

ABSTRACT

GARRETT-PETERS, RAYMOND. Coping with Unemployment: Self-Concept Repair by Displaced Managers and Professionals. (Under the direction of Michael L. Schwalbe.)

Research on unemployment among managers and professionals has documented the experience of job loss as stressful not only because of economic strain, but because of the damage it does to valued identities and self-conceptions. Little research, however, has examined the processes through which displaced workers collectively attempt to repair this damage. Data from participant observation in four support groups for displaced managers and professionals, plus intensive interviews with twenty-two group members, are used to develop an analysis of the self-concept repair strategies used by these relatively privileged workers. Four main strategies are identified: (a) redefining the meaning of unemployment; (b) realizing accomplishment; (c) restructuring time and activities; and (d) helping others. These strategies are argued to be oriented toward bolstering feelings of self-efficacy damaged by job loss and prolonged unemployment. The analysis shows how these self-concept repair strategies depended upon resources not readily available to blue-collar workers. Also considered are the implications of these strategies for the reproduction of class advantage and for the political mobilization of professional/managerial workers in response to recession and mass unemployment.

COPING WITH UNEMPLOYMENT: SELF-CONCEPT REPAIR BY DISPLACED
MANAGERS AND PROFESSIONALS

by
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BIOGRAPHY

Raymond D. Garrett-Peters was born Raymond D. Peters in Fayetteville, North Carolina on November 24th, 1964. Upon graduating from Seventy-First Senior High in Fayetteville he came to Raleigh in 1983 to attend North Carolina State University. After a lackluster and unmotivated year of study at N.C. State, he dropped out of school and focused on a career in the airline business as a customer service agent and fleet service agent with Piedmont Airlines and USAirways.

After eight years of working and traveling worldwide, in which time he developed a strong fascination with the social and cultural worlds he was encountering, Raymond returned to university studies at the University of West Florida (with some needed prodding from his wife). There he was immediately drawn to classes in sociology and anthropology, eventually settling on anthropology as a declared major before transferring to the University of Maryland at College Park where his wife began working on her graduate studies.

As a full-time student at the University of Maryland, Raymond continued to work full-time with USAirways at nearby BWI. In December, 1997 he graduated summa cum laude with a bachelor's degree in anthropology, and was chosen as the university's undergraduate commencement speaker. Shortly after graduation he and his then-pregnant wife, Patricia, returned home to North Carolina as she completed her PhD studies. Back "home" in Durham, North Carolina, his plan was to eventually enter graduate school in anthropology once time and family commitments allowed.

After two additional years of airline work, child rearing, and unsuccessful attempts to begin graduate studies in anthropology at UNC-Chapel Hill, Raymond re-thought his

graduate training plans and was accepted into N.C. State University's Master's degree program in sociology (part-time) in 2000. Once at N.C. State, with a plan to build on his earlier social-anthropological and ethnographic interests, Raymond formally concentrated on the areas of social inequality and social psychology. In his third year there he jettisoned his airline job of 19 years to devote himself to full-time graduate study, and simultaneously began the fieldwork for this Master's thesis. After completion of his Master's degree, Raymond will continue at N.C. State to pursue a PhD degree in sociology.

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Chapter One

COPING WITH UNEMPLOYMENT: SELF-CONCEPT REPAIR BY DISPLACED MANAGERS AND PROFESSIONALS

Job loss is a threat to both economic and psychological well-being. Previous research has shown job loss to evoke feelings of fear, anxiety, anger, and depression (e.g., Brenner 1977; Buss et al. 1983; Feather and Davenport 1983; Fineman 1983; Fryer and Payne 1984; Kelvin and Jarrett 1985; Kivimaki et al. 2003; Liem and Liem 1988). Job loss can also threaten the self-concept by depriving workers of valued occupational identities (see Champoux 1978; Cohn 1978; Fineman 1983; Hartley 1980; Jacobs 1965; Kelvin 1981; Kelvin and Jarrett 1985; Mortimer and Lorence 1979; Simon 1997; Smith 2001) and of opportunities to uphold feelings of self-efficacy through competent action in the workplace (Fineman 1983; Kohn and Schooler 1973, 1978; Mortimer and Lorence 1979; Schwalbe 1985, 1988). Most studies of workers' responses to the emotional fallout from job loss focus on the cognitive coping strategies of individuals (e.g., Fineman 1983; Little 1976; Patton and Donohue 1998; Simon 1997), often ignoring self-conceptions. In contrast, the present study examines how displaced managerial and professional workers collaborate to repair the self-concept damage caused by job loss.

Social-psychological theories of self-concept formation identify three main sources of knowledge about the self: reflected appraisals, self-perceptions, and social comparisons (Gecas 1982; Rosenberg 1981, 1991; Schwalbe 2005a). The importance placed on occupational identity in North American culture, and the centrality of work in the lives of most adults, suggests: (a) that the identity based on one's job may be a key resource for

generating positive reflected appraisals and favorable social comparisons, both inside and outside the workplace; and (b) action in the workplace may be crucial for creating and sustaining feelings of self-efficacy through self-perceptions of competence. To lose one's job, then, is not only to potentially suffer damage to the self-concept, but to lose access to the resources with which it was made and held together.

The self-concept, however, is both a product of events and a social force in its own right (Rosenberg 1981). Theories of self-concept motivation suggest that individuals desire, seek, and try to create positive reflected appraisals, self-perceptions that attest to competence and morality, and favorable social comparisons (e.g., Gecas 1982; 1991; Rosenberg 1981; Schwalbe 2005a). We would thus expect events that damage the self-concept to evoke a repair response in individuals (cf. Goffman 1967). What forms do such repair responses take? Some may involve little more than cognitive "tricks" performed by brooding individuals (see, for example, Rosenberg 1991). But to the extent that the self-concept is a social construction dependent on interaction (see, for example, Swann and Hill 1982), we would expect adults experiencing job loss to try to enlist others in a collaborative process of self-concept repair.

The present study looks at managerial and professional workers who lost their jobs and subsequently joined support groups for displaced, job-seeking workers. Data from participant observation in four support groups, plus intensive interviews with twenty-two group members, show four main self-concept repair strategies used by these relatively privileged workers: (a) redefining the meanings of unemployment; (b) realizing accomplishment; (c) restructuring time and activities; and (d) helping others. These

strategies are argued to be oriented toward bolstering feelings of self-efficacy damaged by job loss and prolonged unemployment. The analysis shows how these strategies were both collaborative and dependent on resources not readily available to blue-collar workers.

Following presentation of the analysis, three sets of implications are discussed. One concerns the need to revise our understandings of the relationship between self-conceptions, stressful life events, and psychological distress to take into account the process of collaborative self-concept repair. The second concerns our understanding of how the self-concept operates as a source of motivation. And the third concerns the implications of self-concept repair strategies for the reproduction of class advantage and for the political mobilization of professional/managerial workers in response to recession and mass unemployment.

SETTING AND METHOD

The research for this thesis was performed largely in four support and job-search groups for displaced professional and managerial workers. These groups varied in size, orientation, organization, and the frequency with which they met, yet all served as sources of various kinds of support (e.g., emotional and psychic, spiritual, technical [i.e., shared job-search strategies], etc.) for the displaced workers who frequented them. I came to these groups through a combination of initial research, word of mouth, and, later, personal connections in the field. All of the support groups were publicly advertised and, in principle at least, open to the public (although they overwhelmingly drew a white, male, and middle-

to-upper-middle-class audience). Within the groups I identified participating job seekers as managerial and professional workers based on identifiers such as former job titles, occupational fields, and educational degrees.

For three of the groups studied I contacted the group leaders and identified myself as a graduate student researcher studying how managerial and professional workers dealt with unemployment. I asked for and received permission to attend the weekly or monthly meetings under conditions of confidentiality, stating I would use only pseudonyms and alter identifying features of any members. For the other group, Job Hunters, I became acquainted with the facilitator at a different meeting, and was invited to attend after he had spoken with the handful of other regular members. On my initial visits, and occasionally on later visits, group leaders introduced me to the members present. Likewise, I always identified myself as a university student-researcher to everyone present at any of the networking tables and/or smaller job function groups held as part of the meetings.¹

Three of the groups were faith-based, held weekly, and organized by local Christian churches. Two of these three were the largest in the region, each attracting in the range of 25-to-90 participants each week; the other, much smaller group typically had five to ten people in attendance. The remaining group, the local branch of a national networking organization geared toward high-paying (e.g., \$100,000 and up) corporate executive jobs, met once a month, and averaged 20 attendees at each meeting. Across all groups the apparent median age was approximately 50 for both women and men.²

In total I visited six different support groups over the course of my research, focusing primarily on four. I also attended each support group a minimum of four times throughout

my one year of fieldwork between 2003 and 2004, for a total of 25 visits or roughly 60 hours of data-gathering in the field (not including formal interviews). Meetings typically lasted from one-and-a-half to two hours. On most field visits I arrived 15 to 30 minutes early and stayed afterward to chat informally with members and group leaders. For each of these field visits I took fieldnotes and/or made jottings, which I then fleshed out more fully immediately following the group meetings. For all of these visits I wrote up full fieldnotes as soon as possible upon leaving the field.

Overall, these groups provided a good deal of overlap in terms of both their content (e.g., commiseration, shared job-search information, opportunities for networking, etc.) and stated aims (e.g., to help workers find jobs, provide Christian fellowship, teach effective networking skills, etc.). Importantly, though, the groups also complemented one another, each offering displaced workers slightly different resources and opportunities for coping (e.g., large, professional, corporate-like settings versus small, intimate settings; a faith-based, supportive focus versus a secular, “no nonsense” networking focus). Each group is described in more detail below.

Job Help

One of the two largest groups in which I did my participant observation, Job Help was a faith-based support group organized and run by members of a large and well-funded Christian church in a middle to upper-middle-class suburb. Meetings were held in the church’s large auditorium, with participants seated at up to 15 circular tables arranged around the front lectern. Also one of the longest running support groups in the area,

attendance ranged from 25 to approximately 60, with about 50 members attending each weekly meeting. The attendees were 78% male, with some 95% of those being white males (the women's portion was also approximately 95% white).

Job Help was self-identified as a "care ministry" and outreach program of the parent church. The group's avowed goals were to provide Christian-oriented spiritual support and networking and job searching skills for workers either unemployed or in transition between jobs. The meetings followed a standard format, starting with coffee, informal chatting, and networking prior to the actual meeting. This was followed by a group leader's welcome and introduction, a discussion led by a devotional speaker, and an invited "spotlight" candidate who offered advice and/or potential job contacts. After the spotlight candidate, members focused on networking and self-presentational speeches at individual tables, followed by the week's "success stories" elicited from participants by a group leader. The meeting ended with a prayer, after which members often continued to chat. The meetings typically lasted one-and-a-half hours.

CareerSupport

Similar to the Job Help group, CareerSupport was one of the longest-running support groups in the area, and was the most strongly attended of those I followed. It was likewise a faith-based and Christian-identified "care ministry" serving as an outgrowth of the home church, itself very well-funded and set on a new, large campus in a middle to upper-middle-class area. Like the previous group, CareerSupport was staffed by volunteers and run by a church committee that included one clergy member. The main, initial portion of each

week's meeting was held in a large conference room capable of seating 100 people.

Attendance here was a bit larger, ranging from a low of 66 to a high of 90, with an average attendance of about 75. As with the other groups, membership was largely white (90%) and male (81%), with only a handful of African-Americans and Asians attending regularly.

Relative to the other church-based groups, CareerSupport was the most overt in their use of prayer, Scripture, and Christian-oriented advice. Like Job Help, they followed a stock format, complete with coffee, bagels donated by a local bakery, and informal networking and information sharing in the hallways prior to the official meeting. Meetings began with a welcome and introduction by one of the group leaders, almost always including a mention of the organization's commitment to providing emotional and spiritual support, Christian fellowship, and job searching/networking skills training. This was followed by a topical presentation or discussion given by the morning's invited speaker, often drawing on Scripture or emphasizing some Christian narrative related to the difficulties of unemployment and job seeking. After the guest speaker, two or more of the group leaders led the group in a weekly ritual of soliciting requests of "prayer and praise," such as petitions for prayer support for an individual's upcoming job interview, concern for other members going through particularly difficult times, and announcements of former members who had recently found jobs. These "requests" were immediately displayed on the marker board up front, and then later copied down to be prayed over by the church's prayer groups throughout the week.

Attendees then split up and reconvened in classrooms down the hallway with their various job function groups (e.g., engineering, manufacturing, telecommunications, etc.) for

roughly 45 minutes. There they would recap the previous week's activities, practice their self-presentational "elevator speeches" for one another, and engage in networking to seek out potential job leads, contacts, etc.³ After these sessions ended many members stayed behind to catch up with friends and/or do some additional networking. On occasion there would also be invited guest speakers or special presentations given in the main conference room immediately after the job function groups. The meetings generally lasted from one-and-a-half to two hours.

Job Hunters

Job Hunters was the smallest of the four groups, with only five or six attendees at each week's meeting. Held in a small classroom of another large and relatively new area church, this group was organized and run by a congregation member who had begun the group along with another displaced church member a few years earlier. The group consisted, on average, of 85% men (with only one non-white among them, an Asian), with some week's meetings attended completely by men.

The format at Job Hunters was a considerably looser than that of the other groups, although it did roughly follow the proceedings at Job Help (which the present group leader had previously attended on occasion). The weekly meetings here were much less formal than at the other two groups, and typically included members who were very familiar with one another, having attended regularly over time. Likewise, there was much less emphasis on networking and more on commiserating, though usually in a jovial key.

Meetings typically began with members filtering in around the start time, chatting

and sharing stories from the previous week(s) as they set up a small circle of chairs in the classroom. At some point the group leader would segue into the start of the meeting, introducing any newcomers and usually establishing some continuity with the prior week's gathering. Sticking approximately to a format sheet he brought to every meeting, the group leader would then start by going through a weekly "report" of his specific job search activities, high and low points of the week, the items he had promised to do and followed through on or not, etc. As each person finished their report the sheet would then be handed to the next person in the circle, and the routine would continue, often interrupted by joking and temporary diversions off topic. Whenever all members had gotten the opportunity to share their information, typically around the meeting's appointed closing time, the group leader would then end the proceedings with a prayer and quick mention of the next week's meeting. Here, too, members would remain afterward to chat for a short time. The meetings here generally lasted one-and-a-half hours.

CorpSeek

CorpSeek, the only non-church-based support group of the four, met monthly in the conference room of a chain hotel in a middle-class suburb, and was facilitated by a local job recruiter. This group served as the local branch of a national organization geared toward offering networking information and opportunities for corporate executives seeking high-paying jobs. Relative to the other groups, CorpSeek was the most "serious" of the four, with a focus mainly on networking with other attendees and very little in the way of emotional or psychological support. In this same vein members were required to pay a fee to attend, and

their dress contrasted with that of members at other groups (e.g., at CorpSeek women and men often wore business suits, something rarely seen at other groups). Attendance ranged from the 15 to 25, with most meetings drawing around 20 participants. As with the other groups, attendance here was largely male (80%) and white (95%).

The format at CorpSeek was routinized and straightforward, with members chatting over coffee before the start of the meeting. At the scheduled start time, the facilitator would welcome the members (seated at circular tables arranged closely together in the small conference room) and then report on some recent trend(s) in the corporate job market. From there the facilitator would provide a brief synopsis of the morning's meeting, which usually entailed networking and performing elevator speeches at the individual tables for roughly 30 minutes before switching tables to do the same activities again. On one occasion he announced a format change, and had everyone go in order around the room giving their elevator speeches and soliciting advice and possible job contact information from a larger net of people. After calling an end to this part of the meeting, the facilitator would usually recap the morning's message(s) and invite the members to remain behind and continue networking with one another. Meetings at CorpSeek lasted from one to one-and-a-half hours.

Additional Data Sources

In addition to participant observation, I also undertook 22 intensive, open-ended interviews with an equal number of women and men who were members of these groups. Three of these interviews were with members who also served, at various points, as leaders

or facilitators of two of the groups (plus one informal interview with a former group leader). The interviews followed a loosely-structured interview guide (see Appendix A), one I developed after some time spent in the field identifying important themes and processes in the group meetings and individual workers' efforts at coping. I used the guide specifically to get at workers' experience of unemployment, trying to uncover what they thought, felt, and did as they adapted to being unemployed (e.g., how they reacted upon losing their job, who they relied on for support, how important their job was for them, their impressions of the support groups they attended, what specific job-search strategies they used, etc.). The interviewees were all volunteers, recruited either face-to-face or by referrals from other members whom I had interviewed earlier. Interviews typically lasted one-and-a-half to two hours, and were all taped and transcribed in full. I also spoke informally at length with a handful of other group members who had served on support group steering committees. All of these occasions provided additional insight into the groups' stated and unstated aims and the often orchestrated processes involved in the weekly meetings. I also attended the yearly networking and motivational event held at CareerSupport to reunite current job seekers with "alumni," former members who had "graduated" by finding jobs.

From two of the groups (Job Help and CareerSupport) I also considered as data the available brochures and information sheets (e.g., Job Help's informational brochure, scripture-oriented motivational sheets, job coach advertisements, etc.) regularly displayed at weekly meetings. Finally, throughout my research I drew from and analyzed various popular news publications (e.g., Fortune magazine, New York Times Magazine, business sections of local and national newspapers, etc.) which the displaced workers themselves consulted on a

regular basis.

Analysis

In analyzing these data I used a combination of grounded theory (Charmaz 1983; Glaser and Strauss 1967) and analytic induction (see Becker 1998:194-212; Lofland 1995; Schwalbe et al. 2000:421-422). I thus worked upward from the data, initially coding for patterns of speech and behavior. This was followed by focused coding that aimed at identifying types of processes evident in the data. Subsequent fieldwork and interviewing were then focused on gathering data useful for elaborating my understanding of these processes. Through this continual and reflexive process of data gathering, coding, writing analytic notes-on-notes, writing analytic memos on emerging patterns, and then seeking new data, I narrowed my focus to arrive at the analytic story most strongly represented in the data.

My overall approach was quasi-inductive, in that I was already sensitized to a potential, salient problem facing the displaced workers being studied: How to cope with the identity and self-concept threat brought on by unemployment. Likewise, with regard to the non-random nature of the sample used, I have made no attempts here to generalize these findings to the larger population of managerial-professional workers directly. Instead, the point has been to “generalize about process” (Schwalbe et al. 2000:421; see, also, Becker 1990), specifically a social process of coping with the threat to established and valued self-conceptions. The focus here, hardly peculiar to displaced managerial and professional workers, is instead on an underlying situation of generic self-concept threat and the largely generic social processes (Prus 1996) of coping carried out by a group of social actors with

certain kinds of resources under specific social conditions.

Job Loss and Self-Concept Threat

Having outlined the case for displaced professional-managerial workers coping under a situation of self-concept threat, it is worth briefly considering what these workers experienced. Precisely what was threatened by job loss? For many it was a sense of stability and identification predicated on their valued and long-standing jobs and careers (see, for example, Fineman 1983). For others it was likewise a sense of self-worth as capable workers and moral beings tied to both their occupational identities and routine activities as, say, skilled professionals or dependable, hard workers. As a former corporate executive describes his experience:

I mean, you really have to get in touch with where you are in this – that – whole process and realize that job you just lost is not you.⁴ That didn't define your net-worth. It may have defined your financial worth, but it didn't define you, your worth as a person. And a lot of people have a difficult time. I know, because – well, I've been employed twenty years. I, I've never been out of work before, and I've always looked at my job, you know, as who I am. When you take and lose your job it's like, "Okay, who am I? If I don't have to work anymore, who am I now?"
(interview excerpt)

Similarly, as described by a former programmer and business analyst unemployed for the third time, job loss is often painful and destabilizing, precisely because it takes away a valued and foundational conception of self. From her interview:

I think the one thing I would like to emphasize is how devastating the layoff was in 2001. You know? It was – I talked about having the three pillars [family, job, and religious faith]. And it was like all of a sudden one of those wasn't there. It wasn't like it's going away, and you can start to prop it up once it's gone. It was just gone. It was very disheartening to really find out that companies weren't interested in their associates, that they really didn't care. It was just the most eye-opening, humiliating, humbling experience I have ever been through. It took away almost my whole sense of being and doing and existing. It really did. I put so much of myself into my career . . . and it was so hard when that was taken away from me.

Within this context of job loss, a diminished sense of self-efficacy stands out as a particularly salient form of threat. This is hardly surprising, since such self-feelings are often shaped and maintained by workplace opportunities to engage in valued activity, gain positive performance feedback, and garner a range of desirable self-evaluations (see Schwalbe 1985, 1988). Following Bandura (1977; 1982), I am using the term self-efficacy to mean the perception that an individual has of her or his ability to produce effects in or otherwise exercise control over areas of their environments (their own selves included). Put differently, self-efficacy is the enduring feeling derived from experiencing one's self as a causal agent responsible for producing valued effects in one's environment (Gecas and Schwalbe 1983).⁵ For workers accustomed to such feelings and the self-conceptions they help engender, job loss means lost opportunities to feel "in control," accomplish meaningful activities, and/or reveal to self and others their capacities as competent social actors.

A diminished sense of self-efficacy is precisely the experience that many of the displaced workers in this study had in common. Such feelings of reduced self-efficacy

occurred not only from losing the normal means of upholding feelings of efficacy (via pay raises, job promotions, completed work projects, etc.), but also from repeatedly fruitless efforts to find new jobs (cf. Stroschein 1998). A former project leader in clinical research describes such a circumstance below in an excerpt from her interview (echoing, too, perhaps, an efficacy-reducing experience common to women as unpaid laborers in the home):

But looking for a job is a lot of work. And it's worse than – the only thing I can compare it to is it's kind of like when you bust your butt cleaning your house, and you work for hours and hours and hours, and it looks nice for just a short period of time. And you feel like for such a – it's such a low return on your investment. Well, unemployment is, like, take that feeling and multiply it by about a hundred, because it's the same kind of thing where it's effort, effort, effort, effort, effort, effort, and you know you're putting in effort, but what do you have to show for it? Nothing. You're still unemployed. For all people know, you could be sleeping, or watching cartoons all day, or eating bonbons, or watching soaps, or whatever. You know, because you have nothing for it. And yet it's, it's expending a lot of effort for absolutely nothing back. And if anything, what you get back is very self-effacing, because it's, you know, "Get an interview – You don't get a call." You don't get anything.

In the face of such threats to their feelings of self-efficacy, displaced workers in this study devised a variety of strategies to accomplish self-concept repair. The next chapter offers an analysis of these strategies, showing their ties to support group participation. What we thus see is not merely cognitive coping by individuals, but a process of collective self-concept repair.

Chapter Two

STRATEGIES OF SELF-CONCEPT REPAIR

How, then, did displaced managerial-professional workers cope when job loss deprived them of the usual means for realizing themselves as both competent and moral social actors? How did they repair the self-concept damage caused by job loss? My analysis shows that in the context of support group participation they used four main strategies: (a) redefining the meaning of unemployment; (b), realizing accomplishment; (c) restructuring time and activities; and (d) helping others. I argue that these strategies bolstered feelings of self-efficacy and allowed displaced workers to cope with the psychological distress of prolonged unemployment. Moreover, these strategies depended on resources not readily available to other, less privileged workers (e.g., blue-collar workers).

Redefining the Meaning of Unemployment

Displaced workers and significant others in the support groups cooperatively redefined unemployment as an opportunity in two different ways, either as an opportunity for change and accomplishment or an opportunity to realize God's plan. For all of these individuals the ability to see job loss as a benefit came in part from prior experiences and interpretation schemes they already had as part of their existing "cultural toolkits" (Swidler 1982) – e.g., in "seeing the good in the bad" or realizing that "every dark cloud has a silver lining." Thus, in collectively redefining unemployment as a potential opportunity, these actors already had at their disposal a variety of learned, shared repertoires or cultural scripts

for dealing with and making sense of situations and events (see Callero 2003). Not only did they have the available cultural “tools” to work with, but these workers had ample motivation to do so in terms of reclaiming a threatened livelihood, buoying sinking emotions, and/or bolstering feelings of efficacy. So, as illustrated in the case of the former operations manager below, losing one’s job can be an occasion for considering other opportunities for both work and self-enlargement (because work can be experienced as confining). From his interview:

RG-P: Going back to being called into the office, getting the word right there, what were your first thoughts at that moment? Do you remember? You said you were stunned.

Interviewee: It was [pause] – stunned is a good answer. Ahhm, in a strange way it was some kind of – I don’t know why I felt this, but it was some kinda relief. . . . I don’t know why. You know, I think my first thoughts were, “Geez. I can do anything I want now.” (emphasis added)

For another displaced worker, a former marketing communications professional and self-employed consultant for the past eight years, the opportunities provided by her unemployment were more specific:

You know, I tried to – I’ve used this opportunity to start losing weight. I’ve gotten organized at home. I’ve done things that I didn’t make the time to do, like updating the kids’ scrapbooks and baby books and reading more books. Organizing closets, giving more stuff to the Goodwill. We’ll probably have a yard sale, which is good, because we’ll get a little extra money, and we’ll also get the house cleaned out. So,

I'm looking for things like that, because I keep thinking, "When I get a job I won't have time to do these things. So let's use this time wisely."

Being unemployed, as this woman notes, could be defined as a chance to focus time and efforts toward other areas in need of attention. More specifically, her job displacement enabled her to feel efficacious to the extent she was able to concentrate on being productive at home, working toward and completing projects that would otherwise have gone undone for lack of time. Furthermore, the kinds of interim goals she was able to achieve, like organizing her home, having a yard sale, and earning extra cash, were arguably valued for the feelings of thrift and accomplishment they provided. Similarly, for those workers who had previously considered some other kind of job, being displaced was for some an opportunity for positive change and a chance to strive for new goals (see Little 1976), thereby allowing them to frame subsequent actions in terms of goal-achievement. A situation of job loss, then, was often turned into both an opportunity – for personal change, to organize one's home, to use time efficiently – and a potential avenue for navigating unemployment in efficacy-inducing ways where one could derive a sense of accomplishment from a range of actions within this milieu.

For those workers who used support and job networking groups as means for coping, realizing their job loss as an opportunity was made an easier task by virtue of having a community of credible and concerned others available to validate such a definition of unemployment.⁶ Workers within these groups were also able to learn – and have reinforced – interpretation schemes or ways of attributing meaning and cause to themselves and their

situations (e.g., by making lateral or upward social comparisons to deflect self-blame for job displacement or, alternatively, boost a lost sense of efficacy diminished in the course of job displacement and a prolonged job search). And while not every unemployed worker came to define their displacement as a positive occasion (at least not immediately nor uniformly across the duration of unemployment), support group participation allowed workers to better realize job loss as an opening for some new direction in life or a new job opportunity.

Within the context of the faith-based support groups the redefinition of unemployment as a positive opportunity often took the form of recognizing – i.e., “re-cognizing” – one’s job displacement as part of an omniscient God’s larger design (e.g., by thinking, “Perhaps God didn’t want me to have that job”). Seen in this light, job displacement was more readily understood as meaningful and having positive purpose for those in question (as opposed to being seen as the result of incompetent work performance or the outcome of a fundamentally flawed economic system that ultimately treats even privileged workers as expendable commodities). For workers who came to see their job displacements as intended by God, an additional question often arose of, “Who am I, then, to question God’s will?” As good, faithful Christians, displaced workers in this situation were thus able to deflect self-blame and rationalize away potential threats to self by seeing their unemployment as scripted by God, rather than due to their own lack of ability or competence. Likewise, by redefining job displacement as part of God’s overall design and an opportunity to realize what purpose a benevolent God had in mind for them, job seekers in these groups were better able to address a lost sense of control and re-frame their unemployment situation as one of a challenge (i.e., a potential opportunity to realize feelings

of efficacy). Moreover, imagining God's hand in their unemployment (citing God's graciousness, specifically) also enabled displaced workers to stay motivated and work hard in their job searches, since not doing so could have been construed as a betrayal of Him (an implicit case, at least, of using God to hold one's self accountable for doing job-search work).

Such God-oriented interpretations of job displacement were shared regularly within the context of the faith-based support groups. In particular, these meanings were handled in the devotional portion of each week's meetings in which invited speakers employed religious rhetoric, Scripture, and storytelling in various ways to give specific relevance to members' experiences of unemployment within a Christian frame of reference. According to the following unemployed software developer and business analyst – even for someone less than religiously devout – there was value in attending a support group (Job Help) and hearing the religious message delivered there on a weekly basis:

I think I consider myself a spiritual person, but not necessarily a religious person. And I do think that it helps when they [group leaders] say, "God has a plan for you. God has a purpose for you." I think that's good to hear that because I think, "Okay. Well, then I'm doing the right thing. I'm trying to find out what that is." So I am doing sort of what supports what I'm sort of doing intuitively, which is to try to use this as an opportunity to find something more meaningful.

Her participation in this faith-based group and some degree of faith in God, then, allowed this woman to see her efforts as valid and beneficial, job finding efforts that were, to a large degree, directed toward redefining her job loss as an opportunity for finding more

meaningful work. As well, under conditions of uncertainty and heightened anxiety that were characteristic for the workers being studied, such messages could help to reestablish a sense of control and stability in one's situation and boost flagging hopes by restoring emotional balance. Put simply, these messages of hope and asserting God's omnipotence allowed job seekers to give positive meaning to their actions and feel as if they were "heading in the right direction" or "doing the right thing" – i.e., making progress.

At the same time, such opportunities were not limited to simply realizing God's plan for one's self, but could also be seen as a matter of using a period of job displacement as a test of one's religious faith and mettle as a good, moral person. A former sales and marketing director (and group leader) clarifies this point as he explains how the CareerSupport group typically contextualized job loss and workers' job finding efforts within a Christian frame of reference. From his interview:

So, in many cases this mission – this network, this CareerSupport ministry – allows people to experience their unemployment – their trial – in the context of the Christian faith, in context of the world view that we're told that the Bible is the correct one. That doesn't mean that all the other networking groups are bad; it just means that they're operating from a very secular, practical, go-out-there-and-find-a-job [point of view]. You know, and if you want to pray to your God, you can. It's all very relevant. I think Christians, our objective is we know that everyone will eventually find a job in some way, shape, or form. Whether you're a VP of something or you're gonna go to Wal-Mart, you're gonna get employed somewhere, somehow. But the objective is to really come out of it stronger in your faith and not bitter.

Such messages, heard regularly in the weekly meetings of these faith-based groups, allowed group members to see value in their efforts (both there and in their overall job searches) and find comfort in realizing their displacements as ultimately temporary. In addition, this information permitted displaced workers to see unemployment as a problem to be solved or a test of certain capabilities, whether the outcome was finding an identical replacement job or coming to realize one's self as a stronger Christian or better person. In the following fieldnote excerpt from a meeting at CareerSupport, a devotional speaker conveys just such a message as he responds to group members' concerns over the range of problems they've experienced while unemployed.

The speaker, Fred, smiled and acknowledged all of these points as relevant to being unemployed [feelings of anxiety, rejectionism, inability to realize God's will, etc.], saying, "Even when we land [find work], we're gonna come across these issues." He paused, adding, "You've gotta put it in God's hands." . . . From there he went on to relate this previous information to his own job search, saying, "I'm really curious about what God has in store for me. My wife says, 'It must be something fantastic, because you've interviewed for some great jobs [job offers he had declined]. So it must be something really good.'" Fred continued pacing the floor energetically . . . and then launched into the story of an Indian leper who, in the middle of a revival run by a Christian mission in South Asia, stood up to thank the Lord for giving him leprosy. . . "As it turns out, this man [the leper] had brought over one thousand souls to Jesus Christ," Fred said in obvious awe, shaking his head slowly. "Can you imagine that?" he asked the crowd, referring apparently to the pain and suffering the leper had gone through in his life, yet still remaining thankful to God. "God," Fred finished, "has got a plan for everybody."

Both stories that this speaker presented – his own waiting for that “great” job that God obviously had in store for him and the leper-as-model-Christian who saw great value in his misery – offered displaced workers the chance to define their current situations as both beneficial and ripe with potential for achievement. The tale of the leper, for instance, communicated implicit, yet valuable lessons to group members (i.e., “Don’t complain, because others have it much worse” and/or “Even those in terrible situations can come to succeed by believing in the Lord”), messages that allowed workers to feel better about themselves and their situations by learning to engage in downward social comparisons and see potential for achievement in an otherwise unpromising situation. Likewise, as the leper’s example shows, even under the bleakest of conditions workers could come to value their hardships as part of God’s ultimate will (itself an accomplishment of sorts).

In all these ways, then, participation in these faith-based groups enabled displaced professional and managerial workers to redefine their job losses in more palatable ways, particularly by drawing on and benefitting from the various resources found there. In any of these senses – job loss as an opportunity to realize God’s true will or as an occasion to reaffirm a moral identity as Christian (and thereby gauge one’s self-worth) – unemployment could thus be defined as a worthwhile task to be taken on and as grounds for realizing a sense of accomplishment. What these messages and stories provided, beyond chances for boosting positive affect or rendering job loss more sensible, was the opportunity for group members to learn a preferable way of interpreting a shared, problematic situation (cf. Haas [1977] 2003; Mason-Schrock 1996; Wolkomir 2001) and allow them to realize their ensuing efforts – whether immediately yielding a job or not – as beneficial and worthwhile, and as

evidence of their capacity for effective action.

Displaced workers also framed their adjustments to job loss as meaningful kinds of “work,” thus allowing them to realize their negative situations and subsequent attempts to address unemployment in efficacy-inducing, work-oriented ways. Put simply, members of these support groups often came to redefine unemployment and their ensuing job search efforts as a “job” or “full-time work.” By defining unemployment as another kind of job, these workers framed their actions in terms of task accomplishment, thinking of unemployment as a challenge or a problem to be overcome, rather than a crisis to be suffered.

For many workers, these coping efforts harked back to their former work experiences and the expectations of efficacy that resulted from such. As a former manager of operations states in the following interview excerpt (when describing his orientation toward unemployment and his job search):

It kinda goes back to, you know, I used to work, back in manufacturing, a number of years. Seven years. Well, what do you do in manufacturing? You make the same thing every day. . . . And this [unemployment situation] is sort of in that vein. You know, a manufacturing-type-of-build-toward, you know, my-next-job. [pause] I’m trying to manufacture my next job.

Likewise, for a former director-level manager below, an effective way of coping with job loss called for just such a rethinking of his unemployment and the ensuing job search as “work” or a “full-time job,” efforts that he notes were enabled through his participation at CareerSupport and Job Help. From his interview:

Well, you do have to look at it as a full-time job. I think the tendency, your first tendency when you become unemployed is to take time off and then not spend a lot of time looking for work . . . I was fortunate that I went to these groups even before I left my job, and I heard their message. And their message is: “You’ve gotta treat this like a full-time job . . . You know, “Get out there and stay busy.”

Likewise, as this same man notes below in a different interview excerpt, the groups also communicated relevant and valuable messages to displaced workers about the need to stay busy in effective, job-like ways.

Oh, yeah. Oh, they were explicit. Yeah, I mean the groups, as part of the intro to the thing and as part of the [job function] groups at CareerSupport – and Maxine at JobHelp, she can get up and preach to the crowd on a regular basis – “Are you doing what I told ya? Are you reading the, you know, [local business weekly]? Are you getting out there and making the phone calls? Are you working at getting yourself a job hard every day?” I guess, you know, the first person I talked to about how to go about a job search told me, “You need to spend at least six hours a day, five days a week doing this. And you need to spend it like you’re getting up and going to the office – Get up, shave, clean up, put your clothes on, go sit at the table, get a space, you know, make a space like you’re going to work, and work at it.”

Such reminders of the need to work hard while being unemployed offered displaced workers a desirable, effective way of approaching unemployment, likewise drawing on and reinforcing previous notions of what it means to be a hard-working professional (thus allowing workers to reclaim a valued but threatened aspect of their self-concepts). In the

same way that a strategy of staying busy allowed one to feel efficacious in dealing with a surplus of undirected time, allocating one's daily and weekly time along the lines of a traditional work model ("You need to spend at least six hours a day, five days a week doing this") was potentially effective in boosting a diminished sense of efficacy.⁷

In the context of support groups, then, workers were given numerous opportunities to define their unemployment situations in potentially beneficial ways. Consider the following fieldnote excerpt of an episode at CareerSupport where one of the group leaders who recently found work offers advice (and solicits coping strategies from audience members).

"My landing this consulting job was a God-thing," Robert announced, as he launched into his presentation entitled, "This Eagle Has Landed." "So it's definitely – no doubt in my mind – God's hand in this." Moving on he said to the audience, "Navigating the emotional roller coaster of the job search – that's normal. You're not going crazy. That's just part of the job search." As the audience murmured approval, Robert pressed them for the various strategies used to deal with these emotional challenges. "Trying to keep busy," a white man up front offered. "Volunteer to help someone," another man said. "Prayer," a white woman in the middle of the group announced. "What I do is I get dressed up in the morning like I'm going to a job interview, like Robert [the speaker] told me once," another middle-aged white man claimed.

Whether achieved through social comparisons with other job seekers or advice from more experienced others in these groups, messages like the ones stated by the first and last speakers in this example communicate the value of acting toward one's unemployment situation as a job. Thus, treating one's unemployment in this fashion could make doing the

necessary work to find a job a priority, thus serving as a potential asset for displaced workers acting under conditions of unstructured and available time and competing demands on time and energy from family members (e.g., for those whose displacements made them more available to take on added duties at home). Likewise, by “staying busy,” or engaging in apparently productive, work-like activity, these workers were at least able to feel productive about their efforts and use of time (see, also, Flaherty 2003).

A former corporate officer for a number of hi-tech start-up companies below echoes much of the same sentiment as he comments on his acquired orientation toward job seeking as a “job.” From his interview:

But I, I guess that, you know, I don’t mean to minimize the trauma, the reality where you wake up in the middle of the night saying, “God. What am I gonna do?” But the trauma of it pretty much, you know, passed fairly quickly. So now it’s just I’m, I’m full-time employed; I’m just not being paid. I’m employed to find a job – the old saying. And to my surprise I’m finding there’s lots of activities I can do there, and I do them okay. They haven’t borne fruit yet, but, you know, I don’t feel that I’ve failed or I’m unsuccessful.

Not only does this worker redefine his current jobless status here as being “employed full-time to find a job,” but he also indicates that within this newly-defined realm of work he was able to preserve some sense of competence from the activities he engaged in there by at least not feeling that he had failed or been unsuccessful. Even within a job search context fraught with opportunities for a diminished sense of efficacy (e.g., by way of little or no feedback on the efficacy of one’s actions from potential employers, given a depressed job market, etc.),

this worker was able to maintain some feelings of accomplishment by both having productive, work-related things to do with his time and by redefining success, at least in part, as “not failing” at his efforts to find work.

As has been shown, coping with job loss can itself be partly a matter of cognitive efforts to redefine the situation at hand, whether speaking of one’s unemployment situation in general as an opportunity to pursue some other line of work, find more a more meaningful and authentic occupation, or realize God’s true intentions for oneself. In any of these cases displaced workers addressed the problem of a threatened self-concept by redefining the meaning of unemployment and their subsequent efforts to find acceptable work as: (1) an opportunity for change and accomplishment; (2) an opportunity to realize God’s plan; and/or (3) a “job.” Such re-definitions of situation and actions likewise informed the remaining coping strategies to be discussed in this thesis. And while this redefinition process occurred via the cognitive efforts of individuals, it was far from an individual process. Rather, coping in this sense is best seen as a joint accomplishment by virtue of the shared symbolic and interactional resources provided in these groups to both teach and learn valuable, efficacy-inducing ways of rendering unemployment more meaningful.

Realizing Accomplishment

A second way displaced managerial and professional workers attempted to boost feelings of efficacy was by paying attention to those things they were still accomplishing in their daily activities, both job search-related and not. As with workers’ efforts to redefine the meaning of unemployment, this strategy of realizing accomplishment entailed a process

of redefinition, specifically that of learning to read one's actions and experiences and reinterpreting them for their efficacy value. More specifically, workers were able to "take stock" of both past and present accomplishments, in order to derive a sense of efficacy from their efforts. They did so by looking back to prior jobs, job evaluations, projects completed, etc., in various acts of "mining the past" for reminders of personal agency.

Displaced workers also magnified the importance of relatively minor accomplishments through their participation in support groups. Achievements that would have seemed minor while they were employed now took on increased meaning as indicators of personal agency and effectiveness (cf. Strohschein 1998). In these group contexts workers were able to amplify the significance of minor accomplishments and thus bolster feelings of efficacy by celebrating accomplishments in various ways, taking part specifically in efficacy celebrations enacted during weekly support groups, occasions themselves designed to remind participants of ongoing accomplishments and boost feelings of hope in the process.⁸ Using excerpted data from fieldnotes and interviews, in this section I will show how displaced workers repaired damaged self-concepts by taking stock of seemingly minor accomplishments and reinterpreting them as signs of competence.

Learning to appreciate their ongoing accomplishments required workers to shift their focus from former, more routine kinds of job-based indicators of success (e.g., performance bonuses, job promotions, completed projects, etc.) to less obvious and perhaps less glamorous sorts of achievements (e.g., attending weekly support group meetings, making a set number of job inquiries, spending quality time with family members, etc.). Importantly, it was not necessarily the actual accomplishments that mattered here for bolstering feelings

of efficacy, but at least the perception that one was achieving something, no matter how small (thus making some kind of progress or at least maintaining one's position).⁹ In the interview excerpt below a former director-level executive describes how he coped with an especially thorny part of unemployment. What ultimately helps is to focus on and realize the things one is still getting done, in effect, "taking stock" of one's accomplishments.

But I think taking stock each day of what you've accomplished keeps you from feeling like you're not accomplishing anything. And there are very few days, when you're unemployed, that you feel like you've accomplished much. So you have to make little things, little successes add up. So you have to tell yourself, "Okay. If I make five phone calls, if I get one lead from somebody and I follow up on it today, today's been successful" . . . You know, picking the kids up at school, just having a conver—"I wanna have a conversation today with my kids." That's a success, you know? It's got nothing to do with a job, but you made an attempt to have a conversation with them, and you had a good conversation. Most days [pause] that's enough.

Here this worker alludes to the efficacy-diminishing nature of a job search in which good jobs are scarce and, thus, accomplishment in the sense of finding a job is difficult to achieve. Similarly, he highlights the need to treat even small accomplishments – job-related or otherwise – as something valuable. Thus, even a taken-for-granted behavior like having a conversation with one's child can be considered and prized as a successful activity, specifically as it reflects, in Meadian terms (1938), the consumation of an act (see, additionally, Schwalbe 1986:35) .

For some displaced workers, small accomplishments were also found in the form of

incremental progress in their job searches, signs that they were moving forward and still achieving something worthwhile. For instance, performing a set number of job-search activities, like online resume postings or cold calls to potential employers each day or week, could be experienced as little achievements, necessary pieces for attaining the ultimate goal of finding a good job. In the common situation that most workers found themselves – putting forth lots of job-finding effort with no “payoff” in the form of a new job – something as modest as landing an interview could be experienced as a success and evidence that one was making headway. This is exemplified in the following interview excerpt with a former telecommunications quality engineer as he assesses his relative “success” as a job seeker by taking stock of the number of phone and on-site interviews he has had (in 15 months of unemployment).

Yeah. I think I’m doing okay . . . Like I told you, I’ve had thirty-two phone interviews with hiring managers. Ten of them have resulted in on-site interviews. Two of them have flown me – West Virginia and Michigan, ‘cause they thought I was the right person for that job. I’ve gotten off a couple of phone interviews, and the guy says, “I want you to come in,” you know, the next day or in two days. So that’s a pretty good success rate – thirty-two interviews, and thirty-three percent of the time I’ve gotten on-site interviews. So, I’m getting them. And they like what they hear on the phone. So I’m getting by this first, the first step.

Although this success rate could be read negatively given the large number of interviews he had with no job outcome, this worker was able to recount and turn these occasions into a collective indication of forward progress in his job search. In effect, by “getting by the first

step” of the interview process at least, he was able to perceive himself as an efficacious job seeker. Likewise, he was able to reinterpret “not failing” as a success, thus deriving feelings of efficacy from his abilities to perform competently as a job seeker (i.e., by getting a good number of interviews and/or doing what it took to land interviews in the first place).

A majority of the men interviewed – but no women – reported the value of taking stock of efficient efforts at job seeking and networking (where building stores of social capital could simultaneously serve to boost positive emotions and a sense of security). So, as a former engineer and corporate officer notes, picking up new resume skills or building one’s network of potential job contacts could be reckoned as efficient uses of time (and, hence, meaningful accomplishments). From his interview:

And the guy from Synergy Group was there, and he had this really good presentation on balanced scorecard and one-page strategic plan [self-presentational job search tools]. The balanced scorecard I knew about, but the one-page strategic plan was pretty fact-filled . . . so I’ve really learned something new there. “Did it help me find a job? No.” But in terms of overall value to me I felt it was valuable. It was good. And who knows? You know, it’s networking. So it’s just as likely to lead to a job, perhaps.

Even the act of establishing contact with unemployed others, as this case shows, could provide workers with feelings of accomplishment and forward progress.¹⁰ In the absence of finding a desirable job and leaving the ranks of the unemployed (arguably the ultimate achievement for such workers), feeling confident about building one’s network of possible job contacts could be one of the next best things (i.e., as a valued accomplishment).

As the above examples show, there were a number of ways in which workers turned seemingly minor activities into grounds for feelings of accomplishment. Whether accomplishments were related to job searches or not (e.g., within family life), these workers were able to derive a sense of achievement from their efforts. Yet, such efforts at taking stock of accomplishments did not stop there. A good number of workers, as we shall see, also looked to the past in order to remind themselves of their capacities as valued workers and to vicariously experience themselves as efficacious social actors.

Whereas some workers took stock of present accomplishments, many (n=16) also looked to past achievements for indicators of personal efficacy. Thus, workers often revisited the past successes to find signs of their qualities as capable workers and/or effective social actors, in effect “mining the past” for signs of efficacy in past work experiences, job resumes, and prior successful dealings with unemployment (see, also, Nurius 1991:248-249). For a few displaced workers, these efforts at mining the past involved a form of “self-talk” to remind themselves of the valuable experiences and achievements they had or had garnered in the past.¹¹ Such is the case, according to this former sales professional, unemployed for the first time, as she describes an important way of coping with the stresses of unemployment and maintaining hope in the process. From her interview:

And so I do that self-talk thing, like, you know, “I do have something to offer. I’ve just got to hang in there. I’ve got to pursue this.” And in looking at it, it’s been a good experience, too. I mean, you are forced to look at what you actually accomplished in previous positions . . . And so, I mean, so you do go through these evaluation tests that these different employment groups will give you, and you go,

“Oh, yeah. Wow, I did that. I did that, too. Wow! I did a lot of stuff.” So it’s just you realize more of your own value, I think. And that’s how you keep hope.

Like other displaced workers dealing with the self-threat brought on by unemployment, this woman felt forced to look back to what she had accomplished in prior jobs. Additionally, she reveals how evaluation tests – a common kind of job-finding tool that many displaced workers took advantage of in support groups, with job coaches, etc. – provided another means of reviewing one’s past (e.g., work records) for signs of previous accomplishment and competence.

The self-presentational elevator speeches or thirty-second speeches that were emphasized and routinely practiced in support groups also provided opportunities for workers to trumpet past accomplishments, job titles, and/or work responsibilities. Although sometimes derided in interviews as inauthentic or unenjoyable attempts at “selling themselves,” these elevator speeches were typically seen as valuable (or at least necessary) tools for landing potential job contacts. As professional performances, these also provided occasions for people to sum up the evidence for their capabilities as both workers and job seekers. As a former marketing communications professional notes (in her interview):

Yeah, to me an elevator speech, it’s just like talking to someone at a cocktail party. I mean, for the last twenty-five years I’ve been in marketing communications, and I’ve done A,B,C,D,E, and F. I’ve worked in high-tech. I worked in a lot of other industries . . . I worked NASCAR. I was a publicist for a cookbook, and I don’t cook – my husband is still laughing at that. I helped [state governor] when he was attorney general. I’ve done a lot of different things, and so I include that in my

elevator speech that I really hit a lot of broad-based industries, even though I started out in high tech. I use that as an advantage.

As she engaged in an accepted, instrumental part of her job search, this displaced worker demonstrated to herself and to significant others (e.g., potential employers, co-job seekers, etc.) that she was a capable and efficacious person. Not only did her past job experiences serve collectively as a perceived advantage in finding work (i.e., by providing breadth of experience), but they also served as potential efficacy-boosting resources by way of reminding this worker of evidence of her past accomplishments.

A number of displaced workers also cited a range of past successes and accomplishments as reminders of competence. In the following excerpt from an interview with a former sales director (unemployed for the third time) suggests, past achievements could be prized for what they indicated to individuals about their potentialities and skills as successful, goal-achieving persons.

I think I have a better chance of surviving than most. ‘Cause everything I’ve ever done has said, “I can do this better than that guy,” I’ve been able to, like, when I stayed in the Reserves and became a sergeant and said, “I want this E-7 job” – when I was an E-4 – “because I know I can do that job better than that guy.” I became one of the youngest first-sergeants . . . Whenever I got into judo at age thirteen, I said, “I wanna get a black belt,” and I got that by the time I was nineteen. Ahhm, I wanted to scuba dive, and [I] got my certification. I mean, those goals that I set for myself I usually accomplish.

Recounting memories of past achievements served as a reminder for this worker that he was

capable and efficacious. This suggests that even accomplishments from outside the realm of paid work could be valued and used as means for coping with the threats of unemployment.

As the previous examples have shown, an important way in which displaced workers attempted to boost diminished feelings of self-efficacy brought on by job loss was through taking stock of things they had accomplished in the past. Still, as the next section will further reveal, it is misleading to think that these individuals undertook or succeeded in such efforts on their own. They were able to do so, in large part, through cooperation with a range of others in support group settings.

Groups served as valuable resources by allowing job seekers to publicly claim these little successes in their everyday lives (i.e., to give agency accounts) within an emotionally supportive environment and receive affirmation for their actions in the bargain. One important aspect of realizing accomplishment was found in the efficacy celebrations that occurred regularly in three of the four groups studied. By taking part in these “success stories,” displaced workers learned to take stock of the things they were still accomplishing (and publicly demonstrate to themselves and others their abilities, accomplishments, etc.). Through such activities displaced workers gained numerous opportunities to pay attention to and value their abilities to “get things done,” rather than losing motivation and giving in to feelings of helplessness.

Such acts of accomplishment-claiming and affirmation are demonstrated in the following extended fieldnote excerpt of an actual “success stories” portion of a weekly Job Help meeting.

Maxine [the facilitator] went around the room seeking out other success stories from each table. “It doesn’t matter how big or how small they are,” Maxine announced enthusiastically. “They don’t even have to be job-related,” she reminded the audience, adding cheerily, “I wanna hear from someone at every table.” One man raised his hand and announced that he was scheduled for a face-to-face interview immediately after the morning’s meeting, which was met with loud applause from the crowd . . . After about ten seconds of silence one fellow admitted, with a grin, “Well, one of the scouts in my troop just made Eagle scout.” There was loud applause from the tables as he added, “And only about two percent of scouts actually make Eagle scout, so” [trails off]. Maxine thanked him and moved to our table where Fran spoke up [with a smile] – “In my quest to find my God-ordained identity, I just did my first day as a substitute teacher.” The crowd applauded loudly, and Gloria, the earlier spotlight candidate, quipped, “And you’re still alive!” Another man sitting beside her, with a broad grin on his face, added, “And with all her body parts relatively intact!”

In these cases the people who spoke up were publicly congratulated for recognizing their efforts as accomplishments, whether they were related to finding a job or not. By taking part or just bearing witness to these celebrations, displaced workers in the groups learned to define and value their efforts in acceptable, efficacy-inducing ways. So, from the man whose announcement of his upcoming job interview was loudly applauded to the other who was congratulated for an accomplishment-by-proxy through his Boy Scout troop association, this example of a typical efficacy celebration demonstrates how participants publicly redefined and took stock of a wide range of accomplishments.

In the following interview excerpt a former project director and seasoned member of both CareerSupport and Job Help reflects on the perceived value of these efficacy

celebrations.

On the flip side, what Maxine [Job Help facilitator] does with the “successes” and “I’m not leaving–” and she does it in such a good-hearted way – “I’m not leaving this table until somebody comes with a success.” I think that does quite a bit at reinforcing this idea that your successes – you need to look at your successes as something much more than what’s happening in your job search. . . . So it is for those reasons that I see them as valuable. . . . And it’s an affirmation. You know, when the people have the praises, even though they’re sometimes the smallest and the silliest little things, just the fact that we sit there and people are smiling at that time, and people are clapping for them. And, no, it may not be the biggest of deals. And, no, maybe you didn’t become the vice president of some corporation. But that moment in time for you was important, and we’re gonna celebrate it with you. So it’s an affirmation.

As this account suggests, the process whereby group members (both facilitators and participants) helped others to see their actions as “successes” (e.g., through public acts of congratulations, cheering, clapping, etc.) included encouraging people to look beyond their job search activities for evidence of personal efficacy.

These celebrations of minor accomplishments were also a part of the smallest of the church-based support groups studied, the Job Hunters group. Although not as rigorously enacted as those in the CareerSupport and Job Help groups, the successes that participants claimed as part of the normal, weekly updates on their efforts and concerns during the meetings provided workers opportunities to feel efficacious. As seen in this fieldnote excerpt of the “successes” portion of a group member’s customary update on his recent

activities, even minor efforts could be claimed as valued achievements in their own right.

Phillip started right into his recent accomplishments, saying that he had just applied for a job at Bell South. “Who are you talking to at Bell South?” Don asked – “I’ve got a V.P contact for you.” “Great,” Phillip replied, adding, “Thanks.” Mentioning his other “successes,” he joked, “I’m alive” (chuckles). “Breathing” (more chuckling, from him and others). “Since I joined this group three months ago,” he added, more seriously now, “I lost 12 pounds.” “Oh yeah?” the fellow next to me quipped, “Is somebody chasing you?” (laughter from the others)

As he cataloged his recent achievements, this worker was encouraged to claim various accomplishments, no matter how small. Importantly, such efforts at stock-taking were handled in a supportive interactional environment (e.g., with some good-natured needling, but no actual challenges to speakers’ claims to efficacy) as a group process. Thus, by applying for a job and receiving public recognition for it, this worker could generate feelings of accomplishment. Likewise, even recognizing the fact that he was “alive” and “breathing” could be conceived of as a success of sorts, particularly under circumstances where unemployed others around them were sometimes worse off, going through divorce, dealing with serious illness, or, as was potentially the case, committing suicide.¹² And as this man implies when announcing his recent 12-pound weight loss, group membership (and the personal effort that this entails) could be appreciated for the opportunities it provided to make meaningful progress in some non-work related realm of life.

In all of the ways of realizing accomplishment just covered – from taking stock of past and present accomplishments to engaging in group efficacy celebrations – we see how

displaced managerial and professional workers were able to derive feelings of efficacy from their actions across a range of contexts. Likewise, I have argued that, in the course of learning and employing such redefinitional strategies, these workers, both individually and collectively, strived to boost feelings of self-efficacy. In the next section I will highlight another way in which these displaced workers bolstered feelings of self-efficacy – by manipulating their experiences of time.

Restructuring Time and Activities

Displaced workers had an abundance of undirected time and an absence of their usual, work-related ways of generating feelings of accomplishment. Some workers thus adopted routines to make up for those that were lost upon being unemployed; others focused on and devoted time to job search tasks they defined as most effective; still others sought out situations and other job seekers who would force them to do the work necessary to find an acceptable (e.g., good-paying professional or executive) job, particularly at times when they lacked the motivation to do so. Whether they employed specific sub-strategies like staying busy, adopting replacement routines, setting achievable interim goals, or enforcing self-accountability, many workers tried, both individually and through their participation in support groups, to fill unordered time and otherwise construct situations and activities – in effect, restructuring time and activities – in order to feel efficacious while unemployed (see, also, Swimbourne 1981).¹³

Many of the efforts entailed in this strategy of restructuring time and activities involved various forms of “time work” that Flaherty (2001) has described as ways in which

people modify or manipulate their subjective experience of time. While Flaherty (2001:23) defines time work specifically as “one’s efforts to promote or suppress a particular temporal experience,” the idea can be extended to include actions aimed specifically at structuring or regulating activities in order to accomplish other things (e.g., perform a task more efficiently, exercise control over one’s self, boost positive self-regard, etc.). To the extent they are able to do so, then, individuals often confront time as a kind of “raw material” of lived experience that can be manipulated or otherwise modified in service of various goals (e.g., in order to regulate one’s emotions, achieve desired outcomes more efficiently, structure tasks, feel better about one’s self via manipulation of other’s appraisals, etc.).¹⁴ The varieties of time work covered below point to the ways in which displaced workers actively strived to control their experience of time in order to feel efficacious.

One way these workers addressed the problem of having too much undirected time on their hands was to try to feel effective by staying busy. Within the job search – where most efforts at staying busy were focused – this involved keeping a full schedule of activities, such as attending weekly support group and accountability group meetings, conducting daily online job searches, attending monthly professional association meetings, etc. Below, a former sales and marketing professional explains such a strategy more specifically in an interview excerpt.

You know, if I use today as an example – Job Help [naming meeting she just attended]. Then I’m meeting with you. Then I’m going across the street to another networking lunch. Then I’m driving to that office in [distant suburb, mentioning a side-business she is trying to start]. Then tonight, through another networking

contact I had – and, again, for the business side of my equation – I’m going, they’re having an event at the [names convention center]. And this guy was able to get me a free pass, so I’m gonna go down there to, you know, check it out, kinda do a little networking. That’s the kind of busy that I’m talking about.

But staying busy also involved, as the same worker notes below, filling one’s time with meaningful activities unrelated to looking for work. From her interview:

I like to get involved in things, so I got involved with the [support] group. I volunteered. I got to know some of the people. I’ve worked on some of their projects. I like to stay busy with things. I volunteer at my own church, and try to stay busy with things. And that was one of the things that I would recommend to people is, during this period of time volunteer to do things. There’s always things you can do to help other people and stay busy. Don’t look at it as, “Well, you know, I need to be out looking for a job.” Well, yeah, you do. But there are also other things you need, too – your peace of mind, your own mental well being.

Like the handful of others who did so explicitly, this worker filled her time with a number of activities, but she did so using efforts that were either directed toward landing a job or revealing her moral worth as a caring, helpful person.¹⁵ So, for instance, she packed a number of networking opportunities into her “work” day along with her attendance at a regular support group meeting. Likewise, she managed to occupy some of her time in a meaningful way by volunteering her skills and time in various settings. Whether staying busy by attending a number of networking/support groups each week, or by searching online job boards or posting resumes, many displaced workers managed to fill time in consequential

ways.

Beyond inducing feelings of familiarity and progress, a strategy of staying busy also allowed workers to impose order on their time as a way to realize the consummation of even the smallest of acts and feel like they were accomplishing something (even if such behaviors were not necessarily instrumental in leading to a new job right away). Additionally, this strategy was potentially important as a performance that signified to self and significant others (e.g., family members, other job seekers, group leaders, etc.) that the unemployed worker was being productive (rather than, say, sitting home all day watching television). In the following interview excerpt a former director-level manager speaks to the importance of keeping one's self busy as a specific lesson he learned as a member of various support groups.

Those messages were important for me, and I feel they were very important for a lot of the folks who were going through the same thing. And I know it was helpful for my family, too, because they saw me active, they saw me staying busy. They heard me talking to people on the phone and sending resumes out, you know – “Okay, I’ve got a couple of more phone calls today, people I’m following up on. Okay, I’ve got an interview, you know, going for an interview.” So that kept them upbeat about the prospects of getting work soon.

For those workers who engaged in and valued such performances, reflected appraisals from significant others were potentially important for the information they provided about one's personal efficacy, whether as a good job seeker or, say, a responsible father and provider. Likewise, such actions were meaningful because of what they told displaced workers – at

times perhaps their own most important audiences – about their skills and potentialities as both workers and capable social actors.¹⁶

Workers also engaged in another form of time work by limiting or otherwise allocating the amount of time they devoted to given tasks in their job searches (see Flaherty 2001:28) . They did so particularly as a response to the felt need to shore up dwindling feelings of productivity and efficacy. A former director-level executive illustrates this point below in an excerpt from his interview:

I mean, even the time I spend – I limit myself now, the time that I’m on the computer. I just tell myself, “Okay. You’ve got thirty minutes to go in there and do what you’ve gotta do. Then get off.” Because you can waste so much time. Or I can. If I get at the computer and start searching on the Internet, it’s nothing to blink and turn around and two hours have gone, and I’ve got nothing to show for it.

Internet searches and resume postings, a major part of the job search for the group of displaced workers in this study, were sometimes experienced as problematic because of their potential for using up unlimited amounts of time and offering little or no return on workers’ efforts (especially given a depressed job market for professional-managerial jobs). Time, in this light, can be usefully conceived of as a valuable commodity to be either wasted or used efficiently. As the worker above shows, it was profitable to alter his use and experience of time by keeping his online job searches to a specified minimum. In the course of placing such limitations on his actions, this displaced worker exercised some degree of control over important realms of experience – time and personal action – thus allowing him to derive a sense of self as agentic in the process.

Some displaced workers also exerted control over the timing of activities (Flaherty 2001:26-27) to make themselves more easily accomplish tasks (or at least feel productive about the things they are doing). Thus, for those who were accustomed to working during certain days of the week or times of the day when they were formerly employed, it was often beneficial to engage in their “work” as job seekers at similar times. As this former computer programmer and project manager points out in her interview when she describes an important way in which she addressed a sense of inefficacy and lack of control:

But it's keeping oneself up psychologically, I think, is the biggest challenge, because you have to find some focus, or you're just so all over the place you feel like you haven't done anything at the end of the day. The other thing that I've been trying to do is, whatever I'm gonna do in this area [job search], I try to do it from eight-to-five, Monday through Friday, such that I still get up – I may not put work clothes on, but I get up . . . and I go to the office. I may be taking care of personal business, I may be job searching. Ahhm, I may be taking care of estate stuff or volunteer . . . but I'm doing business stuff during business hours.

Whether performing personal tasks or those related to her status as a volunteer or job seeker, this woman defined her efforts as “business” and scheduled them within a certain window of time in order to treat such tasks seriously. In doing so she arguably put herself in a frame of mind where she could focus on such efforts as “work,” differentiating them from the swirl of other activities and distractions contained within her daily rounds. Through engendering a sense of familiarity by doing work during expected times (and boosting positive emotions such perceptions of stability and order can provide), or by deciding when to perform a

specific kind of task (thus exerting control over one's situation), an important result here was the ability to better derive a sense of accomplishment from these efforts performed during "work hours."

Outside of efforts at manipulating their experience of time, another important way in which displaced workers sought to bolster feelings of self-efficacy was by restructuring and planning their activities in various ways to create opportunities for achievement (or at least the experience of such) in the vacuum of time and work-related activities created by unemployment. So, in order to compensate for the daily or weekly routines lost along with their jobs, some folks took on new routines in their daily activities and job searches to compensate for lost feelings of order, control, and familiarity. Likewise, some workers focused on setting and attaining a variety of small goals in both their home lives and job searches, goals that were much more achievable in the interim, at least until a suitable job was found. Finally, some recruited the help of other job seekers, family members, and friends as "accountability" partners in order to pressure themselves into staying active and doing the work necessary to find a good professional or managerial job. In all of these ways workers demonstrated the range of abilities and resources some social actors have to construct lines of actions and situations in self-regulating and goal-achieving ways.

Displaced workers attempted to impose order on their time and direct their energies toward finding desirable jobs specifically by adopting "replacement routines" to structure their days and job search activities effectively. By taking on routines to replace those formerly provided by a job or workday, many workers gained feelings of comfort and stability, and were able to impose order on their time and activities (an accomplishment in

itself). As a former technical writer and project director indicates below when describing her daily work “program,” such routines can provide feelings of order and structure (and may also motivate displaced workers to become engaged in additional efficacy-inducing activities). From her interview transcript:

I try to have a routine everyday. Monday’s a little different, ‘cause I go to CareerSupport, but what I try to do is in the morning, I’m the type of person I have to have my shower. Gotta have my shower. House has to be neat and clean. That’s how I work best. I get on the computer, I start looking at Monster [website], I start – I have a whole list of companies I’m always checking to see if they have openings. I do that first for a few hours, then I go to the gym for about an hour, then I come home, and maybe I’ll clean house for an hour. And then I’ll go back and make some phone calls, follow up on newspaper ads, which I usually do on Monday. I have a routine where I segment my day, and that way I get through the day, [and] I feel like I’m being productive.

Such a routine provided familiarity and a sense of productivity for this worker, in part because of how it approximated her former routines in the corporate workplace and at home as a home-based, full-time consultant. Likewise, by breaking up and segmenting her day into discrete, goal-oriented activities, she was better able to realize a sense of achievement.

Some workers also turned their attention to activities at home in order to establish new, comforting routines or restore old ones in order to structure their time and efforts productively. Even the seemingly mundane routine of getting up in the morning and getting ready for work could be experienced as an efficacy-inducing experience, as this former upper-level manager in manufacturing explains in an excerpt from his interview.

I guess, you know, the first person I talked to about how to go about a job search told me, “You need to spend at least six hours a day, five days a week doing this. And you need to spend it like you’re actu– like you’re getting up and going to the office.” Get up, shave, clean up, put your clothes on, go sit at the table, get a space, you know, make a space like you’re going to work, and work at it.

As this example shows, treating the job search as a full-time job could be helpful, both by putting in the necessary hours to frame one’s job finding efforts as “work” and by adopting a routine each day that mirrors a typical workday and work week from workers’ former lives as full-time employed. Likewise, as this displaced worker recounts, such a routine can involve going through the habitual motions of getting prepared for work – both physically and mentally – a sort of “efficacy-priming” routine to get one in a productive frame of mind to focus on and perform one’s job search with purpose.

Outside of more individualized efforts by workers to restructure their time and activities, support group meetings served as ready-made opportunities for participants to engage in structured routines from which they could derive feelings of efficacy. Three of the four groups had highly structured formats and provided familiar, corporate-like atmospheres in which displaced workers could come with other professionals to signify valued professional selves and receive affirmation in the process. By attending these groups and adopting the routines they provided, workers gained regular opportunities to organize their days, fill time with worthwhile activity, and stay motivated to find work. A former executive articulates the value of such opportunities in an interview excerpt below.

Every week [shakes head in affirmation]. Yep. I try not to miss ‘em. I mean it really, they [support groups] get you up, they get you out. I have to get up. I have to clean up. I have to put my clothes on, get my briefcase together, and go out the door. I have to plan my day [pause]. I think I’d be a basketcase if I just sat at home every day, all day, and sat in front of the computer.

Or, as the same worker points out while expounding on the same theme in his interview, the routine that went along with attending support groups provided structure to an otherwise unstructured day.

So having a, having a routine – and these groups give you structure. They give you a reason to get up and get out and get going every day. Even if you don’t get a job lead necessarily, from the group, it gives you some structure to get up and move and do some things, kind of feel like you’re in charge. Even though you know you’re not! [laughs]. It gives you that sense of being in charge of things again.

Participation in these groups allowed workers to impose a sense of order on their formerly work-ordered lives, thus giving them opportunities to derive feelings of accomplishment from the actions there. In addition, such opportunities helped workers to counter the feelings of uncertainty induced by job loss. Even if they were not ultimately in control (given the overall structural and market forces beyond their immediate control), displaced workers could for a while reclaim a sense of being in charge.

Some routines, though, were valued more for the feelings of accomplishment they produced in the moment. For one worker, a former project manager turned private

consultant who took a part-time job at a county park, the routine she acquired there offered something more specific – the actual sense of a job completed. From her interview:

When I worked in the corporate world I was always into project work, you know, where you go in and you start a project, and you wouldn't wanna walk out in the middle of a project. Where if you're doing something part-time – and that's one of the things I like about [local] park is that every day is it's own project. And, you know, yeah, there's some big-picture stuff that we work on, but every day kind of stands on its own.

Taking on a part-time job was beneficial for this worker, not merely for the income it provided, but for the opportunities it allowed her to recreate her former work environment, devoting time to meaningful tasks in a workplace and deriving a sense of accomplishment at the end of each work day. Because these efforts took place within the context of a start-to-finish project completed in the course of one day, it paralleled the overall structure of her former job doing project work and provided her with evidence of her capabilities as a worker and efficacious actor.

Many displaced workers also tried to restructure their actions and reassert a sense of control over their lives by setting and achieving interim goals. Instead of addressing just the larger, overarching goal of becoming re-employed, some workers focused their efforts on smaller, more “doable” tasks in the course of performing job search activities or managing their households, goals that could be more easily achieved in the interim. Such efficacy-inducing efforts directed at their job searches were made possible, too, by viewing the overall problem of finding an acceptable job as one made up of smaller, constituent tasks,

such as cultivating the necessary interviewing and resume-writing skills, networking with others, or just putting in the “necessary” hours of job researching each day or week. To the extent that they were doing the work seen as necessary by the communities of job seekers in which they took part, workers were better able to experience these activities as valuable accomplishments.

A former mid-level manager illustrates this point by alluding to the efficacy threat brought on by seemingly endless job search attempts and minimal feedback from potential employers. From her interview:

I mean, I have to, like, play little games with myself, and I think, “Okay. I have my planner, and I’ll be very judicious the night before, and I’m gonna do this and this and this.” And then I try to knock stuff out.

Likewise, a former technical writer and graphic designer below applies the same strategy in a very specific way to duties within her home life. From her interview:

Yeah, and also what I was told at some point is try and do a small project, and then you feel a little accomplished. You know, when I’m feeling really bad I go down into the bathroom cabinet and take everything out and reorganize it and I’m like, “Alrighty then. It’s all organized. I’ve accomplished something today.”

For another worker, a former sales and marketing professional who drew on past experiences in dealing with feelings of depression and inefficacy, an effective strategy was to identify and achieve various interim goals that could be addressed while she had an excess of time.

From her interview transcript:

And I learned a long time ago, I mean, if you're depressed you need to be kind to yourself. You know? So what is it that's gonna help? . . . For me it's gonna be a creative process, because I'm a creative person. If I'll allow myself to create things, that's very helpful for me, because you're accomplishing something, and you have something to show for it, you know? So, and I had some certain goals. Before I was laid off my goal was to be able to put my house on the market in the spring. And so I had some home projects that I wanted to do . . . So I've tried to do some of those things. And that kind of gives you a sense of accomplishment, as well.

As these workers reveal, narrowing one's focus and concentrating on more achievable, proximate tasks can help to generate feelings of accomplishment. Whether reasserting a sense of control over one's activities by specifically planning out what one will do during the coming day or the week to come, or by providing one's self with evidence of progress (via tasks crossed off a list or a bathroom cabinet obviously well-organized), setting and achieving interim goals in these ways allowed workers to make progress in certain areas of their lives and feel efficacious in the process.

For almost half of the workers studied, interim work in the form of a part-time job or temporary consulting work provided opportunities not only to earn some needed income, but also engage in productive activities that could be valued in a variety of ways. These temporary jobs also allowed workers to see such efforts as worthwhile uses of time, necessary for achieving the larger goal of finding a good job. And by performing certain kinds of temporary consulting work many workers were able to stay current in their areas of

expertise, even gaining material for their resumes to indicate to future employers that they had been busy and productive. As this former engineer and corporate executive explains (from her interview):

I'm very concerned about what – call it, getting stale or getting disconnected. So, losing ground, from a career standpoint [pauses]. You know, having said that, that's where this consulting thing is so great, 'cause even if it's, you know, even if they go bust. They don't get their funding. It evaporates. Well, at least for right now I'm current. I'm out there. I'm interacting, with an active business, working with suppliers and vendors and other people. I'm current. And, and that's a real good feeling.

For this man, his temporary, part-time consulting job was worthwhile as an interim achievement, largely for the feelings of forward momentum and efficient effort it provided. In this situation merely staying current and not falling behind could be experienced as a valued accomplishment (and grounds for staying positive).

In a slightly different sense a former sales and marketing professional, unemployed numerous times, reports a similar strategy of taking on part-time work in order to induce feelings of efficacy. Whereas the former worker valued his efforts in his part-time job as an efficient use of time and energy, the worker below appreciated hers for the little achievements and positive work evaluations she garnered there. From her interview:

So, and staying productive, also. For me I have to, I have to work part-time after a certain period, because I need to do, need to be away from it, not thinking about job searching. And, and just even performing well in a little retail sales job [chuckles].

Somehow, it's sad to say [laughs], but it lifts ya! [laughs more]. You know, you'll grovel for any little, ahh, smiley faces [chuckles]. Little brownie points.

By taking on “a little retail sales job” and then shifting focus onto her performance there, this worker established some degree of control over her ability to act and feel efficacious.

Likewise, she highlights the importance of reflected appraisals in this context, those positive performance evaluations in the form of “smiley faces” or “little brownie points” from apparent bosses and/or customers that provide indication of her value as a good and effective worker.

Outside of these attainable goals found in part-time work or temporary consulting jobs, a final, although less apparent sort of interim achievement was to be gained through the all-important act of networking to which the majority of these displaced workers devoted their time. Networking, defined by workers in these groups as “relationship building” or “making connections,” was viewed as a valuable use of time and a necessary activity for finding a good professional or managerial job.

In all their efforts to network with others across this range of settings, most workers sought to acquire high-grade social capital, in effect, to find “someone who really knows the person who really has the job,” as one displaced worker put it (see Granovetter 1973 on “weak ties”). This act of adding to one's network of social ties or even making a single job contact could be – and was, generally – experienced as an accomplishment or good use of time and energy. And so, in the course of attending weekly meetings with other job seekers or going to professional organization meetings each month, many workers used this time to

accrue potentially important social capital by presenting themselves, their professional credentials, and their past work achievements to a range of others in hopes of developing their network of job contacts. In the interview excerpt below, a former technical writer and project manager's experience in one of the industry-specific job function groups at CareerSupport illustrates this point well.

[Job function] groups are great. Those are just very serious. As I said, even this past Monday, I was looking for a way to get into Manpower Professionals. And I kept calling and the receptionists wouldn't put me through to anyone. Well, someone in the [job function] group knew a recruiter at Manpower, so she was able to give me his name and number. I went home and called him, and he has a resume [now]. Someone else in the room needed some information about another company, and I had that information. So I see the [job function] groups as being really powerful, because you're getting real, valuable information, real names and contacts and company information that you wouldn't normally be able to get. That's the power of networking.

Actions such as those above were often seen as worthwhile investments and, arguably, valued accomplishments. This worker's networking efforts, for example, paid off in the form of a desired personal contact with an employer she was actively seeking out. Likewise, this worker was also able to provide apparently valuable information to another job seeker in the group and arguably see herself as helpful in the process. When she and others in these support groups gained or provided "real names and contacts" and "real, valuable information" in their networking attempts, such achievements could be seen as important accomplishments and evidence of their abilities and self-worth as networkers and/or good

colleagues.

Some displaced workers also restructured their activities by enlisting “accountability” partners or groups to help them find work and stay motivated. More specifically here, these workers recruited others to hold them accountable for staying active in their job searches and doing the things necessary to find a desirable, professional/managerial job (e.g., going to networking meetings, cold-calling prospective employers, submitting resumes, etc.). By choosing such partners or groups with whom to regularly interact – or even having such individuals as resources at their disposal to begin with – such workers were able, at the very least, to create the conditions for better realizing accomplishments, creating, in effect, efficacy opportunities.

By accountability I mean specifically that inherent feature of social interaction in which actors are called on to explain or otherwise justify their behaviors that others deem questionable or non-normative (cf. Scott and Lyman 1968). Schwalbe (2005b:67) unpacks this idea of accountability further, pointing to the possible negative consequences for those who are unable to give acceptable accounts for their untoward behaviors (e.g., failing to perform, being lazy, etc.) as members of a certain valued social category (e.g., professional worker):

Often when we are called to account, it is as members of a group or social category, precisely because we are not doing what someone expects of us as a member of that group or category. We thus stand vulnerable to being ignored, discredited, shamed, or otherwise punished for behaving in a way that appears inconsistent with what is ideologically prescribed for members of the group or category to which we belong,

or appear to belong, or to which we are assigned.

At the risk, then, of losing face or being discredited in their identities as professionals or hard workers when they failed to perform acceptably, these workers used accountability as a tool to help them stay focused on, and make headway in, their job searches. They did so, at least in part, to boost a sense of efficacy by achieving specific interim goals or by simply staying active in their “jobs” as job seekers, putting forth the requisite effort to find acceptable work. And in doing so they were also able to elicit positive reflected appraisals from valued others and perceive themselves as diligent and effective workers in the process.

In the following interview excerpt a former director-level executive describes how this process of accountability works in practice.

When you don't have that day-to-day job, that boss hovering over you, you tend to let things slide. And so having at least an accountability partner, somebody that you're working with and you get together and say, “This week I'm gonna make five phone calls a day. I'm gonna try and get an interview this week. I'm gonna come to this meeting and I'm gonna participate.” And then sitting down or meeting that person and say, “Okay, how'd you do this week? Well, how'd you do this week?” You know, going over that, just knowing that you've gotta [say], “Well, I didn't make my phone calls” [in dejected-sounding voice]. You know, “I was bad this week.” You don't wanna go and sit down with that person and say, “I didn't do what I said I was gonna do” . . . That's really important, I think, if you can get to that point where you've got somebody that'll help you with everything.

Having an accountability partner or partners thus provides the comfort of knowing someone

else is helping you in your job search (see, for example, Thoits 1986 on social support as emotion-focused coping). It also recreates a built-in, but largely unrecognized, feature of workplace environments that likely influences productive behavior in the first place – having superiors or significant workplace others for whom one “performs” in order to avoid having to answer or account for untoward actions.

In these ways just mentioned, a handful of interviewed workers explicitly used friends, family members, and other job seekers to hold them to account for their job search activities on a regular or semi-regular basis (e.g., weekly or bi-weekly). One worker, for example, enlisted her sister as someone to hold her accountable – via their weekly telephone calls – to put forth the specific job-finding efforts she had pledged the week prior. Another, a former project director in the telecommunications industry, befriended a woman with similar interests and unemployment difficulties at a local networking meeting. Although not self-identified as formal accountability partners, these displaced workers, as she reveals in the following interview excerpt, still held one another to account, each “forcing” the other to stay motivated and involved in their respective job searches.

I met her through GGM, the outplacement firm. So she was at one of the networking meetings, and we talked . . . Then we found out that we both were going through this at the same time. And so what we found that we were doing was sleeping in, instead of getting up and getting going. So we forced each other – we worked with each other – and called each other every day before eight o’clock to make sure that we were up and at ‘em. And we figured we had to do that for about two to three weeks before it became a habit.

Beyond typical ways in which accountability partners pressure displaced workers to take on potentially efficacy-inducing activities (e.g., filing job applications, attending weekly support group meetings, etc.), this example shows how pressure to be accountable could also entail even taken-for-granted efforts like getting out of bed and getting one's day started (a challenge for depressed job seekers).

In addition to formally defined accountability partners or groups, support group settings also provided a weaker form of the same social pressure for displaced workers to perform the kinds of work befitting good, professional job seekers. Below, a former sales and marketing professional describes how this process works as she responds to an interview question about how support groups benefitted her job search and coping abilities.

Well, sort of an accountability issue, when you know you're supposed to be doing certain things, and you kinda let a couple of them slide. Then you get in the meetings, and it looks like other people are doing it [the work], you feel – just by listening to what other people are doing, you, you sort of remind yourself, “Oh, yeah. I'm supposed to be doing that.” And it [pause] puts the heat. Yeah. It puts the heat on you a little bit.

The same is demonstrated in the following fieldnote excerpt from one of the small, job-function group meetings at CareerSupport when a regular member stands up to give his weekly self-report.

Then Ted, the older of the three men in the room, excitedly mentioned this group as an informal accountability group. “I like it because it's like a Monday morning staff meeting – ‘Okay, What did you get done?’” “It's about action,” the facilitator,

Jolene, replied, “about getting things done. It’s not all just warm and fuzzy stuff.”

For these workers, the groups were worthwhile in part because they recreated a regular feature of the corporate workplace – “the Monday morning staff meeting” – and because of the way actors and their expectations in either setting pressure people to meet their work responsibilities. The form of accountability shown in both cases also works precisely because of the sometimes unavoidable social comparisons workers make with other participants in these group settings. So, by witnessing others there who were performing capably as job seekers (“doing their homework,” as one group leader termed it) this worker and others like her gained added incentive to get things accomplished in their job searches. And as the worker in the first example notes, accountability in these settings “puts the heat on you a little bit,” pressuring such individuals to keep moving and performing those acts necessary to find a job in order to avoid losing face.

In all the ways just mentioned, displaced workers used a variety of strategies to boost feelings of efficacy damaged by unexpected job loss. Some workers acted to exert control over how frequently, how long, or precisely when they performed a given activity, job search-related or otherwise (restructuring time). Some likewise worked to recreate daily and weekly routines lost along with their former jobs, refocused their attention and efforts on smaller, more achievable interim goals in their home lives and job searches, and used other people as resources to pressure them into performing the tasks needed to stay motivated and actually find work (restructuring activities). In the next section I will show how many of these displaced workers used yet another strategy to bolster damaged feelings of self-efficacy

as they also searched for desirable employment, one of helping others.

Helping Others

Displaced workers also sought to boost feelings of self-efficacy by helping others in a variety of ways. They did so, both within and outside of the support groups they attended, based on the significance of “helping” actions as particularly meaningful kinds of activities that could be readily translated into valued accomplishments and signs of their abilities as good professionals, appreciated workers, and/or caring Christians (cf. Piliavin and Callero 1991 on the “blood donor identity”). These workers were thus able to use a strategy of helping others to good effect, at least in part given: (1) the salience of such a coping strategy for them as individuals with valued moral and worker identities; (2) their participation in support groups that provided large numbers of like- and worse-situated others in need of help; and (3) the prominence of messages of caring and assistance that were promoted in three of the four groups studied.

More specifically, these displaced workers bolstered feelings of efficacy by converting technical knowledge, job searching skills, social capital, and past dealings with unemployment into resources that could be used to help others in the context of their job searches and support group activities. By using these resources to help others, they were able to experience feelings of accomplishment in either the immediate moment (e.g., via the reflected appraisals of others’ thanks for help given) or from the expectation of reciprocated help that others might provide later (e.g., in the form of a valuable job lead or inside contact). Thus, workers employed sub-strategies like volunteering their time and efforts in

support groups, at church, with elderly neighbors, etc., and by acting as a resource for other displaced workers (e.g., by mentoring less experienced job seekers, regularly providing job leads in weekly meetings, etc.). In this section, I will show how such workers gained opportunities to help others through their participation in support groups, and how they used their skills, experiences, and privileges to generate signs of interim progress, and thereby regain a sense of their valued, formerly employed selves.

Through their activities in support groups, many of these workers came to use others in instrumental and socially-sanctioned ways, in effect “helping others in order to help themselves” cope with the damaging effects of unemployment by boosting a sense of personal efficacy. As a starting point, this strategy of helping others was facilitated by shared beliefs about the value and appropriateness of helping within support groups and by participants’ existing views of themselves as decent, caring people. Likewise, the idea of helping others was also prominent in the minds of most of these workers given the emphasis on emotional and psychological support and the need to help one another within the groups in which they took part (whether networking or support-based). For those members of faith-based support groups, the use of Scripture and the emphasis on sacrificing for others (illustrated, for example, in the frequent use of the Good Samaritan parable) further valorized help-giving. The same can be said for the many references to helping in opening and closing prayers in all of the faith-based groups and, for instance, in the weekly “ritual” at CareerSupport where all members were encouraged to share prayers for others in need and praise for those who had performed admirably (often by helping others). In short, as one former mid-level manager in telecommunications put it – “I feel like the more religiously

aware I become, the more I feel like I should be helping others.”

Engaging in this particular efficacy-boosting strategy enabled job seekers to feel good about themselves as socially-valued and virtuous people (e.g., as hard-workers, good and caring Christians, etc.) in the course of their often fruitless job searches. In addition, a strategy of helping others allowed such workers to take the focus off their unsuccessful attempts to find jobs by deriving a sense of accomplishment from their abilities to volunteer for worthwhile causes and/or provide jobs leads and networking contacts for unemployed friends or acquaintances. In this light, according to the former electrical engineer below, the best orientation to adopt in attending support groups was not to go seeking help for one’s self, but to concentrate on helping others. From his interview:

Well, it was [support group] a place to go where otherwise I’d just sit around in here and, you know, do what I have to do [at home], which is not always productive. You get exposed to people in different businesses. You get exposed to people who may have come from a place you’re trying to get into. And you see how people are dealing with their problems. But you also look for opportunities to – “What can I bring to them that may be a benefit?” And this is really the key thing, I think, in these groups. If you come to the group thinking, “If I come they will put job leads in my lap, and I don’t have to do the work,” you probably won’t get much benefit. You’d be lucky to get a job. If you come with the attitude of, “How can I help my neighbor? Can I give him a job lead?” Okay. Feels good when you do that.

As this man indicates, a strategy of helping others could be a helpful way of coping, particularly within the context of a highly competitive job market and few available opportunities for good professional and managerial jobs. By going to weekly support groups

with a professed concern for helping others find work, it was thus often easier to experience one's time and efforts there as worthwhile.

Beyond religious messages shared in support groups that stressed the value of helping others or the opportunities gained in such settings to help others in concrete ways, group leaders and other participants also celebrated members' helping behaviors in the weekly group meetings. As seen in the following excerpt from an orientation session of the weekly CareerSupport meeting, a facilitator places the group's aims for job seekers within a context of "helping" when he advises new members on the best way to approach their job searches. From my fieldnotes:

As he passed out the orientation information sheet and job-function group selection forms, Rick, the facilitator, started the session by announcing to both the handful of newcomers and equal number of "veterans" – "We're here to help each other, to provide you with some skills and information [pause], and networking is the way you're gonna find your next job." Mentioning other, formerly effective ways of finding work like answering classified ads or using job recruiters, he noted, "Two percent of people find their jobs that way." That's not the way you're gonna find your next job," he said flatly. "You're gonna find your next job by shaking someone's hand [by networking]. That's why we're here – to help you find those talents, those skills."

Or in the same vein of the various efficacy celebrations described in an earlier section, the following excerpted fieldnote from the "success stories" portion of a weekly Job Help meeting provides some indication of how displaced workers were regularly exposed to stories and messages that communicated the value of helping others (for all parties involved

in the helping relationship).

A long-time member spoke up, describing to the fifty or so other participants there a recent interview that looked to be a certain job offer. “And I think I’ve finally seen the light at the end of the tunnel,” he announced, adding slyly, “and it’s not a train.” Maxine, the facilitator, clapped vigorously and cheered, “Whoop, whoop, whoop!” as the crowd laughed loudly. “That’s fantastic. It just gives me goose bumps!” she exclaimed, as the rest of the audience applauded. Another white, fifty-something man then announced, “I just had a sit-down birthday party for an 83-year-old neighbor,” mentioning that both he and the neighbor had thoroughly enjoyed the experience. “That’s great!” Maxine shot back. “You see,” she said to the crowd as the clapping died down, “it’s not just about helping someone. When you help a person, it’s benefitting you!”

Aside from teaching group members the emotional and coping benefits of helping others, regular exchanges in the faith-based support groups such as the one above also underscored the appropriateness of help-seeking, arguably within a larger (masculinist) cultural context where such actions might be seen or avoided by many as a sign of weakness or bad form. Likewise, this strategy of helping others was also enabled by the presence of other job seekers in need of help, and the social comparisons workers often engaged in there. Whether done to combat feelings of isolation or to make sense of unemployment in a way that deflected self-blame for job loss (e.g., via lateral comparisons made with large numbers of similarly-situated others “in the same boat”), social comparisons with less fortunate others in these settings helped highlight the salience of helping as a meaningful activity. So, as seen in the following interview excerpt with a former programmer and member of various

support groups who explains the value of making comparisons with other displaced workers who have “survived,” the salience of help (both received and given) was a prominent feature of support group organization and discourse.

Yeah, it’s helpful because in most cases they’ve [veteran members] already been beat up and through the process several times. And that’s the fellowship, whatever. That’s the therapy aspect of the group. It’s just like my wife in the cancer support groups. The first thing they do with you is put you in a room with other survivors to hear their stories. Once you hear their story there is a communing and relief, or wellness, that comes about, because, for one, you’re hearing somebody that’s been through it and they made it. They’re doing okay. And . . . it’s helping that other person, because they feel like they help you by telling you and making you feel better. Been there, done that.

In both the general portion of the weekly meetings at CareerSupport and Job Help and in the smaller job-function groups or networking table interactions there, members were presented with information – experienced job seekers’ testimonies included – that likewise highlighted both the salience and value of helping others in need. By helping others, then, group members gained a legitimate and often available way of helping themselves to cope, whether by boosting positive affect (via the information about one’s own fortunate status realized in helping a variety of less-fortunate others) or by coming to experience small acts of helping as accomplishments and thus reminders of one’s efficacy (cf. Clark 1987:298 and Shott 1979:1327 on sympathy-giving and sympathy-giving and self-concept repair, respectively).

Just under half of those displaced workers interviewed also “helped others in order to

help themselves” by engaging in volunteer activities as ways of filling time with meaningful action and deriving a sense of efficacy from such efforts. Thus, some volunteered at their churches, in their children’s schools, at local homeless shelters, and even with local unemployment services offices. As a former director-level executive in manufacturing remarks in the following interview excerpt, volunteering could be beneficial in a number of ways.

Oh, it’s [volunteering] wonderful. You know, just getting out of the house and not being on the phone and not worrying about, for a couple of hours, not having a job. I mean it makes – it feels good to help somebody else out [pauses] and to get, just get your mind away. You know, “Here’s something I can do and have a positive impact.”

Not only did volunteering provide some relief from his job search activities and the constant worry of being without work, it bolstered feelings of self-worth (see Thoits and Hewitt 2001 on volunteer work and well-being). Equally important, perhaps, such efforts allowed him and similar others to derive a sense of accomplishment from their abilities to “have a positive impact” on someone else.

Some displaced workers also found opportunities to volunteer within support group settings, either as group leaders, steering committee members, or occasional helpers of various sorts. Such actions not only enabled these workers to generate some sense of accomplishment and self-worth from their helping efforts, but also gave them chances to feel appreciated and further invested in the groups, arguably replacing part of what had been lost

along with their former jobs. Some, for instance, helped organize special events, such as the annual networking gathering of current and former group members at CareerSupport. Others there volunteered for the responsibility of picking up and delivering food donated by a local eatery for the weekly morning meetings. Consider, for example, the experience of a former computer programmer in the interview excerpt below who volunteered his time at two different groups, as the leader of the small Job Hunters group and a “board member” of a networking group for hi-tech workers.

That would be the only way [of seeking help]. I think I'm getting my own support by going to them [groups] and helping them [group members]. And chairing the meeting [Job Hunters] for other people that're unemployed and running a, helping run a networking group of a bunch of unemployed [monthly hi-tech networking meeting] – and every now and then I get a “thank you.” And that's support . . . I mean, I think it's a “thank you,” because I helped somebody, and that's helped me get support.

As this man notes, the thanks he received from fellow support group members served as one of the main sources of support he received in his own dealings with unemployment. Such efforts and the positive reflected appraisals they evoked from others – even in the relatively oblique way described here – afforded this worker some sense of accomplishment from his volunteer duties and, most likely, the motivation to continue.

For some like this former marketing communications specialist and upper-level manager, volunteer activities also provided an additional sense of comfort beyond any direct perceptions of accomplishment as a helper (i.e., via downward comparisons with the less

fortunate others she was helping). From an interview exchange:

Interviewee: I think helping others has really helped. And I know that my daughter's at a point where she does volunteer work, because to get into college now you have to do volunteer work. And so she and I'll go do something, like we'll go work at the Salvation Army downtown and serve meals. And that really gives you a feeling of, "Gee, these people are so much worse off than I am." It kind of puts things in perspective, when you're helping others in some way.

RG-P: So is that something you were doing before unemployment, as well?

Interviewee: It was, but I look at it differently now. I think it's even more gratifying than it was, because I know that these people are worse off than I am. So it makes me feel better that this is a temporary situation, that I'll overcome it.

Here social comparisons with worse-situated others provided this worker with some ability to re-interpret her situation as more positive than before. And not only did she use her available time to benefit less fortunate others at the Salvation Army (potentially boosting a valued moral sense of self), but she engaged in an additionally meaningful activity with her teenage daughter (i.e., "time spent together") and demonstrated both the value and efficacy of helping others – all potential grounds for realizing a sense of accomplishment and feeling better about her self and situation.

Another prominent way in which many workers boosted feelings of self-efficacy was by "acting as a resource" for other displaced workers. Whether sharing expertise in the

realm of job searching, acting as mentors to newer, less experienced unemployed professionals, or providing network contacts and job leads to other job seekers, many workers generated feelings of accomplishment by helping others with their job searches. Such workers were thus able to experience themselves as capable, valued, and efficacious people in numerous ways by serving as resources for other job seekers in need. As with the volunteer efforts mentioned earlier, these displaced workers were able to shift attention from their own inability to find work to those things they were accomplishing in the realm of “helping others.” For example, a former technical writer found that support group participation helped her stay motivated and feel accomplished because it allowed her to help others find work. From her interview:

As soon as I got there [CareerSupport] I felt like I had done so much research about, just different industries. But I felt I was such a major resource, so I was just like [with enthusiasm], “Okay?! What do you guys need help in?!” [chuckles] . . . “If any of you guys need help, I just, I wanna be a resource.” . . . And I find myself trying to lift them up at the [job function groups], and see, “Well, who have I come across in my job search that might help you?”

Or similarly, as a former engineer and corporate officer describes below, some workers could take part in faith-based support groups specifically for the opportunities provided there to help other job seekers. From his interview:

Yeah. Like when I go to the – I’m thinking of the church-based group, which is really focused on the emotional support. Just me, I find what makes me feel good.

But it makes me feel good because there are people that go there that need lots of help. You know, they're junior level, or they don't know to do their resume, or they're – English is their second language. You know, they've really got some obstacles, like maybe they're in IT, and they've never had to hunt for a job before. And so in helping them it helps me. It's, "Oh, wow. I can help," you know? It's more that type of support . . . I feel like I'm giving, and in giving it's, it's – I always walk away feeling, "That was worthwhile. It was good. I'm glad I spent my evening there."

For many of those displaced for long periods and/or unemployed numerous times, helping took on increasing importance as an activity which they were often well-equipped and increasingly willing to do in the context of support group participation. As the following marketing and sales professional and member of a various support groups describes in an interview, her main reason for attending such groups came to be one of providing help to others.

But I think I found that they [group leaders] talk about the fact that you get more satisfaction out of giving than receiving. In many of the little groups, you know, especially like at Job Help, like when we sit around and we're in the little networking table groups and so on and so forth, generally speaking, I have to tell you I get more satisfaction out of, "Can I make any suggestions to this person or to that person, the other person, in terms of somebody that might be able to help them?" than I feel that I've gotten from anybody who's been able to give me anything back.

Or, likewise, as a former engineer in telecommunications out of work for nine months

discusses his heavy involvement in a particular support group in the following interview excerpt:

Yeah. It's like at CareerSupport. I haven't been in a [job function] group probably in six or eight weeks, because I kinda had gotten caught up in some administrative duties and being in a couple of network seminars. And then I started doing orientation [a job function group], and that's taken up three or four sessions. And then I got on the steering [committee] for a while, and so it's like, you know [chuckles], I'm doing everything else except networking. But that's okay, because I, I really don't go there to expect any good leads. If anybody gives me any that's great, but historically I have not gotten things [leads] that I wasn't already aware of. So, my mission in life is to see if I can help somebody else. If I can give him leads, or if I give him my network spreadsheets, or, you know, you get 'em hooked up to somebody or some resource.

In each of these cases the displaced workers describe turning away from “networking” as a means for finding a job directly for themselves, with increased emphasis on a strategy of helping others to find work. In doing so these workers, like many others in their situation, came to realize more opportunities for achieving a sense of accomplishment from their abilities to help others via personal stores of social connections and/or knowledge of particular industries.

For one former director-level executive unemployed three different times, support group participation even provided opportunities for helping others in a way that fit neatly with his new turn as a self-employed job recruiter. From his interview:

I like the small group [Job Hunters], because it becomes, like, a knitting circle . . . And I effectively started coming to these groups because I had created a business for myself of recruiting to help people find jobs. Because mentally it helped me, because I could go and plead their case better than I can plead my own, to possible employers. And I could use that as a crutch to talk to employers and try to get, like, Todd Rubin, who's physically handicapped, a job. You know, I could go out and try to help somebody.

Not only did this worker find opportunities in this support group to help others in order to feel accomplished and efficacious, but he was able to do so in a relatively "safe" way. By focusing on the person he was working to help he did not have to do the admittedly harder, self-diminishing work of pleading his own case as a worker in need of a job. In addition, by helping someone else find work, displaced workers in this situation did not run the risk of being personally rejected if the person in question did not find work. And under conditions where it may have been increasingly difficult to stay motivated and perform the work necessary to find one's self a job, helping someone else locate work could be an arguably easier and more immediately fulfilling task.

In a similar sense of engaging in a safe form of help-seeking, some workers adopted a strategy of helping others not merely for the immediate feelings of accomplishment and positive self-regard such actions provided, but for what they believed such helping behaviors would provide them in terms of reciprocated help down the line. In other words, by helping others in their job searches some workers could at least feel confident that these colleagues would respond in kind when the situation arose, thus providing themselves with a sense of

accomplishment (by accruing social capital) and boosting an overall sense of hope.

According to a former marketing and sales professional unemployed numerous times (from her interview):

And actually that, the power – you mentioned that, too – people love to give and help. You realize that when people are helping you, you realize, “Hey. If I can do that back” . . . And so, by sharing – by giving – you also hear about other opportunities, and maybe you’ll be over your buddy that gave you that opportunity . . . Like this guy the last time [unemployment stint], I went to network with him. I called the network meeting . . . And I ended up helping him. I sent him all kinds of leads, and he felt bad, ‘cause he didn’t send me anything. And I know he would give me a job if he ever got in a position. I bet he would. I know he’d do what he could to help me.

In this case, ironically enough, a coping strategy of helping others was also potentially facilitated by a poor job market. Under such conditions displaced professional and managerial workers could potentially feel less competition from other job seekers, and thus be more likely to help them within the context of a overall poor job market (where they might not be seen as potential competitors for scarce jobs based on the belief that employers were in the position to pick job candidates with very specific precise qualifications). In short, by helping others in this way, workers could feel virtuous while accruing social capital that would hopefully pay off later.

In all of the ways just mentioned – volunteering within and outside of support groups, acting as a resource by mentoring other job seekers, sharing job leads, etc. – the majority of

displaced workers managed to help others. Such a strategy was appealing because of its value for self-concept repair. And in doing so, displaced workers were thus able to experience their help-giving as evidence that, despite being unemployed themselves, they were nonetheless capable and worthy people, better off than some others. In the next chapter I will consider the larger sociological lessons that can be derived from the foregoing analysis of self-concept repair.

Chapter Three

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In this thesis I have identified four main efficacy-boosting strategies that displaced managerial-professional workers used to cope with the self-concept threat brought on by job loss – redefining the meaning of unemployment, realizing accomplishment, restructuring time and activities, and helping others. These, however, were far from individual efforts, as displaced workers were enabled to cope in such ways largely through their participation in support groups as sites of collective action aimed at minimizing the deleterious effects of job loss. Both within and outside such settings, these actors used the efficacy-bolstering strategies to good effect, boosting feelings of hope for re-employment, and reminding themselves and significant others of their value as professional workers and moral people.

What, then, is the relevance of the present study for current theory and research? Likewise, what, if any, are the implications for future research? Below I will discuss three sets of implications concerning: (1) the need to revise our understandings of the relationship between self-conceptions, stressful life events, and psychological distress to take into account the process of collaborative self-concept repair; (2) our current understanding of how the self-concept operates as a source of motivation; and (3) the relevance of self-concept repair strategies for the reproduction of class advantage and for the political mobilization of professional/managerial workers in response to recession and mass unemployment.

Stressful Life Events and Collaborative Self-Concept Repair

In his recent review of contemporary theory and research on the self, sociologist Peter Callero (2003:115) issued a call for new “work that explores the sociological context of self-construction” and “the social resources employed in the construction process.” The research and analysis for this thesis has been an attempt to do just that, specifically by looking at one particular class of displaced workers within a situation of self-concept threat. To the extent that I have successfully identified the wide range of resources available to this class of relatively privileged workers and documented how they put such resources to use in boosting feelings of efficacy and repairing damaged self-conceptions, I have hopefully gone some distance toward answering Callero’s call.

The present study also highlights the need to revise our understandings of the relationship between self-conceptions, stressful life events, and psychological stress to take into account the process of collaborative self-concept repair. While previous research into these matters has typically delineated the psychological damage and threat to existing identities and self-conceptions resulting from job loss, I have gone beyond that in this thesis to detail workers’ collective attempts to repair such damage. Although alluded to elsewhere in research on the social nature of coping (e.g., Antonovsky 1981; Kaufman 1982; Nurius 1991; Rosenberg 1991; Thoits 1986, 1995), the current study explicitly demonstrates the collaborative process by which one specific group coped with the deleterious effects of job loss by way of boosting feelings of self-efficacy. As my analysis has shown, these displaced white-collar workers gained valuable coping resources through their participation in support groups, resources such as concrete job-seeking skills and coping strategies, and interactional

partners who could be recruited in various ways by job seekers' to help in shoring up their damaged self-conceptions.

This process of collaborative self-concept repair specifically involved a cognitive reorientation that unemployed workers adopted in these groups to deal with perceived threats to their livelihoods, identities as valuable workers and citizens, and views of self as efficacious (cf. Wolkomir 2001 on negotiating a gay-Christian identity). Coping in this sense entailed learning to think differently about unemployment by way of a "redefinition of the situation" (Pearlin and Schooler 1978) or, more specifically, through "recreating the meaning of action" (Gecas and Schwalbe 1983).

The stance on coping that I am arguing for here reflects a basic symbolic interactionist characterization of social life as constituted by individuals' collective efforts (i.e., joint actions) to define a given situation and fit together lines of conduct (Blumer 1969) in the course of adapting to given social circumstances. Likewise, this way of conceptualizing coping underscores both social cooperation (cf. Thoits' 1986 on social support as "coping assistance") and the power of shared, socially-negotiated understandings to inform coping efforts. Recreating the meaning of action, within the context of this study, specifically involved displaced workers engaging in new contexts of action (e.g., support groups, job searches, etc.) and learning to value such contexts as meaningful sites for the realization of efficacious action. Beyond just looking for acceptable kinds of work within such settings, these workers were acting collectively to teach and learn attribution schemes, ways of attributing meaning to self, actions, and events in valued ways that are cultural and socially learned (Gecas and Schwalbe 1983).

From a more holistic social-psychological perspective, an examination of coping in this socially organized sense requires paying attention to actors' cognitions, emotions, and actions – i.e., what it is that they think, feel, and do – in their various adaptations to an undesirable situation (e.g., prolonged unemployment). Here one of Blumer's (1969) central tenets of symbolic interactionist theory is particularly instructive: the assertion that individuals act toward things (e.g., other human beings, life events like unemployment, etc.) based on the meaning that such things have for them. Such meanings, though, are not automatic, but instead are socially constructed or negotiated through interaction with others. Coping in the context of this study was thus largely a collaborative effort or "group process" (see Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996), not only by virtue of the pooled resources and shared strategies of action found in these support groups, but also by the mere presence of similar unemployed others to help normalize a stressful situation (e.g., via lateral social comparisons), provide emotional support, and otherwise serve as available social objects that one could "manipulate" in a variety of ways to cope with the threats to self (e.g., by providing job leads, serving as others in need of help, etc.). Social others in these groups settings, then, served as valuable instrumental and symbolic resources that were employed in the service of coping.

Self-Concept as a Source of Motivation

The current study also has implications for our present understandings of how the self-concept operates as a source of motivation, with particular regard to the centrality of efficacy-boosting efforts as a form of coping for a class of social actors whose self-concepts

are strongly rooted in perceptions of self as agentic. Theory and research across both sociological and psychological branches of social psychology have long stressed the self-concept as an important source of motivation for human action (e.g., Gecas 1982, 1991; Morse and Gergen 1970; Rosenberg 1981; Swann 1983, 1997; Swann, Stein-Seroussi, and Geisler 1992; Turner 1987), whether for reasons of maintaining self-consistency, generating positive self-evaluations, or experiencing one's self as agentic. Thus, "By virtue of having a self-concept," as Gecas (1991:174) points out, "the individual is motivated to maintain and enhance it, to conceive of it as efficacious and consequential, and to experience it as meaningful and real." Likewise, it is by engaging in a range of defensive activities (e.g., biased perceptions, strategic self-presentations, redefinitions of situations, etc.), that individuals are able to achieve a preferable, consistent view of self (Gecas 1991:175).

The present study adds to this existing literature, not only by providing an empirical example of how a group of actors worked in specific, efficacy-enhancing ways to shore up damaged self-conceptions, but by also demonstrating such coping as largely a cooperative effort. Thus, the data and analysis I have presented show how displaced workers worked to not only reestablish a sense of coherence and authenticity in lives disrupted by job loss, but also shore up damaged self-conceptions by drawing on and actively seeking sources of information about the self (e.g., reflected appraisals, social comparisons, perceptions of self as agentic) that were available in support groups. More specifically, my analysis reveals how displaced workers experiencing the loss of a valued identity and diminished opportunities for feeling efficacious were both motivated and enabled to repair the damage – i.e., cope with unemployment – by boosting feelings of efficacy (see, also, Shott 1979).

Self-Concept Repair and Political Mobilization

The present study of self-concept repair also has implications for the reproduction of class advantage and the political mobilization for professional and managerial workers in response to recession and large-scale unemployment. As my analysis has shown, in their immediate efforts to stabilize themselves and their families and alleviate the psychological harm arising from threatened self-conceptions, these displaced workers ended up reproducing their class position and class advantage. Put simply, it is difficult to develop a critical political consciousness – much less engage in political action to change existing social arrangements – when one is suffering from the debilitating effects of a stressful life event. Under such conditions of threat, the need for self-concept repair can become paramount. In such a light, the current study draws out an important and largely unseen connection between individual coping efforts and the perpetuation of large-scale structural arrangements.

In further considering the potential for the present study to inform the likelihood of political mobilization of workers negatively affected by mass unemployment and economic recession, I return to a general question I posed at the start of my research project: Given their experience of large-scale unemployment for the first time, what would it take for a class of relatively privileged workers like professionals and managers to become mobilized and call for political and social structural change? The answer – or at least the one I gained by spending a good deal of time with displaced managerial-professional workers across a variety of support group settings – is, apparently, “Quite a lot.”

In interviews, for instance, a handful of displaced workers did express disillusionment with an economic system that no longer provided the stable and good-paying professional jobs which they had come to expect. A couple even went as far as to question the inherent logic of an economy in which there were too few jobs available for qualified and capable workers. Consider the following example where a former sales director and support group leader describes the loss of trust in the corporate work world experienced by himself and other displaced managerial-professional workers.

And so there's this discontinuity that resonates with job seekers in saying, "Well, what does it take to get a job? If it's not a meritocracy, if it's not the true qualifications, then is it all political? Do I have to know somebody? And how did this person get this job? And why is he or she still in this job, when I could do it better?" So, it, you know, for many people who have maybe been in a corporation for [the] same job for ten or fifteen years, and then they get whacked, I mean, it's devastating, because [pause] the whole, the whole social contract has now dissolved.

Similarly, in the following interview excerpt a former project leader in medical research questions the morality of an economic system that does not provide enough opportunities for individuals willing to work.

But I think there is something seriously wrong when you have so many people who are ready, willing, and able and wanna work, and they can't work. I can't think of anything more demoralizing. It really is not the way things should be. People

should always have the opportunity to work, just like they should have the opportunity to get an education. And I don't care how much they have or what lines they come from, or whatever, people need to be given that. And if you're not, there is something seriously wrong with the big picture.

With only a couple of rare and fleeting exceptions, though, participants and group leaders in the support groups shied away from any structural analyses of workers' economic troubles, much less possible political solutions to such, as these would have conflicted with the groups' unstated and stated goals of helping members to maintain themselves as middle-class professional workers and ultimately become re-employed (see, also, Schlozman and Verba 1979). Thus, the vast majority of displaced workers in this context were more than willing to accept "the rules of the game" provided by capitalist economics and conventional cultural ideology, holding onto the hope that a good job would soon come available and using the numerous resources at their disposal to cope with the damaging aspects of unemployment. They did so, whether by buffering themselves with comfortable financial cushions, relying on typically middle and upper-middle-class coping tools such as prescription anti-depressants and psychological counseling, or bolstering feelings of self-efficacy in various ways until a good, professional job became available.¹⁷

But by coping in the ways mentioned above, these workers, ironically enough, also shared something in common with Snow and Anderson's (1987) homeless street people, Liebow's (1967) black street corner men, and Burawoy's (1979) shop floor workers, groups with arguably fewer resources at their disposal – the ability to adapt "effectively" to a situation of subordination within the larger context of late capitalist social relations. In

doing so, though, they also reproduced their class position and existing social arrangements (i.e., social structure) in the process (see Gecas and Schwalbe 1983:85-86). And so, as the present study shows, even in the context of large-scale and potentially conscious-raising unemployment, where increasing numbers of formerly privileged workers are drawn into the orbit of “classic” capitalist relations of production, there are still unseen ways in which potential worker mobilization can be truncated and, thus, existing social relations continued.

NOTES

1. All names of individual attendees and the support groups in this thesis are pseudonyms.
2. For all those interviewed in this study the median ages were 46 years for women and 50 years for men.
3. Typically referred to as “elevator speeches” or “30-second speeches,” displaced workers regularly practiced these mini-self-presentational performances in support groups. In doing so they recounted their past educational and work experiences, professional skills, and future employment goals for potential employers (i.e., within the time allowed during a hypothetical elevator ride with a captive audience).
4. All emphases in quotations are from the original, unless otherwise noted.
5. It is in a related sense that Marx also argued for the centrality of praxis in determining the human condition. For Marx, the peculiar ability of human beings to labor and “transform nature” was a defining feature of the human species ([1932] 1994). In a Marxist social psychology, then, we come to know ourselves and are defined by both our capacities and actual abilities to act (i.e., to have an effect on our environments).
6. The existence of co-participants as collaborators in collective definitions of unemployment as an opportunity in these support groups was a coping resource, but one that is far from given. Such efforts typically apply to only those definitions of unemployment that are agreed upon by the groups as legitimate. For example, while these groups periodically acknowledged participants’ felt need to be fearful and depressed, there was strong pressure on members not to complain about negative feelings, as such emotions or voiced complaints signified “whining” or a “victim mentality” and went against the groups’ stated purposes and efforts to keep members motivated and capable of being re-employed. With the exception of the more emotional support-oriented Job Hunters group, the other three groups typically squelched or redirected public displays of anger or fear as unproductive or implicitly bad in form.
7. In a related sense many of the support groups also provided an almost corporate, businesslike atmosphere in which job seekers could cooperatively engage in their job searches (e.g., gaining specific job seeking skills, accruing valuable social capital, etc.), settings that offered a potentially anxiety-reducing sense of familiarity and simultaneously allowed displaced workers to perceive their efforts as serious, work-like business (in contrast to hosting themselves the often cited and disparaged “pity party”).
8. Based on personal communications from group leaders at CareerSupport and Job Hunters, these portions of their weekly meetings were specifically designed to highlight those things members were still accomplishing and thus keep them motivated.

9. As with the previous efficacy-boosting strategy of redefining the meaning of unemployment, learning to take stock of what one is still accomplishing involves a “recreation of the meaning of action” (Gecas and Schwalbe 1983). And as is the case with, say, displaced workers coming to define unemployment as an opportunity, taking stock of one’s accomplishments relies to a large degree on workers’ perceptions of their actions as efficacious, a matter enabled through the joint participation and collective efforts of those in support group settings.

10. Ironically, the vast majority of those I interviewed or came across in support groups failed to see (or at least acknowledge) the potential drawback of networking for job leads in these groups with a pool of other unemployed workers. Only a few individuals and group leaders pointed out the apparent logic of going outside of support groups to network with employed others (e.g., at professional association meetings, trade shows, civic organizations, etc.). In fact, if there was any theory among these displaced workers about how good jobs were to be found, it was through the act of networking, however defined.

Offering support for this view, in her presentation given at CareerSupport, a former group leader there cited data gathered from the group’s “alumni” (members who had since found jobs and left) over the course of the past year (2003-2004). The majority (55%) reported to have found their jobs through networking contacts, followed by, in descending order of frequency, Internet job board postings (17%), company websites (12%), newspaper ads (9%), recruiters (6%), and resume mass mailings (1%). I was informed by a long-time group leader with the other large support group in the area, Job Help, that they had parallel data, but I was unable to locate it.

11. Along with reminders of personal efficacy and worth, self-talk (from the interview data) appeared to be used by these displaced workers in other instrumental ways, as well. For the most part these data can be grouped into five categories around issues of (reported in order of increasing frequency): (1) temporariness of situation; (2) motivational talk (e.g., “You’ve gotta stay positive and never give up”); (3) downward comparisons (e.g., “You don’t have it as bad as some others”); (4) reminders of self-competence and self-worth; and (5) assurances that their unemployment was meaningful.

12. Social comparisons are an integral part of this strategy, particularly in this case with the downward comparisons in which these workers often engage to realize themselves as better off than worse-situated others. By identifying and comparing oneself with other unemployed people in particular (e.g., job seekers going through divorce, prominent guest speakers who have life-threatening diseases, etc.), comparisons with less privileged others enabled many displaced workers to better realize a sense of accomplishment (and successful coping, specifically) from their situations and actions therein.

13. The majority of workers interviewed engaged in some form of restructuring time and activities (women=8; men=9), often using multiple sub-strategies.

14. Michael Schwalbe, personal communication.

15. It is arguable that the majority of those interviewed used this strategy of staying busy, albeit unwittingly. While only four workers (women=2; men=2) explicitly articulated ways in which they consciously acted to keep themselves busy, many others, as revealed in their overall descriptions of their daily and weekly activities as job seekers, can be said to have used or benefitted from such a coping strategy (see Schwalbe 1987 on distinctions between practical [tacit] and discursive forms of self-knowledge).

16. Still, limitations to such a strategy of staying busy sometimes became apparent, particularly as those who were unemployed multiple times or for long durations often came to realize that different measures were required in order to continue feeling accomplished while looking for work. Displaced workers dealing with prolonged unemployment often reported giving up on returning to the corporate world (for lack of trust or the lost security formerly provided in such traditional modes of employment). Instead of automatically returning to a corporate job, these workers began to seriously questioning their identities as workers and reconsider alternative lines of work (e.g., as entrepreneurs, school teachers, etc.).

The interview data reveal just such a pattern for workers displaced for extended periods and/or numerous times. Relative to other unemployed workers it was this group that articulated much greater tensions over their work-based identities. In short, their experiences indicated a more fundamental sort of self-concept damage brought on by unemployment – the felt need to reinvent themselves as different kinds of workers (e.g., contract workers, private consultants, entrepreneurs, high school teachers, etc.). For many this sort of “radical” change was concomitant with a reported distrust of the world of corporate work and a shift in focus from “having a corporate career” to “just making a living.”

17. The question remains, however, as to how successful such coping efforts may be when financial resources run out or more fundamental sorts of self-questioning arise after protracted displacements (e.g., a year or two). See endnote number 16 above.

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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

1. How long have you been unemployed (or underemployed)? What happened? Was it a surprise? What were your first thoughts?
2. Who (if anyone) were the first people you talked to after losing your job? What did they say? How did they react? How were you feeling at that point?
3. (If partner/spouse is not mentioned above): When did you tell your spouse/partner? How did they react?
4. (If subject has children): Did you tell your children? What did they say? How did they react?
5. Who else did you talk to about losing your job? What did they say?
6. What is the hardest thing about being in your current situation? Who, if anyone, have you relied on for support during this time? What have they done for you?
7. Who would you say has been the most supportive? Who, if anyone, has been the least supportive? How did you feel about the support that either/both gave you?
8. Does your partner or spouse (if applicable) work, and if so, how well does their job support your family?
9. How important to you was your job or line of work? Did you often think about your work after hours? Did you do any of your work after hours or at home? Was it always this way? Had you considered doing some other kind of work before losing your job?
10. Did you feel like you needed to start looking for a new job right away?
11. How did you happen to join this support/networking group? How long have you been attending this group? Are you a member of more than one group? If so, what are the others?
12. What was your first impression of the group? Was it what you expected it to be? What did you like best about it? Least? Is there anything you would change about it if you could?
13. Have these (group) meetings helped you in your job search? If so, how? Have you (or anyone you know of) ever gotten a job interview directly from someone at these weekly/monthly meetings? Have the contacts you've made in these groups been helpful? If

so, how?

14. Please tell me about your job search(es); what do they include? (e.g., cold-calling HR offices, online applications, door-to-door visits, blanketing potential employers with resumes, etc.)

15. In most of the groups I've visited I've noticed that people are asked to do/perform a brief self-presentation (i.e., "elevator speech," "30-second speech," etc.) geared toward presenting themselves to potential employers or job contacts. Do you have such an elevator speech? If so, how does it go? (How do you feel about performing these self-presentations (i.e., are they helpful, a waste of time, etc.?) [For participants who attend more than one group] How do the different groups (i.e., networking, support, etc.) you attend compare with one another? Are they different? If so, how? [For groups with invited speakers] What is your assessment of the group's invited speaker(s) and her/his "story?"

16. What other sorts of strategies have you used to find work (including joining these support/networking groups)? Are you looking for work strictly in your former field, or have you considered other areas?

17. One of my interests is in how people cope with the different kinds of emotions associated with unemployment. Do you remember ever laughing or joking about your job loss? When? What happened? Has the job search process been discouraging? If so, how?

18. Was there a time someone said something to you about being unemployed that hurt your feelings or made you angry? What happened?

19. What kinds of things have you had to tell yourself to get through all this?

20. What do you think of as your occupation? What is your age? Your educational background? Marital status? Racial/ethnic identity? Do you have children?

21. Is there anything else that we haven't talked about that is important for understanding your experience of unemployment?