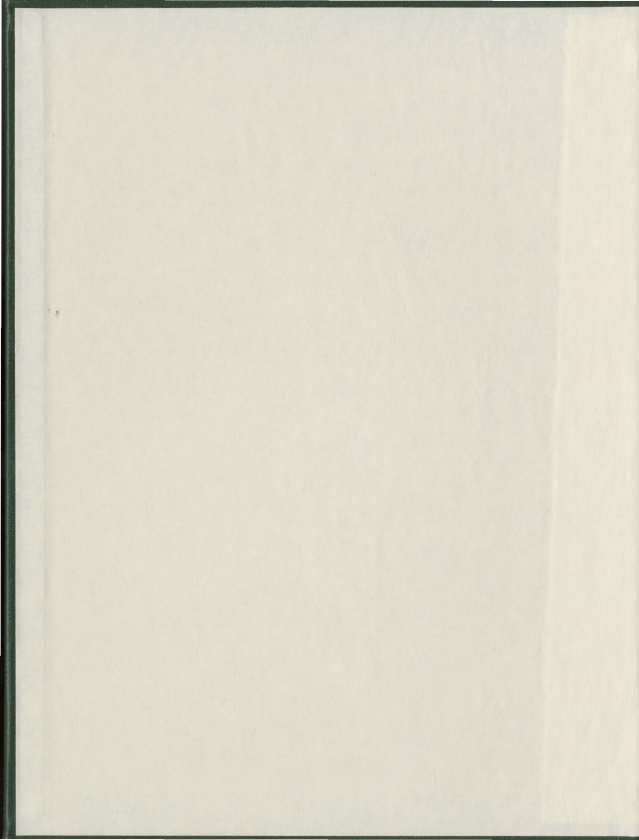# CAREER REGRET:
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF RETIREES' EXPERIENCES

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Career Regret: A Phenomenological Study of Retirees' Experiences

by

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**CAREER REGRET: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF
RETIREES' EXPERIENCES**

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Abstract

The study examines the experiences of individuals who, if given their time back, would have

chosen a different career path. Despite the fact that career has been consistently documented as a

major life regret for many it is rarely mentioned, or only referred to tangentially, in career

development literature. Five individual interviews, four female, one male, with people retired or

transitioning to retirement are presented to explore the experience of regret as it persists

throughout the adult lives of participants. Although the narratives shared by participants are

unique and deeply personal, common themes emerged through qualitative analysis. Four themes

relate to perceptions of the past: Early Influences, Why I Regret My Choice, The Passage of

Time, and Balancing Work and Family. One theme relates to the present: If I Could Do It Over

Again, and one to the future: What the Future will Be. Findings from the current study add to

the limited research on the topic of career regret and implications for theory and practice are

examined.

through. If anyone should wish to test the mettle of a relationship I suggest that a thesis be undertaken; if you both emerge at the end it must be love.

Finally this thesis is dedicated to my children, Owen and Nora, who entered my life during the process of writing this thesis and inspired me to finish it. They are my happiest distraction. I can only hope that they will be as fortunate in their lives as I have been in mine, and they will have the opportunities to pursue the education and career they desire, I hope without regrets.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1

Introduction and Background

If you work full time for thirty years the number of hours spent on the job would be approximately 60,000. Stated another way, every word and punctuation mark in this text represents two hours spent at a job you dislike (The first sentence represents approximately one week). The first two lines of this thesis borrow a concept I first read about in *Koba the Dread* by Martin Amis, who in turn borrowed the concept from Robert Conquest (both are cited in the references). One of the participants in the present study likened her job to a prison sentence in which she would count down the hours, days and weeks until retirement. The idea that the actual letters that comprise the text of this thesis about the experience of career regret could also be used to quantify the time people spend on a career they regret undertaking seemed fitting.

What if you never figured out what you want to do with your life? What if you spent your whole life searching and never found the work you wanted? What if you knew what you wanted to do but circumstances prevented you from realizing your dream? What would the experience of any of the aforementioned be like?

This study attempts to examine the experiences of older people who have regrets about their career, specifically as they transition to retirement. As the demographics of this country shift toward an older population close to or already at retirement (Statistics Canada, 2007) and studies continue to document dissatisfaction in the workplace (Rosenburg & Gladstone, 2005; Statistics Canada, 2006), how well do we understand the impact of regrettable choices on this population? If a portion of the latter years are indeed spent in quiet contemplation of one's past, how does one cope with career regret?

1

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the phenomena of career regret as it is experienced by those transitioning to retirement or currently retired. This study is an introduction to the topic of career regret because to date it has remained a largely unexamined phenomenon. Despite the fact that regret is a popular research area with numerous quantitative studies consistently indicating career, or some derivative thereof—work, job, occupation, vocation—among the highest ranked of major life regrets. In examining regrets among older individuals, Wrosch, Bauer and Scheier (2005) found that almost 90% of older adults have regrets with the potential to present psychological impediments to successful aging. Yet, there are very few qualitative studies that further our understanding of what it actually means to have regrets pertaining to one's career. While little attention has been paid to the study of career regret, the limited understanding of the experience has not gone unnoticed. "In the spirit of enhancing research through multiple methods, we recommend that qualitative studies be completed. Such qualitative studies may provide a rich understanding of career regrets across the lifespan and be the basis for further theory development" (Sullivan, Ferret & Mainiero, 2007, p. 798). The current study attempts to increase interest in career regret and provide insight into the topic. By establishing a research basis for career regret, the author hopes that theory pertaining to this phenomenon can be developed to better inform counselling practice for young and old clients alike.

A phenomenological method, as employed in the present study, provides first-person accounts of the experience and the influence of career regret on the individual and on facets of his or her life. In so doing, it not only validates the experience but provides a

forum for discussion and closer examination of career regret. Within regret research the most often cited regrets are, in decreasing relevance: educational, occupational and family-related. From a career development perspective, most of the categories defined by researchers on regret, and certainly the three listed above, fall under the broad definition of career. Hence, the role played as student, worker, spouse, parent, etc. are all significant in the construction of an individual's life-design (Super, Savickas & Super, 1996; Savickas, Nota, Rossier, Dauwalder, Duarte, Guichard, Soresi, Van Esbeoeck, & Van Vianen, 2009). Within career development, there has been the tendency to focus less attention on the negative aspects of people's lives; however, Vardi and Kim (2007) responded to this tendency by stating "the world of mediocrity, sameness, scarcity, and constraint is a reality for many, and it should be adequately represented in career research. Identifying the 'darker' side of careers logically covers a much larger segment of working individuals and their real life experiences" (p. 508).

Context of the Inquiry: Past, Present and Future

In order to examine regret in the life of an individual, it is necessary to explore the past, relate that to the present, and look at potential influences on the future. This study will use the themes of past, present and future to structure a portion of this chapter and the concluding chapter. In Chapter One, aspects of career issues at the macro level will be examined while Chapter Five will discuss career regret at the micro, or individual, level. By examining career-related trends of the past, present and future as they apply to the baby boom generation—the generation in which all participants in this study are members—a broader scope is provided. This gives a brief overview of the larger context

that the individual stories contained herein have both been influenced by and helped create.

The Past

      The baby boom generation is a cohort that has both witnessed and contributed to some of the most drastic changes in workplace history. Born between 1945 and 1964, the children born in this era, approximately 9.1 million or one third of the Canadian population in number (Statistics Canada, 2001), required rapid infrastructure changes to support and educate them. "When Baby Boomers reach any stage of life, the issues that concern them—whether financial, interpersonal, or even hormonal—become the dominant social, political, and marketplace themes of the time. Boomers do not just populate existing life stages or consumer trends—they transform them." (Dychtwald, 2005, p.17). They included the first generation of highly educated women who contributed to the transformation of the workforce. This resulted in the predominance of dual-income families and interest in issues relating to women in non-traditional occupations. Many of the policies and programs currently offered in organizations today saw their rise based on the efforts and demands of this generation. Policies for affirmative action (Harris, 2009) and sexual harassment (Brownmiller, 1999), in addition to programs for life-long learning and work/life balance, are but a few of the organizational developments attributable to the baby boomers. Economic trends such as downsizing, reductions in pension offerings, national and global recessions had an impact on this group and as Collin (2003) has pointed out, the disparity in income is greater in this generation than in those of the past. This will likely result in different types of retirement

for baby boomers with some choosing full withdrawal from the workforce and many others opting to remain employed.

However, financial realities may not be the only determining factor for the baby boom generation when they consider retirement. Researchers (Hess & Jepsen, 2009; Smith & Clurman, 2007; Novelli, 2006; Sullivan, Forret, Carraher & Mainiero, 2009) have studied the values of this generation. Having grown up in a time of relative affluence and the shift away from mere survival and necessity which typified the lives of their parents' war era experiences, this group has had the time to focus on itself. Specifically, mattering and self-fulfillment are seen as primary values for members of a generation with a strong work ethic inherited from their parents. These values will likely contribute to the interpretation of career regret and will likely play a role in this generation's plans for retirement.

The Present

In 2011, the first of the baby boomers will turn sixty-five years old, the age that has traditionally been associated with retirement. In truth, baby boomers have over the past ten years already begun to retire or redefine retirement as it suits their lifestyle. Many people transition out of work, while some re-enter periodically. Specifically, the trend towards consulting, freelancing and contract work has enabled older workers to maintain a foothold in the labour force while transitioning to retirement. For others, pursuits involve embarking on a 'second career', continuing their education or immersing themselves in the community through volunteering (Smith & Clurman, 2007). For many, new and demanding roles as caregivers to grandchildren and/or aging parents emerge. In 2007, 2.7 million Canadians 45 years or older (about 20%) were providing unpaid care to

someone over the age of 65 with health problems. In just five years, between 2002 and 2007, this number increased by 670,000 (Canadian Institute on Health Research, 2010). The new challenges and responsibilities undertaken by this generation leave little time for leisure. This is one of the reasons why a firm definition of retirement has been so elusive. The argument has been made that when attempting to study the retired population, as is the case with the present study, those in the planning stages should be included.

Definitions of retirement range from complete to partial withdrawal from the workforce. Bowlby (2007) contends that determining exact figures relating to retirement is difficult because of the lack of a clear definition of the term and the tendency of statistical organizations to focus their efforts on human activity rather than inactivity, as in the case of retirement. Hence, given the ambiguity around definitions of retirement, arriving at an accurate representation of retired persons is challenging.

A brief examination of the Canadian workforce and rates of job satisfaction is useful in that it puts in perspective a portion of the population from which the participants in this study are drawn. Indeed, only a portion is available because the statistical information refers to labour force participation and does not include homemakers or the unemployed—individuals who may also have career regrets. As of October 2005, there were 17,423,000 Canadians in the workforce (Statistics Canada, 2005), with over 6 million between the ages of 45 to 59 (in 2001) set to retire in the next decade (Statistics Canada, 2003). However, it would seem that not all of those eligible to retire are deciding to do so. Canada also has an aging workforce, 15.3% of the labour force is over the age of 55, up from 11.7% just five years earlier. According to the census, just over 2 million individuals aged 55 to 64 were employed in 2006, 43.0% more than in 2001. At the same

time, the overall labour force participation rate for this group increased from 54.0% to 59.7%.

For those individuals currently in the workforce, their jobs may not necessarily be a source of happiness or fulfillment. Conservative estimates indicate that 1 in 12 Canadians (approximately 1.3 million) are dissatisfied with their jobs (Statistics Canada, 2006). A survey of over ten thousand Canadians found that 17% "dread going to work" each day and another 32% feel their job is simply a means to make a living (Rosenburg & Gladstone, 2005). The author contends that those who are dissatisfied with their jobs may likely have regrets in relation to their work.

For those currently working and making the transition to retirement, the multigenerational workforce and the rapid rise of technology have changed the workplace considerably. Baby boomers now work alongside younger generations with high levels of technical competence. And although older workers typically demonstrate workplace loyalty and commitment, technological limitations can put them at a disadvantage (Barth 2000). Rather than knowledge transfer from older to younger employees, the skills of older employees are often viewed as redundant or non-transferable. In addition, as Hess and Jepsen (2009) contend, contract work, consulting, and freelancing have changed the nature of the employer/employee relationship. Shifts in the psychological contract, or relationship between employee and employer, have changed in favour of less hierarchy and fewer and less distinct career paths. The trend is towards career flexibility that may prove challenging for some but that may also create opportunities for an individualized retirement.

The Future

The baby boom generation has been the impetus behind many economic, cultural and political changes in society, and is predicted to redefine retirement to suit its lifestyle and values. With a life expectancy of 78 years for males and 83 years for females (Statistics Canada, 2010), Canadians are now expected to outlive every generation that has come before them. With possible retirement in the early to mid-fifties, it has been suggested that for some individuals retirement may form the longest career stage, even exceeding the amount of time spent in the labour force (Novelli, 2006). This has given rise to concerns that the field of career development has not kept pace with this generation: "[T]here is not nearly the same amount of late career counselling available as there is for career selection and career entry. And relatively little research has looked at what organizations do (if anything) to facilitate the retirement of their long-time employees. This problem has implications for society in that with the growth of life expectancy because of medical advances many adults have an entire career after retirement." (Nicholson, 2007, p. 576). Indeed, determining what form counselling should take for those planning for retirement may not be easy. The traditional focus on financial planning (Noone, Stephen & Alpass, 2009) seems inadequate when one considers the complex phase of life many baby boomers appear to be entering.

It has been suggested that the impending "gerontocracy" will not be comprised of the elderly, but rather of baby boomers entering a new phase of life, "middlesence," marked by a period of reinvention influenced by wisdom and experience (Dychtwald, 2005). Cohen (2004) refers to "revolving-retirement"; Dytchwald (2005) predicts "rehirement"; and many economists are predicting "bridge employment" (Hebert &

8

Luong, 2008) and "phased retirement" (Smith & Clurman, 2007) for those making the transition from the workforce. Moynagh and Worsley (2004) offer the term "liquid lives" to refer to a future in which people "mix and match work and more extended leisure where distinctions between working life and retirement becomes so blurred for many people that eventually the notion of retirement itself comes into question" (p. 49). It appears that retirement is poised to be transformed from complete withdrawal from the workforce to a broader definition encompassing various paid and unpaid alternatives. It is clear that career counselling as praxis must be prepared to deal with the myriad of issues that mature clients encounter. For those clients who have career regrets, counsellors may be able to assist them in creating or finding opportunities to change course to ensure that their future 'retirement' is meaningful and satisfying.

　　　The current chapter provides a brief synopsis of career trends of the baby boom generation using the past, present and future as the organizational structure. This serves as a prologue to the present study that examines the regrettable career experiences of members of this generation. Literature, primarily from career development and regret theory and research, is explored to help critically examine and elucidate findings. Using a phenomenological methodology, individual interviews with participants reveal how regrettable decisions from the past influence interpretations of their present and future.

Definitions

　　　Career: A career is both a phenomenological concept and a behavioural concept. It is the link between what a person does and how that person sees himself or herself. A career consists of time-linked senses of self that are defined by action and its outcomes. A career defines how one sees oneself in the context of one's social environment—in terms

of one's future plans, one's past accomplishments or failures, and one's present competencies and attributes. (Raynor & Entin, 1982)

    Regret: is more or less a painful cognitive and emotional state of feeling sorry for misfortunes, limitations, losses, transgressions, shortcomings, or mistakes. It is an experience of felt-reason or reasoned emotion. The regretted matters may be sins of commission as well as sins of omission; they may range from the voluntary to the uncontrollable and accidental; they may be actually executed or entirely mental ones committed by oneself or by another person or group; they may be legal transgressions or morally and legally neutral; and the regretted matters may have occurred in the past, present, or future (Landman, 1993)

Chapter Two

Literature Review

Chapter One sought to examine career development at the macro level as it related specifically to the baby boom cohort. Logically, the current chapter should be devoted entirely to career regret, but as such it would be far too brief given the limited number of studies on the topic. It should be noted that career development and regret are two very distinct areas of academic research, each with a robust empirical and theoretical background from which to draw. Implicit in the attempt to conduct research that crosses two evolved disciplines is the challenge of finding a meaningful way to bridge them. This will be attempted by first exploring career development on the level of the individual, starting with a definition of career and with a focus on career constructivism. Then, using a broader lens, an introduction to findings and trends within regret research will be provided to demonstrate the ways in which it potentially can inform career development theory and practice. As will be outlined in the present chapter, career is a common feature in regret research, but rarely is regret addressed directly in the area of career development.

Career Development

In the one hundred years since career development has been introduced into scholarly debate, the field has seen a remarkable evolution into what is currently understood as career. Earlier views emphasized the importance of matching the skills and abilities of people to complementary professions. Later theories focused on developmental and social learning aspects of career development. Current conceptions are more holistic with an emphasis on meaning-making and life stories. Research stemming

from economics, sociology, education and psychology illustrates that career development has moved beyond positivist, linear models meant to 'fit' people into occupations to a much broader definition. According to Raynor and Entin (1982),

> A career is both a phenomenological concept and a behavioural concept. It is the link between what a person does and how that person sees himself or herself. A career consists of time-linked senses of self that are defined by action and its outcomes. A career defines how one sees oneself in the context of one's social environment—in terms of one's future plans, one's past accomplishments or failures, and one's present competencies and attributes. (p. 262)

The above definition fits well with the current study for several reasons. First, it recognizes career as not just action but as something experienced by the individual. It is this experience or phenomenon that the researcher hopes to capture in the present study. Second is the emphasis on career as "time-linked." This concept of past, present and future fitting with an individual's appraisal of his or her career is important for those who may have regrets, as regret, too, is a temporal process.

However, the field of career development has long focused on career entry. According to Schein (2007), there is a " disjunction between career research clearly geared to young people/career selection and career research that deals with adult evolution and the role that career development plays throughout the lifetime" (p. 575). The initial theories put forth specifically addressed career matching and these early formulations of career persist to the present day. Often referred to as Trait and Factor theory, the concept that an individual's interests and skills can be matched to

12

corresponding occupations was an idea first put forth by Parsons (1909) and Williamson (1939). In practice, this theory is most often seen in skill and interest inventories and comprises a considerable portion of currently used career interventions. Another commonly cited theory, clearly influenced by the Trait and Factor model, is Holland's Career Typology (1985), which uses personality typing to match individuals with careers. According to Holland, a person's personality fits into six categories (realistic, investigative, artistic, social, enterprising and conventional) which have corresponding occupations; the greater congruence between personality type and occupation, the greater likelihood that a person will be satisfied with his or her job. While these theories have largely been employed as predictive (that is, individuals use skill, interest and personality inventories to choose a career), they can also be used to interpret. According to these theories, those who experience career regret would likely be mismatched in terms of skills, interests and/or personality with their occupation.

There are countless theories that examine and attempt to make sense of organizational and individual career development. The developmental theories, whether career based (Super, 1957) or psychoanalytic (Erikson 1980; Valliant 1977), are often cited when the population or individual of interest is mature as these theories specifically address the concerns of later life. Perhaps the most often cited of the developmental theories within the field of career studies is that of Super (1957) who proposed a life-span approach of career development comprised of four distinct stages: Exploration, Establishment, Maintenance, and Disengagement (revised from Decline). Within these stages, individuals play many roles—child, student, leisurite, citizen, worker, and homemaker. Life is enriched through self-expression in multiple roles. Alternately, the

potential for role conflict can make the person feel overburdened (Super, 1980, 1990). In the final stage, Disengagement, the person creates a new life outside of his or her vocation and work organization. According to Sullivan and Baruch (2009), the stage models of career development relate more to stable work environments where workplace advancement through a hierarchical organization is accepted as the experiences of each, usually male, individual. Movement through the stages usually coincides with age milestones and is depicted as a linear progression. In addition, Hall and Mirvis (1995) contend that "models of adult and career development did not adequately take into account the larger environmental context in which careers are played out now, an environment which has recently had a tremendous impact on the nature of career patterns" (p. 378).

Although not career specific, Erikson proposed an eight-stage developmental theory spanning early childhood to late life. Erikson considered the stages of Six through Eight to be the adult stages. In Stage Seven (ages 25-50), people develop integrity and find their place in the world. In the Eighth and final Stage ("ego integrity versus despair") individuals come to terms with their lives. Those who have been unsuccessful in passing through the previous stages are likely to despair. Others describe this final stage as indicative of "life's journey toward maturity, during which one has accepted the limitations of one's individual life but remains an enlightened leader and legacy builder" (Moore, Gunz, & Hall, 2007, p. 28).

Certainly, there is a temptation when examining later-life career issues to focus on the work of Super and Erikson, as their theories directly address development in later life. However, Super's "Disengagement" and Erikson's "Ego Integrity vs. Despair" do not

seem adequate when trying to understand the complexities of this particular phase of life although this is not to say that these theories are without merit or should be dismissed in their entirety.

The Ontogenic (age/stage-based) models are largely contested by those who prefer Sociogenic (social environment) approaches (Sullivan & Crocitto, 2007). However, Chen (2003) asserts that all vocational guidance theories "seem to share at least a portion of the very basic foundation...that is, a person's internal psychological selfhood plays an important role in his or her career journey" (p. 207). The focus on the individual and his or her self-knowledge, understanding and awareness is central to all career theories. Chen (1998) describes a convergence of career theories with constructivism framing these discourses. From a constructionist viewpoint, "career denotes a moving perspective that imposes personal meaning on past memories, present experiences, and future aspirations by patterning them into a life theme. It is the meaning contained in these biographical themes that will equip individuals to adapt to the social changes that are playing out in their work lives" (Savickas et. al, 2009).

As described above, positivists support a view of the world that is objective. Constructivists, however, assert that individuals actively create reality with no separation between the "outside world" and what is experienced. From human experience comes meaning, and meaning-making itself is at the core of what it is to be human. Harbison (2005) describes the difference between positivism and constructivism as one of "event versus process." In such an example, positivists would view career regret as an event, that is, a decision made that results in a less than desirable outcome. Constructivists would consider career regret to be a process. As such, interpretations of regret would be

socially constructed, alternatives would be imagined and the meaning of the regret would change with time.

Many of the modern career theories fall under the constructivist paradigm. Hartung and Taber (2008) describe four elements of career construction:

> The first element denotes the constellation of work and other roles that shape the life *structure*. The second component comprises adaptive coping *strategies* for dealing with developmental tasks, transitions, and change. The third component involves narrative *stories* that indicate motivational patterns and themes that define a life. The fourth element refers to individual *style* characteristics or traits such as abilities, interests, and personality that form a self-concept (p. 78)

Rather than exclusionary, the above excerpt highlights Chen's assertion that career development theories are converging and this synergistic relationship is captured in the constructivist discourse. Supporting Savickas et. al's (2009) 'personal meaning' perception of career, using narrative approaches encourages individuals to recount their life stories coherently so that themes and patterns are identified (Cochran, 1997). Through the process of storytelling individuals arrive at a deeper understanding and can develop a future narrative to guide their career. This was reiterated by Peavy (1998) who contended that meaning is constructed through language.

While it is beyond the scope of the current study to provide an exhaustive account of the evolution and permutations of career constructivism, the following is a brief introduction to constructs and theories the author wishes to highlight. Consistent in both

regret research and career development literature is a focus on decision making. Krieshok's (1998) review of fifty years of literature pertaining to career development confirms several tenets that have been the focus of research. The points he outlined include: "individuals vary in degree of decidedness; career decidedness develops over time; gender affects career decisions as does socioeconomic status, educational attainment and ethnicity; indecision does not always disappear once a decision is made; and the decision making process is complex, not simple" (p. 211-214). There has been a shift away from rational, systematic decision-making strategies to constructs and theories that are more in keeping with less linear career paths: Gelatt's (1989) positive uncertainty; serendipity (Betsworth & Hanson, 1996), happenstance (Miller, 1983), and compromise (Chen, 2006).

There are numerous theories that look beyond individual traits and attributes to include contextual influences on individual career development. Action theory (Young, Valach & Collin, 1996) maintains that meaning is derived from the construction of one's career through action. This 'action system' occurs through an individual's social engagement and interaction. Action is then interpreted as (i) manifest behaviours, (ii) conscious cognitions and (iii) social meaning. Patton and McMahon's (2006) Systems Theory Framework of Career Development (STF) places the individual at the centre of a larger societal system, and in turn, within a larger environmental system. Included within this model are individual skills, interests, and abilities, as well as larger global issues such as politics and economic trends. Influences within the system are recursive and permeate all levels of the system. Although similar to STF, chaos theory as described by Pryor and Bright (2007) emphasizes the dynamic, open-systems approach to career development in

17

which career decisions are unpredictable. Borrowing from the physical sciences, chaos theory explores the way in which small changes or decisions can influence complex systems. Often the effects are not felt immediately but the consequences are realized over time. According to this theory, predictions are typically unreliable but systems tend gradually to self-organize. Certainly, this latter theory is in stark contrast to much of the career development interventions that serve to assist individuals in making long-term career decisions and attempt to predict appropriate career paths.

Considered a systems approach, Integrative Life Planning (ILP) presents a holistic perspective of career development that integrates the individual into the community and global contexts. With a strong social justice basis, ILP views the individual as facing six critical life tasks: finding work that needs doing in a changing global workplace; weaving our lives into a meaningful whole; connecting family and work; valuing pluralism and inclusivity; managing personal transitions and personal change; exploring spirituality, diversity and meaning (Hansen, 2001). It is comprehensive, yet, despite its complexity, it offers individuals guidance on creating a life that is personally meaningful. This process is ongoing and prioritized by the individual with the benefits permeating locally and globally through the betterment of society.

On a final point for this section, many theorists posit that career is intimately linked to subjective well-being (Richardson, 1993; Virtanen, Rantalaiho, & Koivisto, 2003; Bauer & McAdams, 2004). Much of what we understand about our own ability, achievements, and potential can be measured by our career performance. Perceived successes and failures are tied to self-perceptions and how people judge themselves.

18

Career is not a separate, compartmentalized portion of people's lives, but an extension of the people themselves which in turn informs their own self-understanding.

Regret

This section will provide the reader with an overview of regret research. Literature on regret crosses many disciplines but features prominently in economics and psychology. It is information drawn primarily from these two areas that will introduce a definition of regret, and findings related specifically to age and career.

The history of regret seems as old as human behaviour but the theoretical perspective on regret differs depending on the discipline. Within the area of economics, the groundbreaking work of Tversky and Kahneman (1981) defined the direction of the majority of regret research to follow. Prior to their work, models of decision making were largely based on optimal outcomes but the researchers wanted to emulate scenarios closer to real life. In their classic study, they proposed a scenario in which two investors, Paul and George, both lose $1200 in the stock market. Paul loses out by holding on to his original stock (inaction) while George loses due to the purchase of new stock (action). Ninety-two percent of respondents thought George would feel more regret than Paul -- that is, action would be more regrettable than inaction. This was interpreted by the researchers as the result of (i) the possibility of imagined alternatives for George and (ii) the inaction of Paul as a 'default setting,' or inaction as the norm. Many argued that the lab-based designed studies in the area of economics were useful when taking multiple choice tests or gambling but were still too far removed from the experiences of people in everyday life. In actuality, people do not always act rationally, in their own best interest or in keeping with their own values and belief systems.

Just as Tversky and Kahneman inspired a generation of economists, Landman's seminal work, *Regret: The Persistence of the Possible* (1993), inspired those interested in studying the human experience of regret. Her book was a vast departure from the decision-model designed research on regret that came before it, as it squarely placed regret into human experience and development. Landman examined the philosophical, economic and psychological underpinnings of regret and then applied this analysis to the characters and narrative of classic works of fiction. For the purposes of this research, a subjective definition that captures the emotional essence of regret will be accepted as the basis of inquiry. Landman (1993) says:

> Regret is more or less painful cognitive and emotional state of feeling sorry for
> misfortunes, limitations, losses, transgressions, shortcomings, or mistakes. It is
> an experience of felt-reason or reasoned emotion. The regretted matters may be
> sins of commission as well as sins of omission; they may range from the
> voluntary to the uncontrollable and accidental; they may be actually executed
> or entirely mental ones committed by oneself or by another person or group;
> they may be legal transgressions or morally and legally neutral; and the
> regretted matters may have occurred in the past, present, or future (p. 36)

When this definition is considered with the aforementioned description of career, it is clear that those who experience regret will likely not limit its interpretation singularly to their job. Indeed, the experience of career regret will likely permeate through many, if not all, facets of a person's life. Further categories have been developed to distinguish between types of regrets. 'Hot regrets' refer to the intense emotional feeling immediately following the regrettable action or inaction. In such circumstances, the feeling tends to

quickly subside and the individual proceeds without much time spent thinking about the regrettable situation. Alternatively, 'wistful regrets' are those that are not paired with intense feelings but are usually categorized by recurring thoughts that can persist for years or decades. Also, 'daily lived regrets' are those in which the negative consequences of a decision or indecision play out every day causing the individual to revisit his or her regret frequently. Not surprisingly, the latter is viewed as the most deleterious to a person's psychological wellbeing in the long-term.

Zeelenberg (1999) refers to regret as a higher order cognitive emotion and this interpretation of regret is supported by the work of Guttentag and Ferrell (2004), who found that 7-year-olds could make the "comparison of what is with what might have been," whereas 5-year-olds could not. This suggests that, unlike emotions such as fear and anger that can be experienced in infancy, regret requires higher emotional development and cognitive reasoning. Regret is often referred to as counterfactual thinking or "mentally stimulating, 'what might have been,' in contrast to what was and what is" (Sanna, Carter & Small, 2006, p.163). Furthermore, people tend to construct upward counterfactuals in which reality is compared with a better alternative, or downward counterfactuals in which reality is compared with a worse alternative (Sanna et. al, 2006). The tendency to imagine better or worse scenarios heavily influences regret interpretation. Overall, people are said to experience regret when conventional choices are rejected in favour of unusual ones (Simonson & Tversky, 1992); failure in a situation is the result of a narrow versus wide margin (Gilovich & Medvec, 1995); bad advice is followed and good advice is rejected (Crawford, McConnell, Lewis, & Sherman, 2002);

knowledge of alternatives are made available after making a bad decision (Zeelenberg, 1999).

Early studies on regret tended to interpret counterfactual thinking as negative, whereas from the early 1990s onward the functional and beneficial aspects of regret began to be explored (Epstude & Roese, 2008). A review of publication databases by Zeelenberg and Pieters (2006) indicates that the majority of research conducted on regret has occurred in the past ten years. This recent focus on regret has produced some interesting findings. Particularly, in examining the function of regret, Saffrey, Summerville and Roese (2008) found that individuals value regret more than eleven other negative emotions (guilt, sadness, disappointment, shame, fear, disgust, anger, frustration, anxiety, jealousy and boredom). Regret was seen as being beneficial to "making sense of past experiences, facilitating approach behaviors, facilitating avoidance behaviors, gaining insights into the self, and in preserving social harmony" (p. 46). This is especially useful from a counselling perspective. If individuals can use experiences of regret to increase self-knowledge, examine/redesign goals and engage in more beneficial behaviours, then exploring past regrets or anticipatory regrets may be a useful undertaking.

Age and Regret

Emerging from the research is the developmental aspect of regret as it is transformed as a temporal process. This section will examine the influence of age on the experience of regret. With age comes more of life to reminisce about and conversely less time and often fewer opportunities to repair past regrets. Living with the consequences of major life regrets can persist throughout a lifetime; therefore coping with and/or

reconciling the outcome of regrets may also be a lifelong process. Do we regret action or inaction more? According to Kruger, Wirtz & Miller (2005), it would seem that age plays a role in the answer to that question. When we are young, we are more likely to regret our actions. As we get older, it is missed opportunity that tends to trigger the most regret.

According to Jokisaari (2003), "older adults evaluated their regret-related goals or events as being less likely to change than did younger adults" (p.487). Adults who viewed these events as having more consequence, reported lower levels of subjective well-being than by those who viewed the events as having little consequence. Research by Kroll and Egan (2004) suggests that regret interpretation is linked to psychological well-being and health, "guilt, shame, regret and remorse are not just markers and symptoms of depression and anxiety, but figure to varying degrees in how people assess their lives and how they perceive and judge themselves" (p. 558). Recent research (Torges, Stewart and Miner-Rubino, 2004) into subjective regret suggests that the early 60s may be a critical period in adult development for engaging in the internal processes necessary for coming to terms, or failing to come to terms, with major life regrets. According to their research, "life regrets are related to well-being among men and women in their 60s, and people's current interpretations of their regrets can mitigate that relationship" (p. 163). If an individual's well-being can be improved through reconciling or reinterpreting regrets in his or her sixties, then it may be a beneficial topic to explore in counselling.

In a survey of 3579 Dutch women, ranging in age from 16-81 years, Dijkstra and Barelds (2008) found that over two thirds of respondents reported having regrets. However, age was not related to the incidence of regret but did influence the

interpretation of regret. The categories of interpretation were not having come to terms with it; putting the best face on it; and having come to terms with it. With increasing age, women's regret experience tended to fall into two categories: those who were able to come to terms with their regrets and those who could not. The tendency to 'put the best face on' was typically the interpretation of younger women. It would seem that with age came a more authentic response to past events deemed regrettable. This is promising from a counselling perspective in that, with age, clients may be more likely to engage in truly reconciling aspects of their past.

A study by Wrosch, Bauer and Scheier (2005) examined the effects of age as it relates to major life regrets on quality of life. Their findings suggest that compared to younger adults, older adults saw fewer opportunities to undo regrets. In addition, "the negative effects of regret intensity on indicators of quality of life increase as people advance in age" (p. 666). Ruminations related to regret were associated with symptoms of depression, health problems and decreased reports of life satisfaction. However, in terms of finding a means to cope with past regrets, the "findings support the assumption that older adults can regulate the experience of regrets, if they disengage from undoing the consequences of their regrets and have other goals available to pursue in the future" (p. 667). That is, if past regrets can be relinquished individuals can find solace if their efforts are refocused on the pursuit of other ambitions.

To summarize, with age, the interpretation of life regrets influences subjective well-being and physical and psychological health. The early 60s may be an important time in a person's life for coming to terms with past regrets. Research (Dijkstra & Barelds, 2008) suggests that with age individuals may be more inclined to have a genuine

response to regret and this can be useful in reconciling the past. Moving beyond major

life regrets can be achieved through disengagement of attempts to repair past regrets and

through redefining future goals.

Career Regret

The purpose of this section is to highlight where in the literature career and regret

converge. In examining the literature, it is easier to find reference to career in studies on

regret than vice versa. In fact, the subject of career, often used interchangeably with job,

occupation, and work, is a common feature of virtually every study that has sought to

examine the regrettable aspects of people's lives.

Much of the research that has been conducted on regret has focused on the areas

of people's lives that have been most regrettable. Consistently, career is among the

highest ranked (Gilovich & Medvec, 1995). In a meta-analysis of 11 studies, Roese and

Summerville (2005) concluded that the "six biggest regrets in life center on (in

descending order) education, career, romance, parenting, the self, and leisure" (p. 1273).

The proportion of regret was reported as education (32%), career (22%), romance (15%),

parenting (10%), self (5.47%) and leisure (2.55%). The interpretation of the

aforementioned results would likely differ depending on the discipline. Within the field of

regret, the above categories may appear as discrete or autonomous but it is likely that a

researcher from a career development perspective would interpret most, and some may

argue all, of the categories as encompassing one's career. Educational attainment usually

dictates occupational trajectories and the role of parent and spouse often influence one's

career path. If, as Richardson (1993) contends, "life is career" than so, too, life regrets are

career regrets.

Perhaps the most famous longitudinal study conducted on the lives of individual participants was the Terman study in which 1000 intellectually gifted individuals born around 1900 were tracked for decades. Many of the female participants (as reported in their sixties) said that if given the opportunity to do it over again they would change the decisions they made about work and career. Forty-one percent of those studied described themselves primarily as homemakers and only 29% said that they would make the same choice again. They stated that, when not raising small children, they would pursue meaningful employment outside the home rather than working primarily as a homemaker or at "just a job" (Sears, 1979). Another study involving a large sample of women (Landman & Manis, 1992) found sixty-one percent of 1145 adult women of all ages also expressed regrets about having put off their career.

Among those women who do enter the workforce, those that experience regrets may find the challenge of changing employment to be too difficult a transition:

> Factors that compel women to remain in dissatisfying careers are complex amalgams of intrapersonal, interpersonal, and environmental constraints. Although each individual or system has processes that encourage change, they also have processes that maintain homeostasis or return the system to equilibrium after change occurs. This alone can account for a client remaining in a career she dislikes. In addition, career changes can entail complete life overhaul. Benefits of the current career may be substantial; change may result in loss of status, pay, retirement, and other needs in abeyance. Insecurity, poor self-esteem, information or skill deficits, or dependency also may stop a woman from pursuing a more satisfying career. The resources available from

family, friends, finances, etc. may simply not support dramatic changes, nor may the client be willing to pay the costs of change (Fee-Fulkerson, 1988, p. 254).

In a study conducted by Wrzesniewski, Tosti, and Landman (2005, unpublished) in which the majority of participants were women, the occupational regrets of nurses were examined. Divided into three parts, their research looked at (i) the effect of occupational regret on an individual's feelings related to work and life; (ii) the effects of personality on the experience of occupational regret and (iii) the effect of occupational regret on an individual's mental health. Their findings indicate that occupational regret does negatively influence both work and life satisfaction. However, individuals who felt that they had a calling for their profession were protected from the negative impact of occupational regret. Relating to the second part of the study, the personality traits of extraversion and agreeableness reduce the influence of occupational regret on job satisfaction. Finally, similar to results from other studies, occupational regret was associated with reduced satisfaction with life.

Interestingly, Roese and Summerville (2005) also surmise that the high incidence of career-related regret may not be universal. According to their research more profound regrets are experienced in incidences of high opportunity compared to low opportunity. They posit that the freedom of choice available to North Americans may make this population more prone to experiencing career regret. In cultures where societal structure is caste- or class-based, career choice can be limited and individuals would be less likely to ponder missed opportunities or imagine alternatives. However, not everyone agrees with the above assumption, Schieman, Pearlin and Nguyen (2005) note that "although the

individualistic ethos in American culture implies that *choice* determines the content and direction of such pathways, sociologists often view institutional and historical forces as constraining the trajectories of individuals—especially those who have particular ascribed statuses" (p. 694).

As regret is said to flourish where there is most opportunity, is it possible that in times of economic recession people may be less likely to experience career regret? Perhaps the financial dictates of society may be a determining factor in career choice and diminished opportunity may be associated with a reduction in career regret.

Conclusion

The preceding review has attempted to provide a brief overview of the place in academic literature from which career regret has emerged. Clearly, there is a quantitative focus within the broader regret research and regret is largely absent within career development research. This exploratory study hopes to enhance our understanding of what it is to have career regret. What are the experiences of individuals who, when reminiscing about their life, would do things differently? Are there opportunities in retirement to reconcile career-related regrets? Are there lessons of which to inform younger generations so that they do not also follow a regrettable path? The following chapter will examine the methodology used in the present study to examine the experience of career regret in the lives of participants.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Qualitative research is a broad term that is "a process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem. The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyses words, reports to detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting" (Creswell, 1998, p. 15). Moustakas (1994) lists seven features common to all forms of qualitative research, they are:

- recognizing the value of qualitative designs and methodologies, studies of human experience that are not approachable through quantitative research approaches

- focusing on the wholeness of experience rather than solely on its objects or parts

- searching for meanings and essences of experience rather than measurements and explanations

- obtaining descriptions of experience through first person accounts in informal and formal conversations and interviews

- regarding the data of experience as imperative in understanding human behaviour and as evidence for scientific investigations

- formulating questions and problems that reflect the interest, involvement, and personal commitment of the researcher

- viewing experience and behaviour as an integrated and inseparable relationship of subject and object and of parts and whole (p. 21)

Within the domain of qualitative research, many research paradigms exist to broaden our understanding of a topic. When interested in learning more about the experience of a group of people who have a life experience in common, often a phenomenological method is undertaken. Phenomenology is the search for meaning or themes in life; it "attempts to explicate the meanings as we live them in our everyday existence, our lifeworld" (van Manen, 1991, p.11). Within the area of psychology, the role of phenomenology is to make us "seize again the meaningfulness of our own lived experience" (Ashworth, 2006, p. 8).

For the purpose of this study, a phenomenological methodology will be employed to investigate the experience of career regret. Given the strong philosophical underpinnings of phenomenological inquiry, it is necessary to begin first with a brief exploration of the history of this method. This will be followed by the 'operation' of phenomenology as it applies to research. When evaluating current phenomenological methods, it can be challenging to discern its evolution from the philosophical writing from which it is inspired. However, it is necessary to examine the origins of phenomenology and attempt to make sense of its convoluted journey to the present day in order to apply these methods with veracity. It should be noted, however, that the evolution of phenomenology is still ongoing, debates over interpretation and applicability can be traced throughout the past century with no discernable end in sight.

Philosophical Basis of Phenomenology

In the late 19th century "scientism" or the belief that only empirical, testable, methods were capable of providing explanation of the world and reality had established itself as the prevailing view of theorists and scientists (Chung and Ashworth, 2006). In

response to this, Edmund Husserl, a German philosopher and mathematician began the phenomenological movement that put forth an alternate theory to gain understanding of truth through understanding lived experience. Husserl's aim was to "provide a sure foundation for the different scholarly disciplines by establishing the meaning of their most basic concepts. This was done by a clarification of the essential structures of experiences which distinguish one discipline from another and regulate the nature of each discipline's concepts" (Ashworth, 2006, p. 18). Ultimately, each scholarly discipline would have, in addition to its empirical findings and tenets, a phenomenological basis that would serve not only as its foundation but as a guide for future research.

Despite early traces of phenomenology in the work of William James and a small number of gestalt psychologists, quantitative methods have largely been employed in the study of psychology. Within this discipline, Husserl's work corresponded with the rise of behaviourism and cognitive psychology which was largely positivistic and concerned primarily with 'observable' experimentation (Ashworth, 2006). Nonetheless, quite the opposite of what Husserl intended seems to have come to pass. Hence, with considerable quantitative research forming the empirical basis of psychology, researchers have begun to employ qualitative methods, particularly phenomenology, to guide inquiry because the human perspective has been so notably absent. The research, almost entirely quantitative, outlined in Chapter Two indicates that career is consistently among the most regrettable experiences in life. With career regret firmly anchored in the regret literature, it is necessary to cast a more discerning humanistic view on the topic through a phenomenological approach.

According to Gibson and Hanes (2003), in discussing phenomenology Husserl described several essential features of experience: intentionality, lifeworld, intersubjectivity, and embodied consciousness. According to Husserl (1982), intentionality is being conscious of our internal experience of something. Furthermore, being conscious of something and the object of consciousness is linked intentionally. Intentionality is comprised of the noema and noesis. "Noema, the *object* of awareness, and the *manner* in which one is aware of it, noesis" (Ashworth & Chung, 2006, p. 200).

The second essential feature of experience is lifeworld. According to Giorgi (2006), the concept of lifeworld "is to turn examples of the way things are actually lived and experienced in the context and situation in which they occur" (p. 74). The benefit of examining experiences in the lifeworld of participants is that it is true to life. Participants ultimately define the limits of their involvement, and subsequent understanding of the phenomena, by the level of engagement and extent to which they are willing to share their experiences. In comparison, within most scientific inquiry, controlled environments are created and information is extrapolated from variable manipulation or from within the parameters of surveys or questionnaires.

The third essential feature described by Husserl is the concept of intersubjectivity. According to Van Manen (1994), phenomenological inquiry is "intersubjective in that the human science researcher needs the other (for example, the reader) in order to develop a dialogic relation with the phenomenon and thus validate the phenomena as described" (p. 11). As Giorgi (2006) describes, when we review our own experiences we do so with our own judgements, feelings, and associations. This self-understanding is what is referred to as intrasubjectivity. When we attempt to understand the experiences of another person,

then we relate to them at an intersubjective level. Giorgi uses the example of a person having fun, even if you do not enjoy an activity that someone else enjoys, you know this about yourself intrasubjectively, your ability to recognize how someone could have fun engaged in that activity is your ability to understand it intersubjectively. This aspect of phenomenology is more important than attempting an objective viewpoint if a researcher is trying to fully understand the experiences of another individual.

The concept of embodied consciousness is also considered one of the essential features of experience. Life is lived through the body, "when two individuals come together in the world, they bring their own spatiality and temporality, which can have an impact on both individuals' bodies and consciousness" (Gibson & Hanes, 2003, p. 186). This refers to the messages sent to oneself or others through non-verbal cues via the body. Beyond words and language, the body is subjective and when two people communicate it can have a meaningful influence on consciousness both for the interviewer and interviewee.

In addition to the four features outlined above, Husserl also introduced the concept of *Epoché* to the discussion of phenomenology. "*Epoché* is a Greek word meaning to refrain from judgement, to abstain from or stay away from the everyday, ordinary way of perceiving things" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 34). Practically, this is accomplished to the greatest extent possible, through 'bracketing' such that "the everyday understandings, judgements and knowings are set aside and phenomena are revisited, freshly, naively, in a wide open sense, from the vantage point of a pure transcendental ego" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 33). Husserl's inclusion of bracketing marks one of the largest areas of dissension within the philosophical debate on phenomenology. Husserl's view of

33

phenomenology is commonly referred to as transcendental, in large part due to idea that preconceived ideas and judgements can be withheld in the collection and interpretation of experiences.

Heidegger, a student of Husserl, argued that it was impossible to 'bracket' pre-existing assumptions, ideas and opinions. Heidegger supported a view of phenomenology that was hermeneutic. Individual's prior knowledge and experience influenced interpretation and this hermeneutic perspective could be addressed, not through bracketing, but rather through thoughtful reflection.

Phenomenology as a Research Method

The philosophical discourse on phenomenology has also spawned a parallel discussion on phenomenological method. With so many possible interpretations of phenomenological theory, a corresponding method is still being refined. However, despite some variation, the method of phenomenological inquiry typically follows a process as outlined below:

1. Review the historical literature to reach an understanding of the philosophical perspective of the approach

2. Develop questions to draw from participants descriptions of the lived experience of the phenomena being studied

3. Collect data, usually through interviews

4. Analyse the data through (i) *horizontalization* – division of transcripts into statements; (ii) the emergence of *clusters of meanings*; and (iii) textural description, a general description of the experience

5. Finally, the essence, or invariant structure of the experience through identification

of themes provides the reader with a better understanding of the phenomena.

To the extent that the above list can be considered procedural steps, the first has been addressed in the first half of this chapter with a philosophical discussion of phenomenology. Steps two, three and four will be expanded on below through detailing the selection of participants, examining ethical considerations, outlining the interview process, describing the data analysis and addressing issues of generalizability. Chapter Four of the study will be devoted to the final step in the process, the reduction of the data into themes so as to provide the reader with a thorough understanding of the experience of career regret.

Participants

According to Patton (2002), the biggest disparity between qualitative and quantitative research methods is the selection of participants through purposeful sampling. Rather than data gathered from large randomized groups, sampling is intentionally directed towards those who can meaningfully contribute to the questions being examined, "studying information rich cases yields insights and in-depth understanding rather than empirical generalizations" (p. 273). For the current study, a purposeful sampling method was employed as it was necessary to select participants who have experienced career regret to better understand the phenomena. Selection of participants occurred mainly through word-of-mouth referrals by friends and acquaintances. People who were retired or transitioning to retirement were selected as candidates as one area of interest in this study was to examine the experience of regret as

a temporal process. Therefore, insight offered by participants who had invested a considerable portion of their lives into their careers was of particular interest. The criteria participants used to self-identify were based on answering 'yes' to two simple questions: (1) Have you experienced career regret? (2) If given your time back would you, in relation to your career, do things differently?

Once initial selection of participants had taken place, potential participants were contacted by phone or email and offered the opportunity to take part. Participants included one male and four females ranging in age from late-forties to mid-sixties. Four of the participants were married and parents; one participant was single and did not have children. The education of those included in the study ranged from high school completion to doctorate degree. As outlined in the previous chapter, career does not equate to occupation. A career is a composite of the roles people play throughout a lifetime. Three of the participants had worked in their 'regrettable' occupation for more than twenty years, two of the participants had been in and out of the workforce due to parenting and continued studies.

Ethical Considerations

Each participant joined the study voluntarily. Prior to giving consent, each candidate was informed of the nature and scope of the research through an introductory letter (Appendix A). All participants signed a consent form (Appendix B) once fully informed of their rights and before the interviews began. It was understood that the interviewing could be stopped at any time and participants could withdraw and withhold their story from inclusion in the research study.

The interviews began with a reiteration of interviewee's rights and discussion of the research topic and scope. Through brief questioning, participants were invited to share their story and the researcher carefully monitored verbal and non-verbal cues. Interviewees determined the extent to which they wanted to disclose their story and topics were explored, or avoided, based solely on their discretion. Confidentiality was maintained throughout—all names, and places of work were omitted from the final report to protect individuals from being identified. As outlined in the letter of introduction (Appendix A), information was provided as to the safe storage and eventual destruction of data.

Individual Interview

It is important to recognize that the process of engagement between researcher and participant, the narrative construction and transcription, in itself, contributes to and transforms the experience. By necessity, descriptions cannot explain the 'now' as everything described is after the fact, nor can one describe 'everything.' What is described is in fact reflective experience and it is through this that we "formulate meaning and construct the various hierarchies of significance contained within those meanings" (Spinelli, 2005, p. 27).

Interviews were conducted at a time and place convenient for the participant, with interviews audio taped and later transcribed by the interviewer. Once initial rapport had been established through introductions and an explanation of the ethical parameters of the study, the following points were used to guide the dialogue:

- Please tell me about your career.

- At what point did you start to feel regret? Can you describe that experience?

- If you had your time back what would you have done differently?

- Who were your supports and in what way did they help you?

- If given the opportunity to talk to yourself X number of years ago, knowing what you know now, what would you say to your younger self?

- When you think of the future what comes to mind?

Interviews were transcribed by the author with additional notes taken on non-verbal cues, tone and emotional expression witnessed throughout the process. Each transcript was read many times, first to gain an overall impression, second to code the data into meaning units and third to organize the data into overlapping or corresponding content so as to derive from the data themes to help elucidate participants' experiences of career regret. Long excerpts from interviews are included to maintain context for the reader and to establish flow.

Data Analysis

From the time I had determined my thesis topic and began to research a method of inquiry, I started a journal to keep track of random thoughts, ideas, and general impressions. This assisted me in charting my progress and keeping track of the barrage of information I was taking in and in turn attempting to impart. This was the first step I undertook in my attempts to 'bracket' my previous experience and perceptions of career regret. Also known as 'epoche', bracketing is the process of setting aside preconceived ideas and withholding judgements and is an integral part of the phenomenological research method. As Kvale (1996) states, "phenomenological reduction does not involve

an absolute absence of presuppositions, but rather a critical analysis of one's own presuppositions" (p. 54). Prior to engaging in the interview process with participants, I approached a colleague to discuss my topic of career regret and methodology. I thought my colleague a fitting choice, although originally from a science background, she was extremely knowledgeable about phenomenology and had spent a considerable portion of her twenty-five year career involved in both quantitative and qualitative research with human subjects. Our interaction allowed me the opportunity to discuss the literature I had read to that point and impressions and ideas I had formed about my topic and my method. Hearing my own ideas mirrored back to me with her insight and clarity was an extremely beneficial process. It prepared me for the interviewing stage of the project by allowing me to examine my opinions and potential biases. She encouraged me to maintain an ongoing review of the literature and to stay focused through journaling. This advice proved invaluable particularly when attempting to analyse the interviews and keeping true to the content.

In contrast to scientific objectivity, in phenomenological inquiry, "objectivity is reached through the act of consciousness and is an expression of fidelity to the phenomena investigated" (Kvale, 1996, p. 53). A coding system was developed and a line-by-line analysis of transcripts was undertaken. This process permitted the descriptions to be clustered into meaning units such that overlapping or corresponding statements were grouped together. "While most psychologists seek to yield 'truth' (or, to be more precise, statistical approximations of truth) from their studies and experiments, phenomenological researchers focus upon the quest for statements of 'increasing adequacy' regarding the structure of an experience" (Spinelli, 2005, p. 135). The

systematic deconstruction of the transcribed texts into units allowed for themes to emerge from the groupings. . When conducting a phenomenological study, knowing when enough data has been collected corresponds to the emergence of common themes and considerable repetition. Hence, when new themes could not be recognized further data collection ceased (Pleog, 1999). From the initial reading of the interviews for a general impression to the final depiction in Chapter Four, the data were analysed such that the essential experience of career regret could be depicted.

Generalizabilty

According to van Manen (1991), "phenomenology is in a broad sense a philosophy or *theory of the unique* it is interested in what is essentially not replaceable" (p. 7). Phenomenology is not intended to solve problems or provide solutions. The experiences described herein should not be generalized to any individual or larger group. Indeed, if there were one rule of phenomenological inquiry it would be: "never generalize" (van Manen, 1997, p. 22). The goal of any phenomenological study is not to arrive at immutable laws but rather to increase our understanding of an experience or phenomena this is a meaningful endeavour in and of itself. According to Thomas and Pollio (2002), "deciding the applicability of findings is ultimately in the hands of the reader" (p. 42).

Conclusion

Chapters One, Two and Three have attempted to lay the preliminary groundwork for the current study by providing a rationale as to why career regret should be studied (Chapter One), determining where in the literature the phenomena career regret has emerged from (Chapter Two), and the methods employed to examine the experience of

career regret (Chapter Three). The two chapters to follow present the findings of the current study. Chapter Four presents the data pertaining to the various themes that emerged from analysis of participants' narratives. Chapter Five concludes the study with an examination of the results in relation to the literature outlined in Chapter Two, a description of the limitations of the current study, and a focus on areas of research for future consideration to further an understanding of career regret.

Chapter Four: Describing the Experience

"It would be easier to discuss my painful divorce rather than my horrible career, because at least when I was married I could blame the other person, but with my career I can only blame myself." This was a statement made by a person who considered becoming involved in this study, but who eventually declined because she was not ready to discuss her one major regret (permission was obtained to include the quote). In fact, potential participants voiced these misgivings several times. Many people admitted to having career regret but were not willing to discuss their experience as they deemed it too painful to revisit. Conversely, the honesty and frankness of the five individuals who did participate gave the reader significant insight into the experience of career regret. As will be made clear, career regret is not always found in those who spend a lifetime in a single job. For some, it is a lifetime spent searching, making sacrifices for loved ones, discovering what they want to do, or reconciling themselves with not following a passion because of the economic realities of the time.

In listening to the stories the participants share, the author realized quite early how profoundly important work in life is, how work helps us define ourselves, and how regret can be carried with us throughout a lifetime. Excerpts have not been attributed to each participant; rather, quotations serve to elucidate themes. This practice brings a common voice to the experience, but also helps to ensure the confidentiality of the contributors. However, long passages are included to provide a more accurate indicator of how stories were told in their purest form. It is often difficult to fully capture the tone of the excerpts; some were told with resignation, anger, frustration, or even occasional humour. Some

participants spoke pragmatically about their experiences while others used the opportunity to try to gain insight into themselves and their lives. Stories were largely told in chronological order, starting typically at early adulthood, or at the point of entry into the workforce, with occasional reminiscences of childhood. Despite a disparity in the specific circumstances of each participant, analysis of the interviews using the method outlined in Chapter Three revealed pervasive themes that are categorized as follows: Early Influences, Why I Regret My Choice, The Passage of Time, Balancing Work and Family, If I Could Do It Over Again, and What the Future will Be.

Regret can be the result of acts committed or things left undone. Three of the people who shared their stories worked in paid occupations and wished for something else. Two others, having worked unhappily as teachers for several years, gave up their paid employment to raise their families, and both spoke of having missed opportunities by staying home. The participants' actual and desired occupations are listed below:

Actual Occupation	Desired Occupation
Professor	Veterinarian
Mother/Teacher	Professor/Counsellor
Fisheries Observer	Fisherman/Farmer
Mother/Teacher	Uncertain (Academic/Dancer)
Civil Servant (Customer Service)	Horticulturalist/Cook

Early Influences

As children, or teenagers, many of the participants had an idea of what they wanted to be when they grew up. None of the contributors followed these childhood plans, but several recalled these early ambitions with fondness:

Actually, what I really wanted to do was be a doctor. But this was 1969 and girls weren't doctors - girls were nurses and I really didn't want to be a nurse.

Another contributor stated:

I always had dreams of being a fisherman, but of course, my father... well my father did too really. He always wanted to be a fisherman too and he tried it on several occasions but he could never make a living at it. He always ended up going back to carpentry. Plus the fact that he used to be awfully seasick and he couldn't get over it. I never did get seasick enough to throw up or anything. And I loved to be on the water. He had this little dory and he used to go off to work in the motorboat and leave the dory home and I would be out in that whenever I got a chance. At that time, there were no restrictions on fishing like there is today. Anyone could fish for lobster... I used to have lobster pots, when I was nine or ten years old I would have lobster pots out around the harbour, around the cove. So you know I always had a yearning to be on the water...it's hard to explain it so that you would understand it (laughter).

Another said:

... from the time I was in Grade Four and I admired my teacher and I wanted to be a teacher... I think as a little girl, just thinking back to how little I thought about what I was going to do with my life. And then I had vague ideas as a teenager, I kind of thought journalism, I thought about being a war correspondent. I remember thinking how dangerous it would be. That was just one of those fleeting things...

All participants described the people or circumstances that played a role in determining their career paths. Not surprisingly, family, friends, and economic circumstances figured heavily in shaping their futures. For example, despite education and perceived adherence to a feminist ideology, one participant noted the early influence of her family, and in particular, her mother:

The way I thought of myself was a liberated woman and a feminist, and yet I seem to end up staying at home like my mother and it sort of just happened, it wasn't something I planned. Quite a lot has been written about this, about how daughters feel that they can't go further than their mothers. I feel like there is something there, big, and now I'm going to university and my mother never went to university, she valued education and pushed us. That's important actually because her attitude toward career was almost—if anything happens to your husband you'll have something to fall back on. That was it, right, and really that's how I was. That's what I realize now, I didn't think of a career. I thought of something to fall back on and I'm still tending to think that. I still tend to think of myself as not having to be fully responsible

for myself. I see myself in context, as a partner. Even now, despite all my

education, despite everything. That's why I'm saying for me ,it seems parental

influence is enormous.

For another participant, the death of her father resulted in the inheritance of enough money to begin her adult life. However, becoming a wife and mother around this time prevented her from pursuing possible career paths:

When I was young, my father died when I was eighteen, left me the house and

left me some money. But then of course, you turn around, you get married you

have to live in the house you have to raise children, you have to go to work

and all this stuff. And then, you're looking at it saying, you had resources

when you were young, like if Dad had died when I was thirty-five, I wouldn't

have had those resources to start, or I would have went to school since I love

cooking, culinary arts, but I certainly never envisioned my life being there

(reference to her job).

Yet, another contributor described the opportunity that arose amid the painful circumstance of her father's death. Another participant spoke of having a fully funded education and also made reference to an encounter with an advisor, the memory of which she would carry with her for years:

… it's funny because I've been thinking why didn't I do my Ph.D when I was

younger? When I was younger, I didn't know I was smart, that's the other

thing… I don't know what happened, it's kind of like I only realize now that

I'm smart and I could have done it when I was younger, but I was never

encouraged to do it. I think if I had stayed in university the first time, I think

that's the um... my tuition was funded by the department of Veteran's Affairs

because my dad died as a result of a war injury they paid my tuition, gave me

my living expenses, that sort of thing. I can still remember very clearly the

day I had the interview with the guy to set up my funding, and he was asking

me what I wanted to do and I really didn't know and he said: "Well, I'll put

you down for your Ph.D." Now, you know I've just graduated from high

school and now here's this guy telling me I can do my Ph.D. I remember

being kind of, oh wow, like I was really excited about it, but not really sure

that it was possible. But it was really neat to have somebody else make me

think that I could. If I had only had more people like that, but it was only like

a one time thing. If I'd only had more people like that in my life who would of,

you know, encouraged me, you know pointed me in the right direction. I don't

know...have you ever watched the movie Mona Lisa's Smile the one with

Julia Roberts? She kind of encourages the girls to be the best that they can be,

that sort of thing, just don't settle for getting married and that's it. If I'd had

someone like that in my life, I think it would have made a real difference.

Because when I was in school, when I was in high school or whatever, all my

report cards were like- ...could do better, ... not living up to her potential,...

needs to concentrate...you know it was always this negative kind of... No one

ever said 'Boy, you're really smart' or in a positive kind of sense it was

always kind of, you're smart but you're not doing very well, that sort of thing.

The opinions of others were influential for another participant whose prospective career as a teacher was frowned upon by friends who felt her potential could only be reached in a more rigorous academic career (the blanks [-----] in the excerpt indicate a professional school, the name of which has been omitted to protect the participant's identity) :

P: *I've always been influenced by my associations, strangely enough but maybe it's not so strange. And I was going out with a guy at the time who wanted to do --------, his brother was in ------- school, this was when I was like sixteen I guess, and umm...I was told because I was very smart, and they said: 'Well you don't want to waste your life by doing education, why don't you do something where you can use your brain a little bit more' you know?*

R: *Who said that to you? Was that a message coming from a lot of places?*

P: *Ahmm...probably, friends and I think more associates of the people I was hanging out with, my boyfriend's parents, it was along that line. It was never my family. No, it was never my parents, they never tried to influence me or direct me, I should say. It was never 'you should be a(n) ------- because you're smart,' it was never that. It was always outside people.*

Another participant gave up his desire to be a fisherman due to family influences and the economic and geographic circumstances of the time. He and his family in the early 1960s were part of the large resettlement program that proponents believed would offer significant new educational and economic opportunities for rural Newfoundlanders.

P: *Yeah, at that time nobody wanted to see you go at fishing. Because at that time, it was before you were born but at that time…fishing wasn't accepted as a respectable form of employment. Our parents and our grandparents had grown up in such hard times from having people in the fishery and being part of the fishery themselves that they wouldn't care of having anyone belong to them go handy to the fishery (laughter)*

R: *If there was anything else at all you were supposed to do that…*

P: *That's right, so you had to buck the system in order to get into the fishery if you wanted to do it on your own. You had to go against your parents, you had to go against everything in order to make a career of it for yourself. That career as a fisherman, that's not as easy you might think, you almost got to be bred into it. It's like, you're not going to be educated to be a fishermen, if you haven't got the feeling to be a fisherman, if it's not in your blood. But the society and government today thinks you are, they think they are going to make fisherman educated out there on the water and they will be the same as fishermen years ago. But they're not. Fishing life…is not going to be taught in a school…it's a hard life and you've got to be there from the age of ten, eleven and twelve, you've got to be there on the boat, if you're going to be a fisherman. If you're in school then you're not going to be there. But if I had my time back, I'd have tried to be a fisherman…but now it's too late for me.*

One participant discussed her experience of starting out in her job, and subsequently told that she would not succeed:

> I was told when I came here, when I was part-time the associate dean at the
> time said "don't think that because you got your foot in the door you are
> going to get anywhere at this university." So, you know, it's actually hard,
> isn't it, to be striving for something and then along the way you get pushed
> down and kicked and you manage to get yourself together. Well, you know, he
> made me really angry, I was kind of, "I'll show you what I can do." Now I
> feel like writing to him and saying "You said I couldn't get anywhere but look
> where I am now." You know, God, it was the associate dean, and I think it's
> really unfortunate that the people who do that to other people if they had been
> encouraging and had said, "You don't have everything that you need to
> succeed here but I have every confidence that you will work hard and you will
> get where you have to go." I mean, how much better would that have been
> then for me to turn around and say, "I'll show you what I can do."

Clearly, the encounter fostered the participant's belief that she continually would have to prove herself in an unsupportive and even hostile environment.

Summary: Early Influences

For the participants in the study, influences on career choices range from family and friends to advisors and colleagues. In some cases, economic circumstances, conflicting roles (parent, student, worker) and overarching expectations (being a supportive wife and mother, avoiding an older generation's perception of hardships of the fishing life) directly affected the trajectory of individual careers. The messages received were sometimes subtle, as in the case of one woman who recognized that she had adopted her mother's attitude of "A career is something you fall back on," as opposed to strident

discouragement, best expressed as "Don't think that just because you got your foot in the door you are going to get anywhere." Regardless of whom the positive or negative opinions came from, the participants clearly deemed them meaningful in their consideration of career-related experiences.

Why I Regret My Choice

The transition to work did not always involve a direct or easy path for many of the participants. Once established in a career, several noted how difficult it was to change because of other responsibilities and lack of opportunity. For some, compromising was the only option. Even those who left jobs to pursue other work or education did not always find happiness or fulfillment. One person discovered she was pregnant two months into her first year of university and was uncertain of a career to pursue:

> I ended up going back to school I guess about six months after my child was
> born because I was just so bored at home. But what I ended up doing then
> was…so, I started taking psychology again and working part-time in the day
> care. And I was actually good at it, I was good at working with little kids. So
> then I was like what do I do with a psychology degree? Um, so I decided, at
> the encouragement of a friend to do a two-year program for people who have
> a degree already and it was in early childhood education. And the program
> had just become certified so that you could become a teacher. So then, I was
> encouraged, you know, since you're taking the courses anyway you might as
> well get a teacher's certificate. So, I kind of got pushed into it… and, making
> $12,000 as a teacher as opposed to $6,000 at the day-care, you know twice

the salary and I had a student loan. So you know I ended up going into

teaching and I hated it. I just…uh, it was awful. Now even, the word

'education' gives me the creeps. I was just so unhappy there. I had a contract

so I had to go into work but they hired too many teachers that year so I didn't

actually have a class room. I was part of the supply pool and then I didn't get

called as a supply teacher but then I had my home school and I was supposed

to go in and do Special Education stuff I guess. And I would just have one

student that I was working with which was fine. So half the time I wouldn't

answer the phone when they would call me for supply teaching because…it

was awful…Yeah, so I did get out of that and coming back and working in

day-care…I worked in day-care for about 3 years and got burned out so I

left…

For another participant, the decision to pursue a career in education was made to suit the

lifestyle she and her husband desired. In hindsight, she confided that there was a pattern

of "service" in much of her upbringing which laid the psychological foundation for her

seeking out work designed to serve others. The demands of the job, however, detracted

from her ability to devote herself to motherhood, and ultimately, the latter would take

precedence:

I ended up going into education because we could travel. But now, I also

think it was the easy thing, it was kind of like…to me it is very related to the

mother role. I was brought up to do that. I was teaching young kids, young

children and that's kind of an extension of the same role. So I was just kind of

falling in...looking back on it I just did this because it was expected of me. But I wouldn't have said that at the time. And when I did that, I did it with the idea that I could teach and we could travel. And I thought to myself that I couldn't teach and have kids at the same time. So when I have kids, I'll take some time off and I'll go back, that's what I thought. But it didn't work out like that because I discovered when I had my own kids I loved teaching them, it was fun, I had lots of fun with them. Painting and all that kind of stuff and then I really didn't want to go teaching other people's kids. I thought I have no time or energy for my own kids when I come home at night...

One contributor spoke with great anger about her job, and her frustration was evident many times throughout the interview process. When the government deemed her skills were non-transferable, she felt trapped in a job that made her unhappy. As illustrated in the following passage, her reason for staying in the job was not one she could dismiss:

P: We had a new manager, came in, started a couple of months ago, all these shiny new people coming in and he had a meeting with the staff. So he walks in and he puts up this little slogan on the blackboard that his mother said when he was growing up, and we're all looking at him. And then, he says, "Does anyone here like their job?" And we all start looking around at each other waiting to see and he says, "So, no one likes their job? No one likes their job?" I said to him that if someone actually came skipping into the building one day actually saying that they like their job, we would send for the police. Certifiable, gone postal, coming into the building happy—he's

doing something. I'm always saying to him (the manager), *talk to me anytime*

when I come in through the door, get out of the way when I'm leaving. Don't

block me, don't ask me a question, get out of the way... It's just one of those

sad choices in life that you make. You made it because there was a drug

plan...

R: *Because it was the best decision...*

P: *I've got a child with a genetic disorder; he needed drugs he needed*

medical care...

R: *What do you think you've sacrificed?*

P: *Me...I've done the best I could... your salary is negotiated by government*

so it's not like you can do anything about that but as in my personal self, it

has taken everything out of me. Looking at it now, I've got six years more,

and now you're counting down, summer's past, winter's coming up you have

to get through that. Then, there is another summer and it will be five years.

But it is still looking at the clock...You break it down into bits and you get

through. You get through, you get through, you go home.

R: *It sounds like a prison sentence.*

P: *It is, and that is exactly what it's like.*

The same participant later in the interview discussed her attempts to find work in other

departments:

There is no promotion, your supervisors are the same age as you, so I mean

they aren't going anywhere, you certainly can't go anywhere, you've applied

for other positions, but they come back with a reject letter because you don't

have the qualifications to meet what we need.

For one participant, the bold move of leaving a stable job to pursue another did not meet

his expectations. His desire to leave a "desk job" and find work in a field close to his

dream occupation of fishing yielded in a disappointing reality:

P: *So, ten years in accounting and I still had this, ah, unsettled feeling. I don't*
really know how to describe it, I'm not very good with words... No, I wasn't
satisfied with what I was doing. Even though in the ten years I worked my way
up from $68 a week to $265 a week. But I still wasn't really happy…I gave it
up actually, I got so fed up with it that I just threw it down, with nothing else
in sight, no other jobs, nothing.

R: *And what was that like, getting up and going to work every morning in a*
job you didn't like?

P: *It was very painful (mirthless laughter)... well it was, I don't know if I*
should say painful or not, but it was…I think a career is something you should
have passion for, you should have feelings for, you should want to do it, you
know? From my opinion, I don't think anyone should have to work for
somebody else. That's not the way society thinks, that's the way I think.

R: *When you had done bookkeeping originally, you had in mind to do*
something on your own?

P: *Yes, but where are you getting the money from? That was always the*
biggest drawback. I left that…I went taxi driving then, for a few months. That

would be in '77. And then they, ah...the government, the Federal Government set up the prospect of getting a two hundred mile limit. They got that in 1978, and they started training Fisheries Observers for to go out on the boats that were fishing in Canadian waters. I went and did that...That involved going out on the foreign boats by yourself (laughter), and staying out there for an unlimited amount of time. Like you'd leave here and go out on the boat, they'd assign you to a certain boat, the boat would usually come into the harbour to pick you up, or either that you'd go out on another boat and get transferred at sea. So, you'd be out there then, once they assigned you to a ship, they'd tell you when you were going but they never told you when you were coming back. You never did know when you were coming back... No, I didn't enjoy the work. It was a useless, useless job that nobody wanted. It didn't do any good, it didn't serve any purpose. The only reason I was out there was so that the Fisheries Union and the Government could say that they had observers aboard the boats, so if any trouble came up or any controversy about vessels fishing inside of our limits or anything like that, DFO could say we have observers on those boats and we know what they are at all the time. The work that we were doing was absolutely useless.

Summary: Why I Regret My Choice

Regrets are the result of actions taken and/or hopes gone unfulfilled. This is evident in the experiences shared by participants. One saw nothing but futility in the work he was doing. Another saw the work of teaching as taking too much energy away from the

raising of her children, while another saw the years of working customer service as a sacrifice to ensure good medical care for her sick child. Staying with a dissatisfying job, changing careers, not finding happiness in the new pursuit, and sacrificing personal goals to meet the needs of family resulted in regrettable careers. In describing why they pursued the professions they did, two participants indicated "it was the best decision at the time" or "it was expected of me." In examining why they regretted their careers, participants used such words and phrases as "...taken everything out of me," "painful," "useless," "burned out," and "awful."

The Passage of Time

Most of the participants made reference to their age, their stage in life and the process of personal change over their lifetimes:

> ...two ages in my life have been very important—26 and 45 years. When I was 45, I thought up to now life has been like a funnel going out, endless possibilities, it's my life, it's open, and it's anything. When I got to 45, I felt that the funnel was going the other way, life was at the other end. Everything changed, no longer was I this young person with my life and future in front of me, I was now facing death. It sounds morbid but it's good to know that because it does inform everything. Like I said to you my thought is not five years, ten years, it's on my deathbed. How will I feel?...bringing up a thousand things to see before you die, or whatever. People are starting to think like that. I think that it really is a definite stage—for me, it is. I mean some people go out and buy a red sports car and do it that way, but you know,

I'm just not one of those people. Let me put it this way...part of it is to take

stock and what could I have done differently? What do I need to do to make

me feel that I don't have regret? Because I don't want to have regrets, how

awful to be on your deathbed and think, "if only?" And if I died tomorrow, I

sometimes think about that, would I have major regrets? I don't think I would.

I've got some minor ones, but would I do it differently? I did it the best I could

at the time. And did the best with the choices and who I was at the time. This

is strange...the time is running out and it feels like decisions are more

important now than they were before, there is more riding on them. Maybe,

that's the other thing, some people are brought up to be more aware of the

future, security conscious, whereas I was brought up to be frightened in a

sense but I don't think I was brought up to be very security conscious.

For one participant, who works in customer service, the stress of dealing with an often unhappy public every day for more than twenty years has taken a toll. She intentionally avoids social situations and even withdraws from family, so great is her need for privacy and quiet time:

P: My personality hasn't changed, it's just that I hate this job. I was outgoing,

I was what people would call Martha Stewart, I loved to cook, I loved to

entertain. I used to love parties and all that kind of stuff. I used to love to go

out to clubs, and I used to love to go out for dancing. All that has changed. All

I think about now is coming home and going somewhere in the quiet, left

alone. Before it was like I had people over you know, dinner parties, it was

great I made sure I had all twelve places of matching china, all that had to match, all wine goblets, water goblets, all that had to match. And you would have people in Friday and Saturday night, and you would have dinner; you'd serve drinks and a good time, with a guitar and all that. I don't want that anymore. I don't know if it's because of the fact that you are growing older, or if it is the job that actually changed you. But, I'm honestly thinking that most likely it was the job. Instead of growing older, with your kids gone now, you would be more in the mood to have people over in the middle of the week –if it was a half decent kind of job if you could take a few hours off work to prepare something or for special occasions.

R: *When did you know? You started there more than twenty years ago, how far into it were you, when you knew...when you realized you weren't happy there?*

P: *I think I was like, when you start it's new and you're younger, yeah, it's not that big a deal; it's the public but you know you can get through it. I think it's about six to eight months of it constantly and people yelling at you and people complaining...But to me, it's been a waste of my life to be there. And for me, there is no way out until, I say I'm leaving at 55, I'll have 35 years in... I have six years left, I am walking out of that building at 55, I am not staying until I'm sixty, behind that counter. 'Cause as far as I'm concerned, there are not a lot of people who live a lot longer working under that stress at sixty.*

One participant discussed her tendency to lose interest in work she has undertaken as she develops different interests and takes on different roles. As a result, she questions whether she will ever find anything career-related that will offer fulfillment:

> I envy people who seem to be able to find a career that satisfies them, and it seems to be giving them that real fulfillment. And I can't imagine finding anything because I've changed. What does it for me now in a few years time is not going to do it for me. Like sociology, which I loved, and I loved teaching when I first started, and then when I was a mother, I loved being a mother. So everything kind of pales, and that's something I've thought about.

Summary: The Passage of Time

Several of the participants considered the passage of time as important to their experience of career regret and not wanting to have regrets. One individual, who realized she regretted taking her job six to eight months after starting, will have worked thirty-five years in the occupation before she retires. She explained that the toll taken by her job has changed her from an outgoing and fun-loving person to a reclusive and sombre person. As the participants grew older, they discovered more about themselves and their true interests, and noted the decreased opportunities to do the things in life they dreamed of doing.

Balancing Work and Family

Three of the participants were mothers, who each noted the challenges of working while raising a family. They all began their careers in the 1970s, a time of monumental change in women's rights and women's role in society. Yet, each mentioned that although

60

there were new career possibilities for their generation of women, the woman's role in the household did not lessen.

> It was just, I don't know the idea of getting married…you know…having a family…it's just a crock. We, when I say "we" I mean people of my generation, we were sold this bill of goods, you know being married is wonderful, you know it's just man, oh man. But, you asked me do I think about it over the years? but it wasn't until…I knew I had to go back to school because one night after being home, I found myself counting the laundry as I was putting it in the washing machine just to give my brain something to do, I knew I needed to go back to school. And when I was back in school, I was definitely happier but that's probably what led to the marriage breakdown because all of a sudden I started to realize that there was more to life then what I had. And, um…but then I never thought it would be possible for me to do more than what I was doing. That was really too bad…because now I've reached the point where my self-confidence is you know… and that's the thing about being at home is that your self-confidence just goes down…you know…the drain.

One participant voiced concern for her own daughters, as she considered the workload that women face. Though an admitted feminist, she was openly sceptical about the ability of women to combine effectiveness in the workforce and home, given the lack of support for families.

...everybody talks about family values but there is no support for the family.

Women with young kids, families with young kids and most of the burden falls

on women. So, I don't think you can have it all, I think that is what women

who are the daughters of women who have had careers are saying now – you

can't have it all. You can't have both... I see fragmentation for women. I

see...I don't think we are doing a very good job of communicating all of this.

It's almost like a dark secret that people don't want to talk about because it

seems like we can't solve the problem. It seems like it's unsolvable. I think

there are a lot of young women who are choosing to have kids and I think

why? Why don't they choose not to have children? Yes, there is very little

value put on children and parenting. It's not supported in our culture. And

traditionally, it is the women who are poor when they are older because they

make the sacrifices for their kids and they miss out on pensions...so I can

understand when women say they are not going to have kids.

Another participant spoke of the difference between how she feels now and how she felt
as a young mother. Once she had the energy to keep up the pace of a demanding
workplace and home life, but after more than twenty years in a high-stress and sometimes
demeaning job, she can no longer summon the stamina of her younger self.

You had to fit in all this, you were expected to have a full salary, you were

expected to maintain your home, maintain your children, you were expected

to do it all. And at twenty you could, so I mean having children when you

were twenty and twenty one, well you were young, you could pack in a

heartbeat, go for groceries, go on to the cabin.

For several of the participants, the stress associated with work has had a deleterious effect on their health. In the words of one participant:

I can remember days when at the end of the day I would have a pounding

headache and I didn't know they were migraines at the time. And I remember

my head on my desk and I was just so unhappy. Uhhh…I don't think I actually

took any days off sick, I do remember getting into trouble at one point

because I stopped answering the phone. And one of the schools where I was

at the principal was harassing me which I realize now I shouldn't have put up

with.

Another said:

P: You bring home this resentment, you bring home the fact that the customers

are angry with you, you bring home the fact that your coworkers are angry

about something and it just comes out at home...because of the stress level

you have what doctors are now looking at as IBS, Acid Reflux, migraine

headaches, all this now comes into play especially now as you are getting

older with nineteen, twenty years of doing this…I say to my coworkers, is it

really that bad or is it just me is it just my personality? And they say, "No it's

not you." Could someone please draft a letter and we can all sign it and bring

it home to our spouses that we are not all lunatics, it is that bad. They will

look at you and say, one of your friends, "No, I've got the same problem at

home, I don't want to see my husband, I don't want to see my children, I want

to be left alone." And I think that comes with the fact that you see so many

people during the week, that really privacy becomes a priority. It's for

sanity's sake too. To bury yourself in a book, to go somewhere alone...I've

been to psychologists, you know...

R: *What have they told you?*

P: *Quit your job! And I'm looking at them saying, I can't quit. I cannot quit.*

And they are looking at you saying, you're going to snap, it's either that or

quit your job. They are saying, "Can you do it on your husband's salary?"

And you're thinking, oh my God, can you? You know? In this world of two

salaries trying to make ends meet, paying mortgages, and you are looking at

them saying, 'can you do it on your salary' If you have two kids and this kind

of stuff, you know. And they are looking back at you saying, "You've got to

get out, you've got to get out." Two psychologists, two of them looking at you

saying, "You've got to get out."

Summary: Balancing Work and Family

Three of the participants spoke at considerable length about the challenges of working and raising a family. Staying at home with the children often resulted in diminished self-esteem and time spent wondering about other possibilities. Working at a job they disliked sometimes caused resentment and frustration to follow them into their home life to the detriment of domestic relationships. Participants discussed the stress of trying to balance parental roles with work responsibilities and the negative consequences for their health.

If I Could Do It Over Again

One component of regret is the imagined alternative. For some participants, it is clear what they should have done; for others, it is rather a vague sense that they missed opportunities or discovered things about themselves too late in life.

I think my major regret is that I didn't go on in academia to do my Master's
in Sociology because I really liked the work of somebody in California. And,
if I hadn't been involved in a relationship I think that is what I really would
have done, I would have done that because I would have had to. Whereas,
because I was involved in a relationship and my husband had a career that
was going in a different direction, it was almost like it took the pressure off
me. If I had been on my own I would have had to do it, and in talking about a
major regret that would be it. And going back to school has been part of that.
It's been to make up for the fact that I didn't do a Master's, but I didn't want
to do it in Sociology because that's not where my interests lie now. So, I'm
doing my Master's, so I'm taking care of that regret that I didn't go on to do
my Master's.

One participant discovered too late a passion for spending time with and caring for animals. This self-knowledge came after she had committed herself academically and professionally to another profession:

I think I would have become a vet, I think I would have had to have been a
little older. I wouldn't have been able to be 22 and be a vet. I would have had
to have some experience behind me. That's the way I feel, I think by the time I

was thirty, if I could have waited that long, yeah, I would have gone down
that road. Because, even now, and it's a terrible thing to say but I feel more
for animals in distress than people that are in distress. And that's because I
think people have a choice. People are very cruel, and they are particularly
cruel to animals.

Another participant discussed her regret about leaving school and about only knowing
now what she wanted her life to be like:

So, if I had to do my life over again, I definitely would have stayed in school. I
never really thought it through like how would I have done things. I would
have stayed in school, I would have a research job, I'd have a job where I
was working maybe two or three days a week and you know, at home and the
other four of five days just…and not a 9-5 and you're out.

One participant admitted that he should have followed his original dream despite facing
criticism from his family and the possibility of a lifetime of economic hardship:

R: So given your time back what would you have done?…Really hard
question, I know.

P: (laughter) That's a terribly hard question. I think I would have insisted on
going fishing.

On the other hand, one participant's experience of regret does not include a clearly
defined sense that she could have done things differently:

I can talk about regrets, but…it's not like I can see that there was a clear
alternative and life would have been that much better.

Summary: If I Could Do It Over Again

If given the opportunity to turn back time, all participants voiced a desire for something other than the career they created for themselves. For some, the alternative was clear ("I would have stayed in school," or "I would have been a vet"), but others remain uncertain. Several participants indicated that they only belatedly understood the lifestyle they wanted or the profession they desired, well after critical decisions about education and occupations had to be made.

What the Future Will Be

Most of the participants spoke of retirement and of the future for which they hoped. For some, retirement was not an option, or not something they had fully explored or defined, as in the following:

> Well, I'm fifty-four now and I always said that I'd retire when I hit fifty. Because being the miser that I guess that I am, or told that I was, I've collected money because I'm not a big spender. Because I've wanted to have something I can rely on, I've said, well, that's OK because by the time I'm fifty I'll be self sufficient enough to retire. Well, fifty came and went, and there was nothing in my psyche about retirement. I was too young, there was too much to give, it was just the wrong time. Now, and it is only four years later, I've been thinking because the pressures of the job are now... they are now at that point because I've been for twenty five years, I'm at a point where I am now saying it's time for somebody else to come in and do what I did. And I'd like to relax a bit and find out what it is that really makes me happy. Work

67

made me happy but now it's stressful, so it's only been the past few years that it has been stressful. So, I don't like stress in my life and I was always able to deal with stress, but now I find that I'm not able to deal with stress as well. So, I'm thinking maybe I should retire, but then I'm thinking if work was such a big part of my life, and I'm still young, what do I do? What do I do if I retire? I mean, yes, I can get involved in all kinds of activities but would it be what I needed it to be, to be fulfilled? So, I'm really...one day I'm retiring, and next day I won't. So, now I'm looking at, maybe sixty I'll retire, but I just don't know... I don't see myself as having that much free time and being able to occupy it. Now, I know that people say I'm so glad I retired because I don't know how I ever worked because I'm so busy all the time. But, I don't know if I'd find that... I think I need something more in my life and I don't know what it is. Now, I'm a single person too and I think that plays a role as well. I think when you are married and you have kids there are, well, there are lots of things that you can do, but when you are single, well, for me I am thinking am I going to be imposing on somebody, can I be self sufficient? Can I do everything up until this point when I'm older?

Retirement can mean finally having the opportunity to follow one's passion and fulfill a dream. It has the potential to be an escape from the stress and dissatisfaction of work. One participant has imagined her life without the burden of work; it involves full immersion in her passion for gardening:

I would like to retire and even do volunteer at a nursery. I would want to volunteer, I wouldn't even want to get paid; I would want to go there to find out how they go about reproducing different specimens of flowers. And, seeing some kind of development from that, doing some landscaping projects around the city, where you know they put in the wrong thing and you're passing by and you're saying, it's going to die and you wasted money. Sometimes, I feel like stopping and hauling it all up and saying, these things are not going to grow, you put them in at the wrong time of the year, they need cool soil for their roots, or warm soil for their roots to grow. And you just plunk something in the wrong soil, that's frustrating, but a good frustrating. And you're saying 'oh lord, who's doing this?'... But that is what I would do, I would spend my time doing things like that, that is what I would enjoy, relaxing, calming, interesting, fascinating, knowing that you could be in a greenhouse somewhere with the music on low working on something, pollinating something else. It's just something I've watched, I've watched every gardening show... that's what I would do, I would pack up. First of all, I've never had a great fascination with this rock, I would move to Victoria, BC where all the gardens apparently are fantastic. I've often said to my husband I would love to go to Florida, I would love to go on a Caribbean cruise, I'd like to go to Victoria, BC.

For at least one participant, retirement in the traditional sense may never be a possibility. Having spent his life in jobs he has found unfulfilling, he now faces the challenge of

finding work at a stage in his life where he will face barriers due to his age. For him, retirement simply means replacing one undesirable job with another:

Retirement for me is not very much, because I don't have any pension. I was in a job with no benefits whatsoever. There was no pension plan...so now I'm just sort of getting by, that's all. Who's going to hire you once you're 62 years old? I'm looking for a position now and who's going to hire me? The only thing I can do now is work in a store. Who wants to start again at 62 years old working in a store? And the only reason I'm going to do something like that is that I've got to. In order to get by, in order to survive. I go day by day without knowing where my next dollar is coming from. ...I feel pretty useless some days because I feel that I should be out working at something. I'm supposed to be done; I'm supposed to be retired but I feel like I should be out working at something. You can't really retire if you've had a career that you haven't found really fulfilling. If you've got a big retirement plan you're fine, you can plan your retirement and do what you want to do. I'd love to go see the world, I'd love to be able to travel, I'm interested in traveling but you've got to have money for that. I enjoy golfing, I enjoy lots of things but it all takes money. Our society is geared on money.

In discussing her current situation and plans for the future, one participant discussed the need to pay attention to unexplored aspects of her life. At present, she was looking at ways to express herself through artistic endeavours:

I feel like I'm stuck and I'm scared to move forward...and I still feel stuck. I still feel like I don't know who I am after all this work and all this effort. And, I think I'm frightened to be who I am, I think that's what I'm trying to do now, be more vociferous about who I am because I was brought up to be nice and good. And to be nice and good, you don't step out, you don't stand up and speak out, you stay in the shadows, and you say what people want to hear. You don't become a fully-fledged human being in the way that a man is going to be a human being. You're encouraged to attach yourself to other people and live your life through other people, and that's why I don't want to teach because it is the same role as being a mother and a wife; it's living your life through other people and all these service jobs, that's what women do, they serve other people...and so, I don't know whether this is career or not, but if I were to die...yes, this is better for me. At the end of my life, if I look back, what would I have regrets about? It's not a career, it's not work as such - it's doing something that fulfills this deep need in me. ...I've got this deep sense that at the end of the day, you're born alone, you die alone. And exploring this side of my life is helping me give voice and to follow those sort of yearnings which on your deathbed you look back and say, "I wish I'd...". Dance and writing, they're the things that give me that feeling if I don't give it a good chance I'll think, why didn't you do it, you had that opportunity and you missed it...more than not doing Sociology, it's not doing the Master's. Good, I'm feeling good, I feel good because I've had all sorts of thoughts and I've not really explored it as much as this. And as I'm exploring it I'm

thinking – yes I have regrets, who wouldn't. I'm over fifty years old, who

wouldn't have regrets. But none of them are uhhh, if only I had done that.

None of them are like that. They are more like, maybe I should have done this,

maybe I should have done that. And now at this stage, it's like what do you

have deep regret about? And it is this sense of giving voice to who I really am

and being authentic. And expressing that in the community, because I can

with select friends, but I'm at the stage now where I want to take it out into

the world, which is the next step for me.

Summary: What the Future Will Be

All of the participants spoke about their future, some with a clear picture in mind and others with less certainty. One participant saw no end in sight; despite a lifetime spent working, he did not see a traditional retirement in his near future. While several participants spoke of uncertainty in this time of their lives, two were using the time to pursue educational opportunities that had been put on hold. In addition, participants spoke of engaging in activities that they genuinely loved in order to find that elusive happiness and fulfillment. Chapter Five follows with a discussion of themes that arose from the narratives and recommendations for future research and practice.

Chapter Five

Discussion

When initial literature searches on the topic of regret revealed a high prevalence of career-related regrets, it seemed an open invitation for further exploration. Almost two-thirds of the population have regrets in life and a vast proportion of these regrets are career-related. The first chapter offers an overview of the macro level of career (categorized according to past, present and future) for the baby boom generation. This chapter will examine individual experiences using the aforementioned categories and elaborating on the themes described in the previous chapter.

The Past

Most of the themes that emerge from the narratives relate to the past experiences of participants. Life stories having been recounted in chronological order, most of the content of the narratives related to the past. Ruminations of imagining alternatives or undoing decisions and actions of the past comprise a key aspect of regret experience. When considered in hindsight, life stories transform into meaning structures through which individuals come to know and understand themselves.

Early Influences

In describing their past, participants place emphasis on who and what had influenced their early career conceptions and decisions. People in the lives of participants played significant roles in encouraging or dissuading them in their early career choices. Sometimes, influence was indirect, as in the case of one participant who recalls recognizing at an early age that she did not want to be in service like her parents. Though she was determined to avoid professions that would require her to care or tend on others,

her work as a teacher and mother did not permit such a desire to be fulfilled. Another individual, who wanted to continue the tradition of fishing in his family, was strongly discouraged by his parents, who were among those in the community who viewed the profession as common and lower class. Fishermen often spent their lives indebted to merchants who supplied them with the equipment they required to do their work. Despite his affinity for fishing, he abided by his parents' wishes and found work in a store, eventually training to become a bookkeeper. His early career decision was also influenced by a large government-sponsored resettlement program that was undertaken in Newfoundland at the time. Thousands of individuals were moved from remote areas of the Province into larger centres. Many of these people discontinued fishing, breaking with family traditions that dated back numerous generations.

One participant also discusses the role of moving from a rural area to an urban centre. The motivation for the move was largely based on improving her educational opportunities. Yet, her parents never encouraged her in terms of any specific career, leaving educational decisions to her. Instead, the parents of her ex-boyfriend dissuaded her from becoming a teacher. For those participants, who were the first in their family to pursue post-secondary education, specific advice from parents on professions to pursue was almost non-existent. Rather, influential people were often outside the family and did not, other than in the realm of career decisions, have significant roles in the lives of participants.

The role of chance events in contributing to career regret is demonstrated by the experience of another individual. One participant describes filling out a scholarship application and the person helping her complete the form checked the box marked 'Ph.D.'

as the desired educational level. Never before had she considered herself as capable of such academic achievements and she had never had anyone encourage her in this regard. The brief encounter in filling out this application stayed with her throughout her entire life. The idea that she was capable of obtaining a Ph.D. was one she often thought of as she worked as a teacher and mother. It eventually took shape as a goal she wished to pursue but also influenced her level of dissatisfaction with her life, thus influencing her experience of regret.

Given the experiences of the participants, it seems that for the participants in this project, the early influences on their careers fit with the Systems Theory Framework of Career Development. According to this framework, "career development [is] a dynamic process, depicted through its process influences, recursiveness, change over time and chance" (Patton & McMahon, 2006 p. 154). Beyond the individual traits, influences from the broader context (political, geographic, historical and other) form the systems that factor into individual career development. Patton and McMahon posit that some systems of influence that have not received much attention in traditional career literature could have a significant impact on people's lives. This does seem to be the case for some of the participants in the present study, who identify geographic (rural/urban) and political (resettlement) factors as directly influencing their early life and subsequent careers.

Why I Regret my Choice

When asked why they regret their careers, most participants speak of being unhappy or unfulfilled in their work. Having listened to their stories, one is struck by the range of regret experienced. One individual, not wholly unsatisfied with her present career, would have chosen another that was very similar but which would have seen her

skills and efforts employed in the service of caring for animals. For this person, regret over her career involves the acknowledgement that she discovered her passion for working with animals at a point in her life when she felt it was too late to start down a different career path. Her regret induced a curiosity that in turn motivates her to spend her free time interacting with animals.

For another participant, dissatisfaction with her job has seriously compromised other aspects of her life. She is angry, and this anger has had a negative impact on her relationship with her husband and her role as a mother. Hers is a daily lived regret. On an ongoing basis, she experiences the consequences of her decision to take and keep a job that she dislikes. Each morning she sits by herself, psychologically preparing herself for the day she must face. For this participant, anger at her regrettable choice has altered who she feels she is as a person. No longer upbeat and social, she has withdrawn from family and friends and finds only temporary distraction with solitary pursuits.

Beyond not feeling happy in the work they are engaged in, some saw their efforts as futile in the broader context. For one individual, who worked as a Fisheries Observer, the work proved to be too dissimilar from that of an inshore fisherman. His long stays at sea, the lack of a pension, and the recognition of his role as a political smokescreen with no influence over the inevitable collapse of the fishery made him dislike and regret his career choice.

Clearly, work is not a discrete category in the lives of the participants in this study. It weighs heavily on their self-perception and development. Richardson (1993) did not distinguish one's life as separate from one's career. In listening to the stories of

participants and analyzing the narratives, the interviewer was convinced that to tell one's career story is to tell one's life story.

The Passage of Time

Participants feel they have invested so much time into their careers that they could not change to a different occupation. While some identify factors such as parental advice and unexpected pregnancy as playing a role in influencing career paths, more recent influences such as familial responsibility and financial obligations weigh heavily in determining decisions with regards to career. Each stage of life introduced a new set of demands and possible barriers to pursuing desired career goals. Participants speak of having seen fewer and fewer opportunities to fix or compensate for their past regrets. One individual spoke of a noticeable shift in her perspective of life when she turned forty-five. Prior to that age, she viewed life as being full of potential and possibility, but subsequently she was conscious of time and the need to get things done.

Also, participants noted that as they got older, they discovered activities that made them truly happy, such as caring for animals, dance, gardening, and writing. These interests emerged over time, sometimes long after career decisions and commitments had been made. Given their options at the time, several participants felt that their earlier career decisions were the best ones they could make. For some, it was a more gradual realization that they had set out on a path they were unhappy with, and they did not think they could change. Interestingly, this is described within Chaos Theory (Pryor & Bright, 2007) as slow shift, where the full impact of seemingly benign decisions is not felt until long after the decisions have been made.

Balancing Work and Family

Participants with children speak of the challenges of working and raising a family, most notably the long hours away and the energy and emotional fortitude devoted to work. Some, especially in the 'caring' professions such as teaching, found that after a full day's work they had very little left to offer their families. Several participants disparagingly mentioned the idea that "you can have it all" as it relates to work and family—a concept born out of the second wave of feminism, that seemed more a myth than reality to these participants. Regardless, they had toiled under this belief, committing themselves to a successful balance of career and home-life without success. This sense of not being able to create the career or home they wished for weighs heavily in their interpretations of themselves. Not feeling satisfied in either domain caused at least two participants to give up their paid work to become full-time mothers. With this decision came doubt over whether they had made the right choice. The sense of having abandoned their goals did not necessarily abate with time, although some participants did embark on different paths. For another participant, the long hours devoted to work were necessary not only for the income but also for the benefits. With a chronically sick child, she was forced to remain in a job she strongly disliked. For her, the job became a sacrifice that was necessary in order to maintain the best medical treatment for her child. This is consistent with Fee-Fulkerson (1998) who posits that the reasons women stay in jobs they dislike are not simple decisions. They are decisions in which the lives of and responsibility to others have to be considered.

For many, the unhappiness they experienced at work followed them home. It seriously influenced relationships with partners and children. One participant, who

worked away from home for extended periods, found the instability and the uncertainty

over when he would be returning home particularly difficult. Once he was assigned a job,

he was given no notice of when it would end. There was an absence from his family, but

also an absence of control over the amount of time he spent working. This lack of control

over time and the commitment required to his work interfered with family life.

The Present

For participants, the present is a time for considering the past and making plans

for the future. For most, it is a period of transition and looking for opportunities to make

the latter part of their lives meaningful and fulfilling. However, for those with regrets, the

present can be occupied by thought of the past and considerations of how things could

have transpired differently, 'if only.'

If I Could Do it Over Again

All participants speak of the wish to have done differently things in the past. Some

know definitively what they should have done, but for others there is no clear solution.

Now in possession of more self knowledge and confidence, several participants articulate

what their past decisions would have been. For some, it was returning to a plan they had

originally been dissuaded from (such as pursuit of higher education), or acknowledging

earlier on their dissatisfaction with their job and taking the risk to leave.

However, despite having recognized their regrets in hindsight and describing them,

devising a different plan proved difficult. Career indecision does not necessarily refer

only to future decisions; as seen in the present study, it can influence interpretations of

one's past as well. Simply put, even with the ability to review their past, no easy answers

or solutions emerge. For some, with age came a greater understanding of themselves and

their interests, but this did not necessarily translate into a better understanding of what they thought they should have done in the past, or what they would do in the future. This is consistent with the work of Kreishok: "just because individuals know themselves reasonably well does not necessarily mean they will be able to make good decisions based on that knowledge." (1998, p. 213). Self-understanding will not necessarily translate into good decisions or the ability to create the life one wants.

The Future

Anticipatory regret refers to making decisions in the present to avoid the experience of regret in the future. Even with hindsight, self knowledge and understanding, career choices can be difficult, and it is possible that people can live their entire lives without knowing 'what they were supposed to be when they grew up.'

What the Future Will Be

All of the participants are either transitioning to retirement or retired. For one individual, there is no foreseeable retirement as financial constraints will keep him in the workforce for years to come. His hoped-for retirement of leisure activities such as travel and golf will have to be pursued after work hours or during vacation periods.

There are concerns raised about self-sufficiency and not wanting to burden others. The issue of losing independence and relying on others, however, is not in the forefront for most participants. Of primary concern is a desire to devote more time to activities that make them happy. Retirement is regarded by most participants as a time of opportunity and with that comes the pressure to make the right decisions and to take full advantage of their prospects.

In keeping with the life design concept, creating a meaningful and fulfilling life is an ongoing process that does not necessarily follow set stages or scripts, as noted by Savickas et. al. (2009): "The counsellor inquires of the client whether there were any options given up, daydreams destroyed, or choices circumscribed. It may be time to retell and once again experience these silenced stories. Through common discovery and re-authoring, stories can be reorganized, revised and revitalized," (p. 246). In keeping with regret research, the word 'relinquished' might be added to the list at the end of the previous citation. If individuals cannot undo the decisions of their past or reach their original goals, relinquishing those goals or transforming them into realistic ones can help them overcome the recurring thoughts and emotions linked with their regrets (Roese and Summerville, 2005).

Practical Implications

Why is regret important to counselling? Simply put, regret potentially can link us to our past, ground us in the present and direct our future. For some individuals, regrets will be interpreted as minor transgressions or slight distractions. For others, they may become the overarching theme in their life story. Embedded within the experience of regret is valuable information on how individuals construe and understand themselves and their world.

It is possible that regrets can be examined within the career theories that have been described to present day. The author focused intentionally on theories that are narratively-, ecologically- and/or contextually-based, not only because they are the most recent developments in the field, but also because they allow for regret to be interpreted in complex systems. People's lives are complicated, and attempts to reduce these lives to

simple formulae or discrete operations do not adequately capture them. While there may be regret over the decision that was made, it may be compounded by further regrets over the many possibilities given up. Incorporated in the life that is constructed should be the imagined life that can influence interpretation of one's self and the life being lived.

There has been a strong focus within the field of career development on career entry (Schein, 2007). In the past, when careers were much more linear and predictable in their progression, such a focus was necessary and relevant. However, as traditional concepts of career began to change, in part due to advances in technology, information systems and an increasingly globalized marketplace, the maintained focus on career entry did not reflect the issues and challenges faced by individuals on their varied career paths. Issues surrounding retirement will be a huge future challenge for career counsellors, as much of the information available on retirement focuses on financial planning (Noone, Stephen & Alpass, 2009). If demographic predictions hold true, close to one-third of the Canadian population will be retiring over the next ten to fifteen years (Statistics Canada, 2003). It is clear from the present study that individuals who are close to or have retired are still engaged in the process of meaningful engagement, self-expression and understanding through their work and involvement in the community. The focus on finances, while important, does not seem adequate when considering the major life transition individuals face when planning for later life. The search for happiness and fulfillment is ongoing and needs to be supported at every phase of life.

Strengths of the Current Study

One area of strength for this study is the methodology; qualitative research allows for a broad examination of individual life narratives. This research design allows for a

82

comprehensive and deeply personal first-hand account of the experience of regret. Husserl (1982) recommends that each discipline employ a phenomenological method that would serve as the basis for all future research within that discipline. While this largely has not come to pass in most research disciplines, this thesis as one of the few studies specifically examining the topic of career regret does contribute to Husserl's original plan. Phenomenology is well suited to counselling research because, like counselling, interviews are often open-ended and participants disclose information at their own discretion. In both counselling and phenomenological research, it is the client/participant who has the power to determine what is shared in a session/interview. A narrative review process is empowering for participants, as they ultimately determine what they want to share and what aspects of their lives they find personally meaningful.

The participants themselves are also a strength of this study. The individuals vary according to educational level, occupation and socio-economic background, and their experiences are drawn from very full and varied personal narratives. Yet, as much as one might expect disparity in their stories, there are elements/themes that are shared by all.

Although regret has often been researched in the short term, this study attempts to examine the experience of regret as it develops over the course of an individual's life. There are few studies that attempt to examine the transformative process of regret, and the current study adds to our understanding of this phenomenon.

Limitations of the Current Study

Although listed as a strength, the methodology also has weaknesses that need to be addressed. The data are presented through a hermeneutic phenomenological method whereby the researcher's own biases and feelings likely influence interpretation. While

the current study has much to offer in improving our understanding of career-related regrets, generalizing from phenomenological research is not recommended. A possible limitation of this study is the fact that participants did not have the questions prior to the interview. Participants were invited to describe their experience of career regret as they reflected on their past and considered their futures. It is unknown whether 'in the moment' recollections could have been improved upon with the opportunity to review the question prior to the interviews.

In addition, generalization of findings based on gender is not warranted, as there was a gender imbalance. In the present study, four of the five participants are female. Similarly, a more culturally diverse sample would be useful. Although one participant is an immigrant and another was raised in a different province, cultural influences on the experience of regret are not largely represented in the present study. Further, since this was an exploratory study utilizing five participants, there is no attempt to generalize findings, as more in-depth examinations are needed.

Terminology can vary depending on the discipline. Sometimes, clear definitions are not available; for example, arriving at a clear understanding of 'retirement' proved difficult. Traditional conceptions are not necessarily relevant and the term appears to be undergoing a process of redefinition. Within career development, the word, *career*, has a much broader definition than is used within regret research. Undoubtedly, these differences in terminology make bridging these disciplines challenging.

Directions for Future Research

Given that there is little extant specific research on career regret, the research possibilities are many. What follows is not an exhaustive list, but one which details

points of interest for the author that fall outside the parameters of the current study.
Possibilities for future research include:

- Examining the extent to which career dissatisfaction overlaps with the experience
  of career regret.

- Exploring whether certain professions induce more regret than others.

- Taking a theme from those detailed in this study and using it as the focus or
  reframing it as a research question (i.e. to what extent does work/life balance
  contribute to the experience of career regret?)

- Focusing on individuals who experience "daily lived regrets" (that is, those
  individuals who keenly feel their regrets and suffer the consequences each day).

- Examining the effect on an individual of having a parent with career regret.
  (Interestingly, all participants chose to tell their stories mostly chronologically,
  some beginning in early childhood and others in late adolescence. All participants
  spoke of their parents' careers but the career paths of their own children were
  rarely or briefly mentioned.)

- Using narrative approaches to explore the imagined lives of individuals and the
  role of 'imagined lives' in counselling.

- Determining the extent to which career exploration programs, which offer
  seemingly endless career possibilities, contribute to creating career regret.
  (Research suggests that opportunity breeds regret.)

- Assessing the role technology plays in reconciling or reinforcing life regrets.
  (Will programs like Second Life, or other virtual reality simulations that allow for

imagined alternatives to be indulged, influence our experience of regret interpretation?)

Conclusion

Regret has been described as a "higher order cognitive emotion"—in order to experience it, one has to be able to imagine possible alternatives and compare them to reality. Regret can range from the slight to the extreme and can persist throughout one's entire life. Regret provides an opportunity to re-examine the past and inform present decisions to create a desired future. This study attempts to provide an initial review of regret's place within career development research and literature. The author contends that when there is evidence of regret in the lives of individuals, it is worth close consideration. The absences in people's lives, the missed opportunities, and the wishes that have been unfulfilled reveal as much about people as their achievements.

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Appendix A

Letter of Introduction for Research Participants

Juanita Hennessey
Masters Candidate
Faculty of Education
Memorial University of Newfoundland
C/O 37 Doyle's Rd.
Goulds, NL A1S 1A2

September 1, 2005

Dear Participant,

I am a graduate student in the Counselling Psychology program in the Faculty of Education at the Memorial University of Newfoundland. I am currently conducting a research study under the supervision of Dr. Mildred Cahill in partial completion of the requirements for the degree of Master of Education. I am writing this letter to provide information on my project Career regret: A Phenomenological study of retirees' experiences of a regrettable career to help you determine whether you would like to participate.

I am undertaking this study to explore the experience of people who have worked their entire adult lives in jobs they more than dislike—but regret. It is my intention to interview participants who are currently retired or near retirement so as to increase the understanding of career regret as it is seen from the perspective of those at a late stage of adult development.

If you decide that you would like to participate, I will meet with you twice for individual interviews. The first interview will focus on the timeline history of your career (early work, education, influences, etc.). The second interview will focus on your perceptions of your career and a discussion of the major themes that emerge from the information you provide. The interviews will be audiotaped for ease of transcription and all information will confidential.

As a voluntary participant in this study you have the right to refuse any question, terminate the interview at any point or withdraw from participating altogether. All information collected will exclude any identifying information. The final draft will contain direct quotes but you will be given a fictitious name; every precaution will be taken to ensure your anonymity. The audiotapes will be kept in locked filing cabinet in a locked room and will be destroyed two years after the publication of the report. The final report will be available to you, free of charge, at your request.

You are provided with two copies of the consent form. If you would like to participate, please sign both; one will be kept in my files and the other should be kept for your own records.

A proposal for this research has been approved by the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research at Memorial. If you have ethical concerns about the research (such as the way you have been treated or your rights as a participant) you may contact Ms. Eleanor Butler at the Office of Research, 737-8368 .Should you have any questions or require any further information please do not hesitate to contact me at 745-4387 or my supervisor Dr. Mildred Cahill at 737-6980.

Thank you for your consideration,

Sincerely,

Juanita Hennessey

Enc/: Consent for research participation form

Appendix B

Consent Form for Research Participants

Research Project Title: Career Regret: A Phenomenological study of retirees' experience of a regrettable career.

My name is Juanita Hennessey and I am a Masters student in the Counselling Psychology program of the Faculty of Education at Memorial University. I am currently conducting research with retired individuals who look back at their career with regret. I am requesting your consent to participate in this research and would like to meet with you to discuss your experiences.

Your participation will consist of two audio-taped interviews scheduled at your convenience at a mutually agreed upon location. The first interview will focus on your experiences as you reflect on your career. In the second interview I will provide a transcribed copy of the interview for you to review for possible omissions or alterations.

Information you provide will be kept confidential. You will not be able to be identified and all pertinent information (name of employer, dates of employment) will be omitted. Audio tapes, notes and transcripts will be kept in a locked cabinet in my place of residence and destroyed five years after the completion of the project. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you have the right to withdraw from the study at any time. The results of this research will be made available to you upon request.

This research has been approved by Memorial University of Newfoundland's Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research. If you have any questions please do not hesitate to contact me, Juanita Hennessey, at 745-4387. If you wish to speak to my supervisor you may reach Dr. Mildred Cahill at Memorial University, 737-6980.

Your signature on this form indicates that you have read the letter of introduction and that you understand the purpose of the study, potential harms and benefits, how your rights will be protected, and agree to participate in the study. Please provide the method by which you can be contacted in the space below.

Contact Information: _____

_____   _____
Participant's Signature   Date

_____   _____
Researcher's Signature   Date