarly explains that “It’s more people creating their own opportunities.” “Everything else being equal,” he goes on to say, “I think the odds are still on the favor of those who take the lead in having side projects regardless of any full time employment, whether it’s permanent or regular, and I do have that. I do take that initiative.”

Even those people who do see the need for more systemic change find themselves reverting back to the idea that success is ultimately linked to individual effort. Kathy, who was frustrated that there was no WPA-style program initiated by the government to help those out of work in the recession, also found herself frustrated at her discouraged peers: “I think some people in my situation have kind of given up, or are not very actively looking for work, which kinds of amazes me, because I don’t know what they think can happen if they don’t just keep putting themselves out there and finally the odds will be in their favor.”

In their book *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, Robert Bellah and his colleagues discuss the tendency of Americans to revert to what they call “the first language of American Individualism” [1, p. 20]. While people may draw on second languages rooted in different cultural narratives at different points, Americans tend to fall back on using language and patterns of thought that stem from the dominant cultural narrative of individualism. Bellah and colleagues were talking specifically about the moral dialogues in which Americans engage, but I would argue that this idea also provides a useful framework for understanding the patterns evident in these interviews. Even though people saw the structural forces at work in the problems they faced,

again and again they found themselves discussing solutions in individual terms.

While these people see the role that larger economic forces played in causing their unemployment and subsequent economic decline, many assume that the solution to their problems is individual effort. This seeming contradiction may be the result of mixed messages from lingering societal myths—a continued belief in Horatio Alger stories of rags to riches through hard work and discipline clashing with the news that millions of talented and qualified people are out of work—or the limiting cultural narrative of individualism. At the same time, it is hard not to try to understand this pattern a little more sympathetically as people doing what they can with the limited resources they have. After all, how can one person make the government launch job creation projects or lead a citizens' movement for reform? One person can, however, work hard, be disciplined, and try to get creative. In this way, individual solutions may be the best way people have found to give themselves a feeling of agency and a much-desired sense of control over their own fates.

Redefining Success

For many of the people I interviewed, success proved to be a complicated idea, one that was shifting and changing in light of their recent life events. Traditional measures of occupational prestige and material wealth seemed to be challenged by a more nuanced concept that was ultimately more about happiness and self-fulfillment than about financial gain. Some people saw this as a sign of a new way of living and working in America. Dylan, the former publisher from San Francisco introduced earlier, explains, “It seems like you kind of have to redefine what success means in your mind and take charge and be creative, and that’s it. And not to just look at [economic success].” He goes on to describe the changes he sees:

There’s less of a stigma attached to not being on the corporate ladder, and a lot of people are also just tired of that. It’s all blending into one kind of new world of what means most to you, what you should be working for, and how you can get what you really want from your relationship to work.

Dylan was not alone in this view. Several people insisted that their goals were not defined by material gain or personal profit, but rather by a sense of satisfaction that came from doing what they loved.

Indeed, many people saw personal and intellectual satisfaction as their main consideration in searching for a new job. Bill, who had worked in the chemical industry for over thirty years and has done a series of odd jobs since being laid off three years ago, explains that his main goal is to find a job that challenges him. “I’d like a challenging job,” he says, “something where I can use my skills—people skills, my technical skills, my mechanical skills. Money is not an issue with me... I just want a challenging position.” He emphasizes repeatedly that he is not concerned with money:

I think there is a misconception that [older workers] want higher salaries and higher benefits and things like that. I think there’s a large majority of individuals like myself who just want an opportunity to do something significant and make a contribution to society.

And I'll be willing to take half my past salary in order to do something worthwhile.

This sentiment appears again and again throughout the interviews. Jim, the project manager introduced earlier, explains that "I'm a hard worker and I'm well educated and I'm pretty much on the ball, so it's really hard not having that mental stimulation and that push, and learning new things. . . It was never really about the money with me, it's more around engagement." Kathy, the former Vice President from San Francisco, also agrees: "So as long as I'm learning and feeling creative, I'm willing to take a position that's not at the senior director VP level. That's not my highest priority."

While there is nothing particularly new or surprising about people finding meaning in their work beyond simple financial rewards, it is remarkable that so many people chose to articulate their feelings in this way. It was not enough to simply look for a challenge or want an outlet for creativity; respondents also made clear that "money is not an issue with me," that "it was never really about the money." Looking again to Newman's work, it is interesting to note that she found the downwardly mobile managers she studied continuing to buy into a culture that glorified financial success. "The glorification of competition" she explains, "transforms the pursuit of wealth, and a narrow concern with economic profit over other social goals, into a socially responsible and hence morally admirable attitude" [27, p. 76]. She goes on to point out that "It is a testament to the strength of this business culture that unemployed managers assert and reassert these values, even though this brings criticism down upon themselves and others in the same predicament" [27, p. 76-77].

The people with whom I spoke, however, managed to avoid this criticism by rejecting the cultural values from which it sprang. They emphasized that money and occupational prestige were not the goal; that they were looking instead for more intangible sources of gratification and were more than willing to sacrifice salary in order to find them. In one way, this shift in focus helped provide some sense of meaning for people whose lives were in many ways disappointing, or at least would be interpreted as such through the lens of "glorifi[ed] competition" and "narrow concern with economic profit." In another way, however, it reflects the recurring tendency of the people I interviewed to switch the focus of their critiques from the societal to the individual level.

While people see the source of their problems in systemic terms, their search for solutions finds them turning their gaze back on themselves. This changing definition of success, I argue, is thus another facet of the individualistic response my respondents formulate to the problems they face. In this case, the response is not for individuals to act upon themselves by changing their behavior, but rather for them to do so by changing their goals and expectations. In the face of their unfortunate circumstances, they question and adapt their beliefs about what they want and what they are willing to do to get it rather than challenging the system that both produces and limits those opportunities.

Unrelenting Optimism

The people with whom I spoke were surprisingly optimistic. I say this not because they believed their situations were likely to improve, but rather because they relentlessly searched for silver linings in their otherwise unfavorable

circumstances. Henry, a single man from Seattle, explained how being out of work in an inhospitable job market somewhat counter intuitively gave him the opportunity to travel and try new things:

If anything, it's allowed me to have some life experiences I've wanted to do for some time but then put off because I didn't have a huge chunk of vacation time... it allowed me to experience some things I've wanted to do for a while... I don't know, it is hard to say, because some times I think about this twenty-twenty, would I have traded what I've got to do for the past year and a half for working again? And the answer is still no.

While Henry's adventures travelling across the country (where friends and family hosted and entertained him for free) are a somewhat extreme example, they are nevertheless reflective of a general tendency that sprang up everywhere in my interviews. Very often, when I asked people how the recession had impacted their life, they focused less on how they had been disappointed or deprived and more on those things for which they were grateful. Matt, the family man from Pennsylvania, answered precisely this way: "I get to spend a lot more time with my daughter. I get to spend more time around the house generally... So I've been able to pick up a lot of the caretaking load there, take her on day trips to places and things." Gloria, the Pennsylvania resident who lost a lucrative job in real estate, likewise focused on the importance of the things she gained: "I see my family. I go to family functions... My life has a better lifestyle as far as a healthier balance with you know, the social activities... that has improved 100%."

Other people point to the hidden gifts and unexpected benefits of their experience with unemployment. Gloria, a paralegal who has been periodically caring for her elderly father on the East Coast since losing her job, explains that "Getting laid off for me has been a blessing in disguise... although I haven't had steady work and the income that I was used to, I have had the freedom and flexibility to go back and forth to the East Coast, which has been a godsend for an aging parent. In that case, I consider myself very fortunate." Jim from San Francisco explains how he not only escaped the corporate world he hated, but also rediscovered talents and interests he abandoned long ago: "It's brought out my creative side. I'm painting again; I'm sculpting. People love what I do. I've sold some pieces. How's it changed my life? Oh my god, I don't have to get up and go to work in the morning. I don't have to sit in a cubicle. That's pretty nasty stuff." Margaret is even able to spin the loss of her impressive salary in the positive light of a much-needed readjustment of priorities:

[Prosperity in this country] will never be what it was. And, you know, some of that is not a bad thing. I mean, honestly, I have to tell you, I'm the first one to admit that I don't know the prices of anything. I never looked at the price of anything... It didn't matter because I didn't have time. In some ways, I think it's also a good thing to slow down and maybe not take things for granted so much.

The unrelenting optimism that many of my respondents share is often considered a quintessentially American tendency. While most people in this country assume that this outlook is inherently good and thus beneficial to the people

who embrace it, it can be problematic. In her book *Bright-Sided: How Positive Thinking is Undermining America*, Barbara Ehrenreich deconstructs the role positive thinking plays in American society. “Positivity is not so much our condition or our mood,” she explains, “as it is part of our ideology—the way we explain the world and think we ought to function within it” [8, p. 4]. Ehrenreich argues that the emphasis Americans place on positive thinking exaggerates the role that attitude plays in success, denying the importance of other more material determinants.

The result of this logic is eerily reminiscent of the meritocratic narrative of the Darwinian business culture described by Newman:

If optimism is the key to material success, and if you can achieve an optimistic outlook through the discipline of positive thinking, then there is no excuse for failure. The flip side of positive thinking is thus a harsh insistence on personal responsibility: if your business fails or your job is eliminated, it must be because you didn’t try hard enough, didn’t believe firmly enough in the inevitability of your success. [8, p. 8].

She goes on to explain that “As the economy has brought more layoffs and financial turbulence to the middle class, the promoters of positive thinking have increasingly emphasized this negative judgment: to be disappointed, resentful, or downcast is to be a ‘victim’ and a ‘whiner’” [8, p. 9]. She explicitly describes the implications of this for the unemployed: “With real jobs disappearing, the positive thinkers counseled people to work even harder on themselves—monitoring their thoughts, adjusting their emotions, focusing more intently on their desires” [8, p. 193]. According to this argument, then, positive thinking is yet another way that Americans turn the focus of their critique and any effort for change back on themselves.

Respondents themselves refer explicitly to the importance of positive thinking and the pitfalls of negativity. Kathy, the former vice president out of work for over a year and a half, does just this when describing how her daily life has changed since becoming unemployed: “And basically I tried to keep myself busy. Keep myself busy, keep my spirits up, keep my outlook positive, because it doesn’t help to get negative.” Vera, who has been out of work for over two years, also emphasizes the importance of avoiding negativity: “I do meet people at [an unemployment support group] who I stay away from because they are very bitter. Everything out of their mouth is just so negative it’s like, how do you expect to get a job?” For both of these women, staying optimistic is not about feeling good or avoiding depression; it is explicitly tied to achieving success. One tries to keep one’s “outlook positive” because “it doesn’t help to get negative.” In fact, it is baffling to see others failing to practice this same positive approach. “How,” they have to ask, do they “expect to get a job” with a negative attitude?

Ehrenreich points out that there is some inherent contradiction in this perspective. If we are sincerely optimistic about how things will turn out, then why do we insist on the active practice of positive thinking and guard so heavily against negative thoughts? The answer, she explains, is that “We do not fully believe that things will get better on their own. The practice of positive thinking is an effort to pump up this belief in the face of much contradictory evidence” [8, p. 5]. She concludes that “Positive thinking may be a quintessentially American

activity, associated in our minds with both individual and national success, but it is driven by a terrible insecurity” [8, p. 6].

This insecurity is at the heart of many of my respondents’ optimism. For many people in this study, it is important to remain positive not because there is genuine evidence that a reason for optimism exists, but to the contrary, because little such evidence exists at all. Unemployed for months and often years with no indicators that genuine change is on the horizon, these people embrace positive thinking in an attempt to exert some influence over their fate. This relentless optimism, I argue, is yet one more way that the people with whom I spoke dealt with their problems in individualistic terms. Rather than challenging the structural sources of their problems, they continue to focus on reforming themselves. They have concentrated on choosing the right behaviors, adjusting their goals, and, finally, on adopting the right attitude. While this may provide people with some sense of agency and a much-needed feeling of control over their circumstances, it ultimately leaves them unable or unwilling to challenge the system in which many of their problems are rooted and advocate for attempts at more structural forms of change.

Conclusion

People who found themselves unemployed in the midst of the Great Recession were able to think of their problems in structural terms. They did not see themselves as particularly deficient or abnormal, both because they had come to see unemployment as a relatively common part of work in the 21st century and because they were acutely aware that this was a problem also being faced by personal acquaintances and anonymous masses alike. The lived experience of searching for work in an era of economic decline along with the public discourse surrounding the Great Recession thus provided a powerful narrative on which people could draw to give coherence and meaning to their difficult situation, and do so in a way that didn’t place the blame solely on themselves. This demonstrates a significant shift from the experience of the downwardly mobile managers Newman studied in the 1980s [27] and suggests the importance of context and the adaptability of culture in producing alternative narratives for people to dealing with difficult or devalued experiences.

While people saw the problem as originating in the economy and other larger structural forces beyond their control, they nevertheless sought solutions in their own behavior. They thought about what they could do to improve their chances of success: maintaining discipline, being creative, working hard, staying positive, and ultimately rethinking what success means to them and adjusting their goals according to the new limitations they faced. In this way, these findings speak both to adaptability and the persistence of culture. While these men and women were able to draw on the narrative of the Great Recession to make sense of their experiences, they also fell easily back into the “first language of American individualism” when thinking of how to react to and go forward with these experiences [1].

There are many potential explanations for this shift (and occasional stagnation) in the way that people think about unemployment today. As I have suggested at many points already, it is likely that the private discourse surrounding unemployment is highly reflective of the public one. That is, as those

in the public frame the unemployed as unwilling victims of a bad economy, it may be easier for the unemployed themselves to see things this way. This framework is clear in the world of politics. The recession has taken center stage in political campaigns and job creation has remained a top priority and major talking point for the Obama administration [5]. At the same time, the news media has maintained an intense focus on the downturn, as economic forecasts and the latest unemployment rates continue to make headlines and analysts endlessly debate how deep and how long the crisis will be.

This discourse is reflective of some real and significant structural changes that have occurred in this country since the economic downturn began, which themselves have likely done much to shape how people today think about the experience of unemployment. Unemployment rates have climbed to record levels by recent standards, and have done so in a remarkably short period of time. Unlike other recent recessions, the Great Recession was global in its scope, and seemed to leave no group unaffected. It was not a gradual decline, but rather a precipitous drop in economic well-being that was heralded by the unexpected demise (or near demise) of some of the wealthiest and most powerful institutions on the planet. The size and scope of the recession was difficult for anyone to ignore, let alone for those facing imminent economic decline.

In this paper, I have documented a shift in the way that people think about their own experiences with unemployment based on the evidence available in my interviews. The study is thus exploratory in nature and does not offer a representative look at this phenomenon and cannot speak decisively about its causes. In order to more definitively explain the causal mechanism behind this shift, further research must be done in this area.

Yet, while this study has its limitations, it is highly suggestive and makes an important contribution to the literature on downward mobility in America. It highlights the importance of historical context in understanding how we make sense of our lives, and specifically adds to our empirical knowledge of the effects the Great Recession has had on American society. This research thus sheds light on how structure and culture interact to create both change and continuity in the wake of major societal shifts. Ultimately, it suggests both the strength and the persistence of individualism as an organizing concept in the American imagination.

Appendix: Interview Schedule

Introductory/background questions

Where are you from?

Why did you move here/stay here?

What do you like about the area?

Is there anything you don't like about living here? Have you ever considered moving? Why didn't you?

Work history questions

Can you tell me a little about your work history?

Where have you worked? How did you get those jobs? What did you do there? Did you like working there? Why/why not?

What sort of training/schooling do you have?

What did you major in/study in school? Why? What did you plan to do with that degree at that point? What did you end up doing with that degree? Was there anything else you had considered studying? Why didn't you end up doing that?

Can you tell me a little about your last job?

Where did you work? How did you get the job? What did you do there? What was your day like? Did you like working there? Why/why not?

Unemployment questions

What was it like when you lost your last job?

Did you see it coming? Why/why not? How did you react? What did you do?

Have you made any major changes?

Have you had to move? Are you still in contact with your friends/acquaintances from work? With your old neighbors?

How has your daily life changed since then?

Can you walk me through an average day?

How has your family been dealing with it?

Do you have a partner/spouse? Has he/she had to change his/her work habits? Do you have kids? How much do they know about the situation? Have you talked to them about it? Do you think it affects them? How?

Job search questions

What sort of work would you like to get?

Would you be happy finding a job like your last one? Would you like to switch to a new career path? Like what? Why/why not?

How have you been going about the job search?

Where have you been looking for work?

What do you think your odds of finding a job like your last one are in today's market?

Why do you think that is? What do you think would improve your chances?

What sort of work do you think you're likely to find in today's economy?

Why do you think that is? Are you happy about that? Why/why not?

Personal advancement and opportunity questions

How do you think your friends view you and your situation?

Do you think they look at you differently? Do you think they understand? What about your family? Your partner? Your former co-workers?

How typical do you think your situation is?

Do you think many people in the country are facing the problems you are? Why/why not?

Do you feel like America is still the land of prosperity?

How would you define "prosperity"? Why do/don't you think that's still the case? Was it ever the case? For whom?

Do you think that people like you can still improve your standards of living in America today? Why/why not?

Do you think it will have a lasting impact on the country?

On the economy? On the American people? How so?

What do you think could be done to help people in your situation?

Do you think anything could be done to help the economy bounce back? To improve the situation for ordinary Americans? What do you think that is?

Do you think your children will be able to attain the same standard of living that you did?

Will they have the same opportunities you did? Why/why not?

Recession questions

When did you first become aware that the country is in a recession?

What did you think when you first heard about Lehman Brothers or Bear Sterns, or any of these other big problems with Wall Street? How about the TARP bailout?

Did you see any connection between these events and your own life at the time?

What did you think was going to happen to you? What about for the country?

How long do you think this recession is likely to last? Why is that?

How has the recession touched your life?

Have you had to cut back on spending? How do you make the decision of where to cut back? Can you give me some examples? Has the value of your home or any other assets gone down? Have you had to pay bills late? Have you had to find alternative/additional sources of income? Can you give some examples?

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