TOWARDS MEANINGFUL WORK: A PRELIMINARY UNDERSTANDING OF CAREER PARALYSIS

by

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This qualitative study aimed to explore the, as of yet, little understood phenomenon of career paralysis. Career paralysis is a new term adopted by the researcher to represent the increasingly common experience among adults today of wanting to make a career change toward something more meaningful but, for several reasons, being unable to actually make a change. The goal of this research was to develop a preliminary working model of career paralysis through an in-depth exploration of people’s in-situ experience of the phenomenon. Eight females and five males, ranging in age from 26 to 41, participated in the study. Participants self-identified with a range of ethnocultural backgrounds and a range of professional backgrounds. Conducted within a phenomenological framework, open-ended semi-structured interviews were completed with each participant and interview transcripts were analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis. Participants wanted to make a career change both from a desire for more meaningful work and from a desire to escape variables of job dissatisfaction. At the core of their lived experience of career paralysis, participants described an underlying knowledge or truth that change was needed that was in direct conflict with a deep sense of stuckness regarding the possibility of career change. This conflict of career paralysis was revealed to affect participants’ lives across many dimensions of experiencing. Participants described both external and important internal barriers, which hindered their interest, motivation, and efforts toward change.
The implications of the findings for theory are discussed and include the importance of meaning in career, and the role of inertia variables in adult career decision-making. In addition, the findings of the study gave rise to the two-part Emergent Model of Career Paralysis. The model describes both the maintenance of career paralysis through an examination of the relationships between barriers to career change, and describes the various dimensions of being within the experience as related by participants. The model may serve as a preliminary guide for practice and points to a need for thorough assessment of individuals experiencing career paralysis and integrative treatment with special focus on meaning and inertia factors. Finally, directions for future research are proposed.
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At these moments, we find ourselves at an impasse, and we suffer. At work we feel stale or unchallenged--or fret that we are not progressing to a more rewarding role. In our personal lives we feel agitated, deflated, or downright bored. We are desperate to discover a meaningful way to contribute at work, to find a reinvigorated role in our families, and to dive back into the current of our own lives. We sense that life is flowing all around us, but we sit like a boulder in a river, yearning to be swept along and transformed by the river’s great energy.

- Timothy Butler, Getting Unstuck: How Dead Ends Become New Paths
Chapter 1:
Introduction

We all know someone--ourselves, a friend, a family member, a colleague--who is currently contemplating a career change. We are also likely to know someone who has been seemingly contemplating a career change for many years. For some reason, however, this person appears to be stuck; he or she is yearning for change yet unable to move forward. While there are many examples of successful career changes, there appears to be just as many career changes that seem perpetually stalled. Wherever we look, there are examples: a successful corporate executive who has been wanting to change careers for the past decade but who can’t seem to justify a move or decide what she would rather do; a junior government policy advisor who is chronically unfulfilled at work, despite new opportunities within his ministry, but whose new career search never progresses to action; an engineer who has been ostensibly leaving his career to pursue photography for the past five years. For whatever reason, these people are stuck in a chronic state of indecision, inaction, confusion, frustration, or struggle when it comes to career or career change.

A thorough review of the literature on career problems and transitions (e.g., Allen, Herst, Bruck, & Sutton, 2000; Multon, Wood, Heppner, & Gysbers, 2007; Carless & Arnup, 2011; Brown, et al., 2012) revealed no empirical research on this problem--this specific experience or phenomenon among adults of stalled change, confusion, or “stuckness” in career--despite increasing anecdotal evidence, including coverage in the popular press (e.g., Caprino, 2013a, 2013b; Ibarra, 2002), prevalent stories from the
researcher’s friends, family, and colleagues, and consensus among career counselling and psychotherapy practitioners, that it is becoming a rather common experience. Indeed, it appears to be a fairly well known, but as of yet, undocumented, phenomenon among professionals of many ages and of many career stages today. This research project proposes to address this gap in the literature by offering an initial empirical study and exploration of the phenomenon. While there are many existing constructs in the field of career development, including, for example, career/job dissatisfaction, career indecision, career barriers, and career transitions, which speak to elements of this experience and provide valuable insight, the present study proposes a new distinct construct to more fully articulate and understand the problem.

Given the lack of existing documentation and literature, the researcher was confronted with the preliminary task of choosing a term to denote the phenomenon. Internet searches (which revealed innumerable blog postings, personal stories, and self-help sites) and popular press coverage of the phenomenon offer inconsistent terminology such as career limbo, career inertia, career indecision, and career paralysis (e.g., Archer, 2013; Caprino, 2013a). After a thorough consideration of the options, the researcher adopted the term career paralysis. The Oxford English Dictionary (2013) defines paralysis as “the inability to act or function properly.” Similarly, the Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2013) defines paralysis as “loss of the ability to move; a state of powerlessness or incapacity to act.” When this definition of paralysis is applied to a career context, career paralysis, it suggests an inability or powerlessness to act or move within the career domain, it implies a state of “stuckness” that appears to appropriately label the experience of those people described above. Additionally, it appears to denote
the struggle and sense of powerlessness that is thought to accompany the experience. *Paralysis*, moreover, in contrast to terms such as *limbo, inertia* or *indecision*, for example, appears to capture the internal struggle between the desire to move/make change and the seeming *inability* to do so.

Additionally, the term *career paralysis* appears to have been first introduced (or at the very least popularized to some degree), by occupational psychologist Rob Archer of London, United Kingdom in 2008 via his business website, *The Career Psychologist* (n.d.). Archer offers counselling services for clients dealing with a variety of career concerns, career change among them. His use of the term (Archer, 2013) to describe the feelings of paralysis experienced by people who are looking to make a career change toward something more meaningful because they are unhappy, bored, or unfulfilled at work but who, for any of several reasons, cannot seem to make a decision or move forward, is congruent with the phenomenon of inquiry explored by the current research project.

It may be helpful to situate this proposed phenomenon within definitions of work, career, and vocation/calling. Work has been referred to as “purposeful activity to earn money or other reward and possibly to produce a product or service to others” (Sharf, 2010, p. 3). Moving outward from this basic definition of work, career has been defined as “the combination and sequence of roles played by a person during the course of a lifetime” (Super, 1980, p. 282). Career thus captures a more holistic understanding of what it means to work in various capacities and at various times in one’s life. Finally, vocation and calling, concepts that are receiving increasing interest in the career development field, refer to the experience of connecting one’s work “to an overall sense
of purpose or meaningfulness toward other-oriented ends” (Dik & Duffy, 2000, p. 428).
In contrast to vocation, the notion of calling includes an element of a transcendent
summons towards particular work (Dik & Duffy, 2009). It seems that the experience
career paralysis may represent a thwarted struggle toward more meaningful career and
possibly, for some, towards a vocation or calling.

The researcher’s preliminary theorizing and speculation would describe career
paralysis as a paralyzing and debilitating state of indecision, inaction, frustration, and
uncertainty around career, which can easily begin to affect other important areas of life
such as mental health and relationships. It is thought that many individuals may come
through this period of career paralysis on their own, but that it may sometimes take years
to do so. It is also suggested that the paralysis may result from multiple factors. For
example, an individual may wish to do more meaningful work yet be unable to actually
articulate what more meaningful work would look like for him or her. Alternatively, an
individual may be constrained from making a career change toward something more
meaningful because of the risks involved or because of cognitive or other biases around,
for example, the probability of success of the career change. One definition of career
barriers is “events or conditions, either within the person or in his or her environment,
that make career progress difficult” (Swanson & Woitke, 1997, p. 434). Career paralysis
could as be thought of as a complex system of career barriers that interact in a particular
way to result in particularly unsatisfying and frustrating non-action on career over a
protracted period of time. This theorizing, however, is based on anecdotal evidence and
clinical experience. As mentioned above, no empirical research or statistics exist to date
on the phenomenon. It is the goal of this research project, therefore, to shed initial light
on these theories and speculations through an exploration of real data, and to help the field move toward a preliminary model and conceptualization of career paralysis. The above is a necessarily preliminary attempt at defining the new proposed construct of career paralysis. It is hoped that this research project can help to clarify and refine this definition.

**Context of the Inquiry**

According to statistics provided by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Canadians spent an average of 1,710 hours working in 2012 (OECD, 2012). This equates to most of us spending nearly a third of our waking hours at work. From a time perspective alone, work and career are significant components of individuals’ lives. Moreover, it is acknowledged that work and career interact significantly with people’s lives in a myriad of ways. The state of our career, including job practicalities and levels of job satisfaction, influence our physical health (Frankish, Moulton, Quantz, & Carson, 2007; Leung & Cheung, 2010; O’Campo, Eaton, & Muntaner, 2004), our family and relationships (Allen et al., 2000; APA, 2012), our psychological well-being (Bowling, Eschleman, & Wang, 2010; Erdogan, Bauer, Truxillo, & Mansfield, 2012; Leung & Cheung, 2010), and overall life satisfaction (Bowling et al., 2010; Erdogan et al., 2012). Given the incredible importance and influence of work and career, it is no wonder that a rich literature has developed in the field of career development.

The present study is situated amidst this already extensive literature, which includes as disparate areas of focus as models of initial career choice and decision-making (Bullock-Yowell, Peterson, Reardon, Leirer, & Reed, 2011; Guay, Ratelle,
Senecal, Larose, & Deschenes, 2006; Tinsley, 1992) to the experience of burnout (Jenaro, Flores, & Arias, 2007) and workplace bullying (Dzuka & Dalbert, 2007). This literature has given us classic models of career choice and development such as Holland’s theory of types (1966, 1997) and Super’s life-span life-space approach (1953, 1990), which continue to play important roles in career counselling and career self-help today.

Submerged within the career development literature at large, the present study is also intimately connected to a new and exciting body of work emerging more recently in the field (Lips-Wiersama & Morris, 2011; Savickas et al., 2009; Sterner, 2012). This new research is being fuelled by a rapidly changing world of work (Trevor-Roberts, 2006; Sullivan & Baruch, 2009) and a more dynamic and fluid conceptualization of career (Briscoe, Hall, & Frautschy DeMuth, 2006; Meijers, 1998; Savickas et al., 2009). Career development is no longer a predictable or linear phenomenon whereby someone chooses a career, gets a job, and stays with the same company until retirement. For example, a report released by the U.S. Department of Labour in 2010, whose findings came from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979, revealed that on average, baby boomers held 11.3 different jobs from the ages of 18 to 46. Moreover, there has been a fundamental shift in attitudes toward career. Individuals are increasingly putting subjective career values such as family responsibilities and personal fulfillment ahead of traditional or objective career values such as security, salary, or prestige (Hall, 2004; Power, 2009). Within this framework, career is now expected by many to be a primary source of purpose and meaning (Dik, Duffy, & Eldridge, 2009; Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2011).

New research is thus emerging to better fit this new world of work. For example,
different research projects are exploring and modeling how people navigate this new world of work and how they create their own career (Arthur, Khapova, & Wilderom, 2005; Savickas et al., 2009), how they negotiate multiple job and career changes (Chen, Ployhart, Cooper Thomas, Anderson, & Bliese, 2011; Gomes & Teixera, 2000; Griffeth, Hom, & Gaertner, 2000; Tan & Kramer, 2012), and how people and corporations alike define meaningful work (Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009; Schultze & Miller, 2004). The present study endeavours to offer a rich and compelling description and articulation of the experience of career paralysis, which will help to flesh out these emerging models of career development and career change in the new world of work. It aims to provide crucial information regarding where in the models, in the pathways proposed, do people get stuck and what this experience is like.

Above and beyond the field of career development, this study is further situated within the discipline of counselling psychology. The knowledge gained by studying the experience of career paralysis will be invaluable in assisting psychologists, psychotherapists, and counsellors guide their clients in working through this issue. Knowing the close relationship of work and career to other areas of well-being, it would be a disservice not to bring any knowledge gained of the experience of career paralysis to the broader field of counselling more generally.

**Study Rationale**

The current state of the career development field reveals a rich and rapidly evolving research literature. Important work is being conducted to explore society’s new relationship to career and new models are beginning to grasp the complexity of career and career development today. There is much, however, that is unknown and several
authors have described important gaps in the literature that remain to be filled.

Firstly, Arthur, Khapova, and Wilderom (2005), highlighted the disconnect in the literature between career theory and career success. They noted, for example, that current underlying career theory is fragmented with one body of work prioritizing indicators of objective career success and another much smaller body of work prioritizing subjective indicators of career success. This paints a murky backdrop for interpreting the success of any career theory in predicting, describing, or understanding career development or career problems. In the context of the present study, how does one understand a woman who has achieved incredible objective career success and yet has been contemplating a career change for years due to a sense of meaninglessness and boredom at work? Has she achieved a successful career? If yes, how are we to understand her career dissatisfaction and her sense of being lost with regards to career? Where is she in terms of stages of career development? What is stopping her from making her desired career change? Arthur et al. (2005) suggest that one way of answering these types of questions is to broaden our horizon to include subjective and qualitative indicators of career success rather than relying solely on static indicators of career success. They argue, along with other researchers (Lips-Wiersma & McMorland, 2006), that the career development field is currently lacking in such qualitative input.

Secondly, both traditional and emerging theories of career development have modeled pathways of career development (e.g., Cochran, 1997; Gottfredson, 2002; Miller-Tiedeman, 1997; Savickas, 2002; Super 1990), but there exists little research on where people get stuck and what the experience is like. Job and career change literature focuses primarily on antecedents of change (e.g., Blau, 2000; Carless & Arnup, 2011;
Griffeth et al., 2000; Kammeyer-Mueller, Wanberg, Glomb, & Ahlborg, 2005) and post-change effects (e.g., Boswell, Boudreau, & Tichy, 2005; Carless & Arnup, 2011). While some research is now beginning to explore the process of career change (Gomes, & Teixera, 2000; Wise & Millward, 2005), no research has examined the stalled career change, or examined people who want to make a career change but who don’t complete a career change. In other words, no one has explored the experience of career paralysis. The idea that something important and worthy of study is occurring here, between the desire to career change and actual career change, including possible career paralysis, is supported by the fact that in the related job change literature, the relationship between intention to change jobs and actual change behaviour is modest at best (Griffeth et al., 2000). The career decision-making literature may provide some insight, but is largely based on research with college students and young adults (e.g., Brown et al., 2012; Downing & Nauta, 2010; Gati, Asulin-Peretz, & Fisher, 2012; Konstam & Lehmann, 2011), and deals largely with initial career decision-making rather than mid-career changes.

The present study proposes to address some of these concerns. Methodologically, it hopes to bring valuable subjective and qualitative input to the career development field. Conceptually, it aims to flesh out emerging models of career development and career changes by exploring, understanding, and describing the, as of yet, undocumented experience of career paralysis as a distinct career and life problem in adults.

**Goals of the Inquiry**

The present inquiry explores the experience of career paralysis. It focused on the subjective, personal, and existential experiences of people currently in the midst of career
paralysis, thus allowing a preliminary model and conceptualization to be built from within the experience itself, where it is most poignant, relevant, and alive. The inquiry was conducted within a phenomenological framework, using open-ended, in-depth and semi-structured interviews in an effort to give voice to stories from within. It aimed to encourage a creative and collaborative environment of discovery, analysis, and sense-making as each participant was invited to explore his or her personal and unique experience of career paralysis.

The experience of career paralysis was investigated within the context of existing career models, both traditional and emerging, and within the larger context of meaningful work and meaning-making in career and life. It took into account what is known about possibly relevant areas such as career decision-making, career change, and meaningful work, while allowing room for a bottom-up exploration of this, as of yet, undocumented phenomenon. It endeavoured to foster the exploration of multiple facets of the experience including sense-making, maintenance, subjective effects on other life areas, and other variables/lens/understandings through which people relate to the experience of career paralysis.

Working from a humanistic, existential, constructivist, phenomenological framework, this study aimed to articulate the subjective experience of career paralysis and to expand our current knowledge in the field of career development, career counselling, and counselling psychology more generally. This goal was proposed to be met by strengthening our understanding of themes and concepts essential to career paralysis as well as the impact of career paralysis on career, life, meaning, self, and identity. This study aspired to help researchers, practitioners, and individuals themselves
to better characterize, articulate, and understand the experience of career paralysis. Such knowledge, ultimately, will assist practitioners in guiding their clients through career paralysis and will provide valuable self-help guidance for individuals currently experiencing career paralysis themselves.

It was believed that those who are currently struggling with the experience of career paralysis were the best equipped to provide us with a rich understanding of the phenomenon. Their accounts offer evocative and authentic views of the experience on which we can begin to conceptualize the phenomenon, and begin to build models, therapies, and interventions that will assist those who find themselves in career paralysis in the future. This study aimed to begin this process of exploration from the bottom up, grounded in the qualitative data of real experience.
CHAPTER 2: 

Literature Review

This chapter provides a context for the experience of career paralysis. It presents research and theoretical models of various areas within the career development field in the hopes that some may prove helpful to our understanding of the phenomenon. Although the existing research literature does not speak directly to the experience of career paralysis, as it is a proposed new area of study, the knowledge, findings, and models presented in this chapter are connected and applicable in various ways, and this relevancy to the phenomenon of inquiry will be highlighted.

This chapter begins by offering a brief review of the importance of work and career in our lives and of the many pathways through which work and career may influence both physical and psychological well-being. It then provides a summary of key theories from the career development literature, including both traditional and emerging theories. It also suggests some preliminary connections between existing theories and the experience of career paralysis. The chapter then moves away from theory to explore and present what we know about career change. As career change is an under-researched concept, the research from the job change literature is reviewed first to provide a starting point. Research on career change and the process of career change is then examined and the seemingly best available proxy to career paralysis, career indecision, is presented. Finally, three potentially relevant theoretical models of career change are presented, along with preliminary ideas of how and where the experience of career paralysis may be understood within them.
The Importance of Work and Career

Above and beyond the time component, work and career influence and interact with people’s lives in a myriad of ways. Firstly, work and career are related to physical health and physical well-being (Leung & Cheung, 2010). Regardless of specific career, employment in general is correlated with positive health effects (Beland, Birch, & Stoddart, 2002; Frankish, Moulton, Quantz, & Carson, 2007). On the other hand, unemployment is correlated with negative health effects (Kraut & Walld, 2003; O’Campo, Eaton, & Muntaner, 2004). While the direction of causality between employment status and physical health is at times unclear, it is likely that they both influence each other. For example, studies indicate that employment facilitates physical health through various pathways such as increased income, increased social status, and better access to health and fitness services (Beland et al., 2002; Ross & Mirowsky, 1995). Other research suggests that healthy individuals are more likely to find and maintain employment in the first place (Breslin, 2003). Stressful working conditions and experiencing career-related burnout, for example, can also have significant effects on someone’s physical health and physical well-being (e.g., Eriksson, Starrin, & Janson, 2008).

Secondly, work and career have been found to influence levels of life satisfaction and psychological well-being (Erdogan, Bauer, Truxillo, & Mansfield, 2012; Leung & Cheung, 2010;). For example, research has consistently found a correlation of .40 between job and life satisfaction (Bowling, Eschleman, & Wang, 2010) and an average correlation of .43 between career and life satisfaction (Erdogan et al., 2012). A distinction between job and career satisfaction is sometimes made in the literature. Generally
speaking, job satisfaction refers to levels of satisfaction with the unique characteristics of a particular job such as exact pay scale, relationship with direct supervisor, or commuting time. Career satisfaction, on the other hand, refers to levels of satisfaction with one’s career more broadly, including personal accomplishments, career progression over time and satisfaction with the industry or field in which an individual is pursuing work (Ergodan et al., 2012). While dissatisfaction with job and career undoubtedly contributes to a desire and an intention to change careers in some individuals, and thus likely contributes to some incidents of career paralysis, career paralysis appears to include an additional element of dissatisfaction with one’s self and one’s process as one contemplates a career change that distinguishes it from job dissatisfaction in and of itself.

Pathways of Influence

Needs satisfaction. There are multiple pathways through which job and career are thought to influence life satisfaction. For example, in the needs satisfaction model, work may be viewed as one way of meeting financial, interpersonal, and esteem needs (Diener, Oishi, & Lucas, 2002). Financial needs are obviously affected by salary and income level. Research, however, has found no or only weak relationships between actual income level and life satisfaction (DeVoe & Pfeffer, 2009; Durak, Senol-Durak, & Gencoz, 2010). It is a lack of salary or income through unemployment, in particular, which seems to be crucial (Ervasti & Venetoklis, 2010; Pittau, Zelli, & Gelman, 2010). For example, poverty is strongly related to life dissatisfaction (Boes & Winkelmann, 2010). On the other hand, job security, above and beyond income level, has been shown to predict life satisfaction (De Cuyper & De Witte, 2008; Silla, De Cuyper, Gracia, Periò, & De Witte, 2009).
There is also evidence to suggest that interpersonal needs can be met through work-based relationships and social groups. A supportive work environment and satisfaction with co-workers in particular (in comparison to satisfaction with supervisors) have been shown to correlate with life-satisfaction (Bowling et al., 2010; Huffman, Watrous-Rodriquez, & King, 2008; Michel, Mitchelson, Kotrba, Le Breton, & Baltes, 2009). Additionally, work-based relationships are relatively more important to life satisfaction for people who highly value relationships and social harmony (Simon, Judge, & Halvorsen-Genepola, 2010).

Finally, the needs satisfaction model also suggests that work and career can be sources for satisfaction of esteem needs. It is thought that things like position level, rank, and societal values toward particular professions might influence people’s sense of prestige, status, and self-esteem and thereby, life satisfaction. For example, a doctor may experience enhanced well-being through the knowledge that society highly values her work. A CEO of a large company might experience greater life satisfaction due to the power and prestige that comes from being at the head of a successful company. Research in this area has been unclear however, and some authors suggest the need for a more sophisticated exploration of the relationship between things like power and prestige with life satisfaction (Erdogan et al., 2012).

Work-life conflict. A second pathway through which work and career can influence psychological well-being and life satisfaction is through the presence or absence of work-life conflict (Deckop, Jurkiewicz, & Giacalone, 2010; Gagne & Deci, 2005; Sheldon et al., 2003). Work-life conflict arises when a person’s work-life begins to interfere with his or her personal life or vice-versa. This does appear to be an important
issue among today’s workers. For example, over thirty percent of employed adults in the United States report difficulty balancing work and family life, and over twenty percent report that work demands significantly interfere with their home/family life (APA, 2012). A comprehensive review of work-life conflict outcome literature (Allen et al., 2000) found that work-life conflict can affect life satisfaction via three main categories: 1) through work-related outcomes such as declines in job performance and career satisfaction, 2) through non-work-related outcomes such as decline in family/marital satisfaction or in leisure satisfaction, and 3) through stress-related outcomes such as general psychological strain, physiological symptoms of stress, and maladaptive coping mechanisms such as alcohol abuse.

**Meaning, engagement, self-realization, and identity.** A third identified pathway through which work and career influence life satisfaction is through its role as a source of meaning, engagement, and self-realization. Work has long been recognized as a potential pathway to self-realization and identity formation (Munley, 1977). In Western societies, in particular, our identity is often synonymous with our career. This is so true that some authors have conceived job loss and unemployment as akin to death, and job transition akin to a journey towards rebirth (Herr, Gramer, & Niles, 2004). Work can provide meaning through challenge and opportunities for growth (Erdogan et al., 2012), as the realization of a vocational calling (Dik et al., 2009; Duffy, Manuel, Borges, & Bott, 2011) or through the engagement of self-determination needs. Self-determination theory (SDT), for example, is a theory of motivation which posits that people have a core intrinsic psychological need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness; the activation of these needs has been shown to make independent and additive contributions to personal
well-being (Gagne & Deci, 2005; Sheldon, Turban, Brown, Barrick, & Judge, 2003). 
There is now research suggesting that work life and career have incredible potential to 
fulfill these needs and thus to increase subjective well-being (Deckop, Jurkiewicz, & 
Giacalone, 2010; Gagne & Deci, 2005; Sheldon et al., 2003). Work can provide us with a 
forum for identity formation and expression, for challenge and growth, and for 
meaningful engagement with our world.

A Brief History of Career Development Theory

Given the importance of work and career and their influence on and interaction 
with physical health, psychological health, and life satisfaction, it is no wonder there has 
been a long and rich history of research and theorizing in the area of career development. 
Beginning in the early 1900s, researchers and clinicians began to formally describe career 
development processes (Parsons, 1909), and as the world of work continued to evolve, so 
did career development theories (Sharf, 2010). We now have a comprehensive and 
detailed literature on many aspects of career development. Career development theories 
are often categorized into traditional and emerging theories. The following sections will 
briefly review some of the main concepts of each type in order to provide a backdrop for 
current career problems and concerns, and review links and relevancy to career paralysis.

Traditional Career Development Theories

Trait and factor theories. Trait and factor theories, among the first career 
development theories to be formalized, regarded career development as a matching 
process between an individual’s traits (i.e., skills, interests, personality traits) and a job’s 
factors (i.e., job requirements) (Sharf, 2010). In this sense, an individual attempts to find
an occupation whose job requirements best match the traits he or she possesses. For example, a man who excels at math, and who prefers to work alone, might be best matched to the occupation of mathematics professor. This occupation, which requires excellent math skills but not necessarily good social skills or an outgoing personality, matches what the man has to offer. Another example might be a woman who is very extroverted, social, with high verbal intelligence, matching into a public relations profession. These, of course, are very simplistic examples but they convey the basic idea of the matching process. Career assessment, in this context, involves a thorough investigation of an individual’s aptitudes, skills, achievements, interests, and personality traits (often through various career assessment inventories) and thorough information gathering about the requirements of possible occupations. This information is then sorted to hone in on the best possible match between an individual’s traits and the factors of possible occupations. This kind of assessment process remains what most people think of as “career counselling” even today.

Holland’s theory of personality types. One of the most widely researched trait and factor theories is John Holland’s theory of personality types (1966, 1997). His theory proposes six types of work environments and six corresponding personality types: 1) Realistic, 2) Investigative, 3) Artistic, 4) Social, 5) Enterprising, and 6) Conventional. An investigative personality (e.g., someone who enjoys puzzles and challenges that require intellect) will likely be suited for an investigative occupation such as a physician or a development manager. A more conventional personality (e.g., someone who values stability, order, tradition) on the other hand, will be better suited to a conventional occupation such as bookkeeping or office management. Holland’s theory recognizes the
complexity of both people and occupations and as such also allows for combination of types. Holland’s notion of congruence measures how good of a match exists between a certain personality type and an employment environment.

In the context of the present study, one could argue that an experience of career paralysis might result from an inability to resolve an incongruence between someone’s personality type and employment environment. For example, environmental, cultural, or political circumstances may possibly prohibit someone from pursuing a career that is best suited to their unique personality type. Another example may be the case of someone who is unable to identify what specifically in the employment environment is incongruent with his or her personality and as such, is unable to make the necessary adjustments or changes. Additionally, if a person were unable to find a personality type or combination of types that he or she felt accurately represented him or her, he or she may feel confused, directionless or paralyzed when considering a career change.

*Myers-Briggs Type Indicator.* Perhaps the most well-known trait and factor theory is the Myers-Briggs type indicator theory. While this theory was not empirically developed, it still became one of the most popular theories of personality and is still widely used today in personality and career assessment (Myers, McCaulley, Quenk, & Hammer, 1998; Sharf, 2010). The well-known Myers-Briggs personality typology places people on a continuum along two main axes: perception-judgement and extraversion-introversion. Career counsellors use Myers-Briggs assessment results to help match potential clients with appropriate occupations much in the same way as Holland’s theory of types. This theory is also often used directly in corporate settings for various purposes such as developing and implementing management development programs (Mani, 1996).
Much like with Holland’s theory of types, career paralysis within this framework may be conceived as a mismatch between Myers-Briggs type and nature of an occupation, confusion around one’s personality type, or inability to make use of type information in selecting or changing careers (due to other constricting variables such as finances, geographical location, etc...).

**Life-span and developmental theories.** As theorizing around career development and career counselling became more complex, several researchers began to take a more developmental focus. These researchers recognized other social, cultural, and developmental facets of career development.

Possibly the most well-known theory of career development is Super’s life-span, life-space theory (1953, 1990). Super’s theory examines career development across the life span. His life-career rainbow model demonstrates how life role (e.g. student, worker, citizen, etc...) and life stage interact and influence career development (Sharf, 2010). His model posits five distinct career phases over the life-span: 1) Growth (Birth to 14), 2) Exploration (14-24), 3) Establishment (25-44), 4) Maintenance (45-64), and 5) Disengagement (65+). Each stage has several substages. This model views career development as beginning with the cultivation of one’s self-concept in childhood and continually growing and shifting across the life span as career development progresses. People may recycle through some of the stages if necessary. For example, as a result of job loss or in anticipation of job or career change, someone in the Establishment phase may return to the Exploration phase.

Super’s theory represented a significant shift in career development research, as it encouraged a conceptualization of career as a life-long, developmental, and dynamic
process rather than a single point-in-time issue (Super, 1990). Career development began
to be recognized as a continual process that evolved over time and involved multiple
shifts and re-negotiations between other roles, commitments and relationships (Herr,
1997). In the framework of the life-span, life-space theory, career paralysis could be
thought of in numerous ways. For example, someone who finds themselves unhappily
ensconced in the maintenance phase may be hesitant to take action toward desired career
change out of fear of “moving backwards” in terms of career phase. Alternatively, career
paralysis could be thought of as an inability to move out of an initial Exploration phase,
or as an experience of stuckness in an Establishment or Maintenance phase as a result of
an ineffective Exploration phase. In other words, someone who never fully explored
possible career options during the Exploration phase may have a limited understanding of
what he or she would prefer in terms of career. One additional possible conceptualization
could be an inability to resolve tensions between work life and other important life roles,
which impedes taking action toward a desired career change.

The New World of Work and Emerging Career Development Theories

The world of work has changed dramatically in recent times, and individuals
today have to negotiate an increasingly precarious and insecure work environment
(Kalleberg, 2009; Trevor-Roberts, 2006). For example, due to changes in production
methods, adoption of technology, outsourcing, down-sizing, and the growth of alternative
work arrangements, career development is no longer a linear or predictable phenomenon
(Sullivan & Baruch, 2009; Trevor-Roberts, 2006). The global economic difficulties of
recent years have also played a key role in re-shaping the employment landscape. Older
workers have been forced to reconsider their career paths and retirement plans amidst
lay-offs (Blenkinsopp, Baruch, & Winden, 2010) and financial difficulties (Wang, Adams, Beehr & Shultz, 2009). Younger workers are entering a labour market where few traditional jobs exist and where education, hard work, and loyalty no longer guarantee career success (Niles, 2003). Individuals nowadays must continually adapt, re-market, and re-brand themselves in response to rapidly changing workplace environments (Sargent & Domberger, 2007). They are increasingly being tasked with the responsibility of creating their own career from scratch (Briscoe et al., 2006) and are more often than not unattached to a particular company or employer (Arthur, 2008). In addition to these situational factors, there has been a fundamental shift in attitudes toward career. Individuals are increasingly putting values such as family responsibilities (Hall, 2004) and personal fulfillment (Power, 2009) ahead of traditional career values such as security, salary, or prestige.

In the face of this rapidly changing world of work, new emerging theories of career development and career decision-making have surfaced. The traditional theories of career development, described briefly above, including trait and factor theories (e.g., Holland, 1966; Myers et al., 1998) and developmental theories (e.g., Super, 1953, 1990) set a solid foundation for understanding career. These traditional theories deal largely with initial career selection and rely heavily on the concept of one-to-one matching of an individual’s skills and interests with job requirements. In addition, while they do allow for the influence of context, they tend to assume a relatively linear or stage-like progression of career development. While these concepts remain extremely useful in many career problem and counselling cases, new career theorizing has begun to propose more fluid models of career development and more nuanced conceptualizations of career,
in an effort to better fit the complexity of much of today’s career development.

**Savickas’ career construction theory.** Many emerging career theories are largely based in notions of *constructivism*—i.e., that there is no one single truth and that individuals create their own truth and meaning. Savickas’ career construction theory (1997, 2002; Savickas et al., 2009), works with the assumption that people create their own career, for example through imbuing work, social relationships, and other career-related events with meaning and incorporating them into a personal life narrative. Savickas’ theory does not depend on career or life stage, but rather on how an individual tells his or her career story. Central to the theory are notions of adaptability (i.e., adaptability to particular life contexts), flexibility (e.g., to different work environments), life-long learning, and an exploration of all possible selves (Savickas et al., 2009). These notions are essential to successful *boundaryless* or *protean* careers—careers that are characterized by multiple changes, multiple trajectories and dynamic physical and psychological mobility with regards to career path (Briscoe et al., 2006; Sullivan & Arthur, 2006).

Career paralysis within Savickas’ career construction theory may represent difficulty in adapting to the often fast-paced, mobile, and self-directed career paths common today. Another possible understanding may see career paralysis as an experience of intense confusion at some point in life among the many possible selves one could create and a sense of being overwhelmed by choice and the responsibility of choice. For example, a man in his early thirties with a Master’s degree in Communication Studies may in his view *settle* for a lower-paying but secure and salaried job as an assistant in an advertising company, rather than pursue a dream as a mobile
communications consultant because he feels he lacks the adaptability skills that would allow him to confidently pursue a boundaryless career. This may leave him hesitant to make a change, but unfulfilled with his present work situation; in others words, he may feel paralyzed. Another example of career paralysis within this framework could be a middle-aged doctor who, while enjoying her family medicine practice to some degree, has other impressive interests in writing, cooking, and outdoor pursuits. Whenever she muses about pursuing one of these interests more fully, however, she comes into conflict with other parts of her self, including the boundaries and demands of her current career. She may thus feel limited, and vaguely unhappy, regarding her career and level of life fulfillment but feel paralyzed at how she might make changes.

**Narrative and holistic approaches.** Other emerging theories such as Cochran’s narrative approach (1997) also prioritize an individual’s career story or narrative over career stages or linear development. Rather than focusing on someone’s career chronology or timeline, for example, Cochran’s narrative approach focuses on significant chapters or episodes of a person’s career story and the meaning behind them. For example, a lawyer’s career timeline could be something like: 1) Does well in high school 2) Goes to university and majors in political science 3) Applies and is accepted to law school 4) Graduates from law school 5) Completes articling year and passes the Bar Exam 6) Begins practicing as a lawyer 8) Makes partner 9) Decides to launch her own law practice. In contrast, a narrative approach may conceptualize the events in this way:

A young woman who excelled in high school finds herself struggling when she arrives at university. She flounders for a year or so feeling lost amidst the growing pressures of young adulthood. Looking back on this time, she calls it her “dark period.” She reflects how this period was necessary however because it forced her to consider herself and her life in a new light. She recalls how incredible it was when she first joined the university
law club in her third year. She suddenly had some good friends who, like herself, enjoyed debating and solving logic problems. This group of friends encouraged her to apply for law school. Law school seemed to be one of the happiest times in her life; she felt engaged, studious, productive and she met her future husband. Once working as a lawyer, and now a new mother, she worked hard to balance her work and home life—it was not an easy task and she felt the wear of her lifestyle. Jokingly, she refers to this period as “Endless Days of Toil and Trouble.” This experience of her early years as a lawyer, influenced her decision to begin her own law firm—it would be mean just as many hours, but would allow her more flexibility. For her, working on her own schedule represented freedom and she felt less pressurized, and she felt it allowed her the time and mindset to develop more authentic relationships with her two daughters.

The above conceptualization is less concerned with a chronology and timeline and more with significant growth moments and episodes of meaning-making when it comes to life and career. In narrative career counselling, counsellors guide clients in reflecting on significant chapters in their life in order to assist them to flesh out their career narrative and current career problem. They encourage speculation and fantasizing into a future career narrative and help the client to construct their ideal pathways. Near the end of counselling, concrete action is taken to change or influence the plot-line of their career story.

Another holistic theory is Miller-Tiedeman’s lifecareer approach (1988, 1997). This theory posits that career and life are not separate constructs but part of one ever-evolving life experience, or lifecareer. This theory emphasizes the individuality of each person in deciding what is meaningful to them and distinguishes between this personal reality and the common reality of others, experts, or society. Miller-Tiedeman prioritizes a client’s own meaning-making, understanding, and sense of the spiritual or important, in exploring career problems. Clients are encouraged to value their life as their career, and to explore and embrace work and experiences that provide meaning, energy, and a sense
of balance, unity, or harmony. While this theory may sound vague or unclear, it appears to appreciate the growing holistic understanding of career in contemporary society.

The lifecareer approach, for example, may add to the narrative example above by exploring how the woman found balance in her life between her many roles, what activities or people brought her energy and a sense of renewal in times of stress, and how practicing law may or may not have been a vocational calling. Lifecareer theory may have seen her decision to launch her own law practice as an effort to restore balance and harmony; her “dark period” during university may have been viewed as an essential period of change, during which she came to know herself on a more fundamental level.

Within these narrative and holistic frameworks, it is possible that career paralysis represents an experience of a stale or stalled life story, where the central theme to the narrative has been lost, and where all action seems only to bring one back to the beginning--one can’t seem to move on from this chapter of life. A deep sense of ennui or meaninglessness may also be present along with an inability to recall or take inspiration from significant moments of one’s past or ideas for the future. It could be conceived as a loss of the thread of one’s life story or as an experience of life and career as out of balance, harmony, or energy and without movement towards re-balancing or re-energizing.

Social cognitive career theory. Another emerging theory is Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994, 2002). Based on Bandura’s social cognitive theory (1986), SCCT is built on the interaction of central concepts: 1) self-efficacy, our beliefs about our ability to succeed, 2) outcome expectations, our beliefs about the probability of a certain outcome, and 3) personal goals. Career development
and career choice arise from a complex interaction of these three building blocks with contextual factors (Sharf, 2010). For a simplified example, imagine a young woman who has done well in her basic science courses in school. She may develop a sense of self-efficacy when it comes to science courses, which then interact with and translate into a belief that she will likely do well in her science courses. These beliefs may lead into a goal of pursuing medical school. In a positive example, this goal breaks down into sub-goals and behaviours that are achieved one by one and fuelled by self-efficacy and positive outcome expectations. The interaction of these concepts assist the woman in maintaining her interest in medicine over time, and her motivation for studying even when things are more difficult. Framed within this perspective, career paralysis could represent a break down in one or all of the SCCT building blocks. For example, a man may have the goal of opening his own business, but lack confidence in his business skills. In other words, he may have low self-efficacy when it comes to building a business. Due to his low self-efficacy, he has a negative outcome expectation for his efforts, and may not fully commit to building a business. If he has a full-time position, he may keep working at his current job and indefinitely put off his vision.

**Job and Career Change**

Having provided a brief overview of existing career theory, this section will now hone in on one specific career issue, career change. Traditional theories of career development may conceptualize career change as a transition stage in the developmental process, or as an event that necessarily occurs after changes in an individual's skill set no longer match well to his or her existing job. Emerging theories would likely conceptualize career change more broadly and holistically. For example, a career change
may represent a shift in a person’s life narrative, a career change may be the result of a constellation of other life experiences, including tangible and mental, or, a career change may be conceptualized as a fluid process of boundaryless self and career.

It is important, at this point, to define the difference between career change and job change. Job change can be defined as movement to another work position within the same field and is viewed as part of a “normal” or “traditional” career path. For example, a publicity assistant who is promoted to publicist in the same company or who accepts a new job offer with a different company undergoes a job change. In comparison, career change is movement to an entirely new profession or occupation and is not typically viewed as a normal step of career progression (Carless & Arnup, 2010). For example, a publicity assistant who returns to school to train as a psychologist undergoes a career change. An extensive body of research exists on correlates, antecedents, and processes of job change (e.g. Boswell et al., 2005; Chen et al., 2011; Griffeth et al., 2000; Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2005). Career change, on the other hand, is less well understood (e.g. Carless & Arnup, 2011; Tan & Kramer, 2012). The following section will review research from the job change field and will incorporate what research exists on career change to provide a context for these important life transitions.

Models of Job Change

Much of the research on job change, or turnover, comes from organizational and managerial psychology. Studies exploring antecedents or correlates of turnover are particularly ubiquitous given the economic cost of turnover to organizations and companies and the accompanying desire to find management strategies that retain employees. Griffeth et al.’s (2000) meta-analysis of antecedents and correlates of
employee turnover provided a comprehensive overview of research in the area and is often cited in subsequent studies. Not surprisingly, the biggest predictor of turnover in their analysis of over 100 studies was quit intentions with a .38 correlation with turnover behaviour. Quit intentions are, of course, cognitions, motivations, and plans to quit, that usually occur near the end of some longer withdrawal process. Among other variables, job satisfaction and organizational commitment were the next biggest predictors of turnover behaviour with correlations of -.19 and -.23, respectively. Job satisfaction refers to one’s general level of satisfaction with the job, the work, and day-to-day tasks. Organizational commitment refers specifically to one’s commitment to work, the organization, and its goals and values. The study also found evidence for some influence of additional factors such as job content, job stress, work group cohesion, level of autonomy at work, and advancement opportunities. It is likely that such factors flow into and affect levels of job satisfaction and organizational commitment.

These results from Griffeth et al.’s (2000) meta-analysis, along with earlier research (e.g. Hom & Griffeth 1991; Mobley, 1977; Farrell & Rusbult, 1981) support attitudinal models of turnover. Attitudinal models posit that the turnover process begins with low levels of job satisfaction and organizational commitment, which then proceeds to emotional and cognitive withdrawal from work and thoughts about possibly leaving. Alternative job search behaviours are finally initiated and eventually a decision to go or stay is made. Additional research suggests that job satisfaction mediates between more objective job characteristics (e.g. pay, hours, and advancement opportunities) and turnover (Mobley, 1977). Rhodes and Doering’s (1983) classic model of career change is a similar attitudinal model which proposes that personal factors, organizational factors,
and perceived personal and organizational fit interact to affect career satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Satisfaction levels then interact with thoughts and beliefs about changing careers and then, for some individuals, results in intentions to change careers and career change behaviours. These attitudinal models are still very helpful templates on which to anchor our understanding of job and career change, even as the new world of work and new theorizing begin to present a more complicated picture of such transitions.

**Change in job satisfaction and job change.** More recent research has attempted to expand on and elaborate the basic attitudinal models of job change and turnover. In their longitudinal study of job satisfaction and turnover, Chen et al. (2011) demonstrated that systematic *change* in job satisfaction over time has a higher relationship to actual turnover behaviour than absolute level of job satisfaction. For example, Person A and Person B may both have the same level of job satisfaction at time X, but Person A’s level of job satisfaction has steadily risen for the past year while Person B’s level of satisfaction has steadily declined for the past year. Although at time X, they both have the same absolute level of job satisfaction, Person B is much more likely to think about leaving or changing jobs than person A. The authors explain this finding in terms of future-work expectations and momentum. If level of job satisfaction has been steadily declining with time, an individual likely expects it to continue declining in the future, due to the power of momentum. This expectation of continued lower job satisfaction prompts various meaning-making and evaluation processes during which a person may decide to make a job change. The authors further found evidence that the relationship between change in job satisfaction and future work expectations is partially mediated by organizational tenure, or how long an individual has been working with the company. It
is proposed that organizational tenure and experience with the company may temper the momentum of declining job satisfaction and work expectations by contextualizing it within a larger framework of reference. For example, an individual who has worked with a company for many years may understand that his or her declining job satisfaction is due to temporary shifts in company dynamics that will eventually be resolved. This study thus expanded on the idea that factors like low job satisfaction and organizational commitment initiate job change and turnover by adding a temporal and dynamic element to the process.

**Dispositional and personality-related variables of job satisfaction and job change.** Other research has found a role for dispositional and personality-related factors in job satisfaction, job change, and turnover (Carless & Arnup, 2011; Connolly & Viswesvaran, 2000; Judge, Heller, & Mount, 2002; Thoresen, Kaplan, Barsky, Warren, & de Chermont, 2003). For example, Connolly and Viswesvaran’s (2000) meta-analysis reported a positive correlation of .49 between job satisfaction and *positive affectivity*, i.e., the predisposition to experience positive emotions. They also reported a negative correlation of -.33 between job satisfaction and *negative affectivity*, i.e., the predisposition to experience negative emotions. In other words, their study provided evidence that job satisfaction may in part be dispositional—if you are predisposed towards positive emotions generally, you may also be more likely to be happy and feel positive about your job and thus enjoy higher job satisfaction. You may thus also be less likely to pursue a job change.

Judge et al. (2002) conducted a meta-analysis of the relationship between the 5-factor model of personality (Goldberg, 1990; McCrae & John, 1992) and job satisfaction.
The 5-factor model of personality is well known within the field of personality psychology and has been found to generalize across measures and cultures (McCrae & John, 1992). Briefly, it posits a framework of five main personality traits: Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism. Within each factor, clusters of additional qualities are found. For example, qualities such as gregariousness, assertiveness, and warmth are often found within the factor of Extraversion. Judge et al. (2002) found moderate correlations between job satisfaction and each of Neuroticism, Extraversion, and Conscientiousness. Neuroticism and Extraversion emerged as the strongest correlates of job satisfaction and these results are in line with an earlier qualitative review of the related literature (Tokar, Fischer, & Subich, 1998). In general, job satisfaction is related to lower levels of neuroticism and higher level of extraversion.

The *honeymoon-hangover* effect is another example of personality-related and dispositional effects on job change and job satisfaction. Boswell et al. (2005) studied job satisfaction and voluntary job change over five years among high-level managers. Among job changers, their results revealed a distinct pattern: low job satisfaction preceded voluntary job change, job satisfaction increased temporarily following job change (*honeymoon effect*), and job satisfaction then declined and tapered off some time after the job change (*hangover effect*). One explanation for the decline of job satisfaction over time following voluntary job change is the notion of a dispositional or personality-related *set point* for well-being (Diener & Diener, 1996; Judge et al., 2002). Although job satisfaction after job change may initially increase due to such factors as excitement, renewed sense of engagement, new colleagues, possibly higher salary, etc…the effects of these changes eventually wear off and employees begin to realize the reality of their new
workplace and feel the effects of the more mundane day-to-day tasks of the new job. At this point, dispositional factors such as positive or negative affectivity, mentioned earlier, kick in and affect levels of job satisfaction. It is unclear how such an effect may play out in career change (vs. job change). For example, one might argue that some who pursue a job change may actually benefit more from a full career change into a new field that they find more meaningful, rather than simply changing jobs in the same field. In the context of the present study, a job change may possibly be part of the experience of career paralysis--it may be an attempt at finding more meaning at work without the risk of a full career change. There thus remains questions around other influencing variables--for example, could a career change to something more meaningful buffer against the honeymoon-hangover effect?

The Importance of Meaning and Values

As mentioned earlier, a fundamental shift has been observed in attitudes toward career. Subjective values such as family, personal fulfillment, feeling valued, feeling engaged and achieving of sense of meaningfulness in relation to career are increasingly gaining importance (e.g., Hall, 2004; Power, 2009). In terms of job change and turnover, for example, a recent survey performed by the American Psychological Association (2012a) found that employees who do not feel valued at work are significantly more likely to report that they intend to make a job or career change. Employees who report feeling valued at work, on the other hand, are significantly more likely to report both higher job satisfaction overall and in other key areas such as opportunities for growth and development and being recognized for their contributions to work. In a separate study looking at workforce retention, employees reported that having a job that fit well with
other areas of their life (work-life fit), enjoying what they do for a living, and feeling connected to the organization were the most important reasons for wanting to stay with their current employer (APA, 2012b).

As suggested by these surveys, such values and a search for meaning and purpose are beginning to influence career decision-making and behaviours. Indeed, recent research in voluntary career change shows that the decision to make a career change is often propelled by such subjective career values (Wise & Millward, 2005). Tan and Kramer (2012), in a qualitative study exploring voluntary downward career change among thirty professionals in Singapore, found that individuals reported three main motivations to pursue career changes: 1) to respond to a pre-existing calling toward some other career, 2) dissatisfaction/inability to identify with their current career, and 3) identifying a passion for a new, previously unknown, career. The study spoke to the importance of the relationship and congruence between self-identity and career and of the importance that people feel a sense of purpose or fulfillment with career. Another qualitative study of career changers found similar themes regarding the importance of subjective career values: in their study of ten British individuals who had experienced voluntary career change, Wise and Millward (2005) found that themes of self-awareness, and a desire for personal growth and challenge were central to decisions to make a career change. A third qualitative study exploring voluntary career change also found that themes of incompatibility between existing career and self-identity were crucial to eventual career change. This study also revealed that satisfaction/dissatisfaction with career is not a static variable; but a dynamic process that evolves and interacts with individuals’ ever-changing identities and sources of meaning (Gomes & Teixera, 2000).
What is meaningful work? As reviewed above, the desire for more meaningful work, increased self-awareness, and increased sense of purpose are increasingly cited as reasons for contemplating or initiating career change. This is in line with a shift, more generally, towards more meaning-oriented living and nascent theorizing connecting meaning-based systems of philosophy, such as existentialism, with career development (Cohen, 2003; Maglio, Butterfield, & Borgen, 2005; Schultze & Miller, 2004; Sterner, 2012). Such theories posit that an experience of existential crisis, or a gradual decline in meaning may prompt the desire for a career change.

The most comprehensive model of meaningful work has arisen out of the business and management field. Lips-Wiersma developed her initial model based on findings from a qualitative research study exploring work meanings of 16 spiritually oriented people (2002). The model was subsequently refined through additional research including a large-scale action-research project spanning six years across five Western countries (Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009). Their holistic model of meaningful work proposes four sources of meaningful work: 1) Developing and becoming self, 2) Unity with others, 3) Expressing full potential, and 4) Serving others. Meaningful work arises from a combination of these four sources and also requires a balance or harmony between them. For example, if an individual serves others to the point of damaging his or her own well-being, sense of meaningfulness declines. Moreover, participants experienced the strongest sense of coherence of their meaningfulness experience when they could see all four sources of meaning in a full, comprehensive picture. The burgeoning interest in meaning-based models of career may suggest a central role for meaninglessness, lack of meaning, or struggle for meaning in the experience of career paralysis.
The Process of Career Change

Existing studies on career change reveal that voluntary career change is not a simple or easy process. It involves a complex interplay among many variables. For example, in the study mentioned earlier of professionals in Singapore pursuing volunteer downward career change (Tan & Kramer, 2012), themes arose around the process of communicating their decision to others. Parts of this communication process included gathering social support for the change, silencing naysayers, and refocusing and highlighting the positive aspects of the new career post-change. This study revealed the pressure that can accompany voluntary downward career change, such as the need to justify or defend one’s decision, especially in countries that value the accumulation of material wealth and social prestige attached to certain career positions. Voluntarily moving away from a prestigious career to pursue personal values or other subjective desires can often be met with societal resistance. It is possible that such resistance plays a part in the experience of career paralysis.

Additional studies on voluntary career change reveal a dynamic process that places career change in the middle of a larger process of growth, development, decision-making, and identity-creation. Gomes and Teixera’s (2000) phenomenological study of autonomous career change among professionals identified career change as stemming from an immature career choice made earlier in life. This initial choice however was not perceived as having been wrong, but more as a necessary step leading to deeper knowledge of self, a step along the pathway to career and personal maturity. This study, among others, reveals that career change is more than a simple rational decision that is made at one point in time through evaluating skill, opportunities, and alternatives. It
appears to be embedded in a larger process of growth and development.

Moreover, career change is not always something that occurs as a consequence of present dissatisfaction, a conscious drive toward more meaning, or conscious intention. Murtagh, Lopes, and Lyons (2011), for example, used a qualitative methodology to explore the process of decision-making in voluntary career change among eight women in England. Two major themes emerged from their research which they labeled, a) planless actions and positive emotions and b) constructing the decision. Planless actions and positive emotions refer to the finding that many actions undertaken by participants were not at first intended to bring about career change. When such actions evoked positive emotions, however, they quickly became catalysts for career change. For example, one participant began taking a college course simply for personal interest. When the course evoked a sense of “having found one’s passion”, however, she quickly decided to pursue a new career in the field. This finding corroborated existing literature on other-than-rational models of career decision-making which emphasize the importance of context, chance, happenstance (Bright, Pryor, & Harpham, 2004; Mitchell, Levin, & Krumboltz, 1999) and emotions (Johnson-Laird & Oatley, 2004; Kidd, 1998) in career decision-making. The second theme to emerge from this study, constructing the decision, is an overarching term encompassing several self-regulation strategies participants used to build and reinforce their initial career change decision over time including building certainty, perceiving continuity, and temporal framing. In this study, participants did not follow a systematic decision-making process--they were influenced by multiple factors including emotion, and self-regulation of resulting career decisions.

The little literature that exists on volunteer career change reveals an incredibly
complex process that remains to be fully understood. Additionally, people who want to make a career change in today’s world face an unprecedented challenging career environment of uncertainty and rapidly changing world of work. Thus, in addition to complex variables reviewed briefly above of growth, development, maturity, identity, and motivations to pursue a career change, it is important to examine what factors may play into someone’s actual likelihood of making a career change. Research into the antecedents of actual career change have revealed numerous variables of influence, including personality factors, demographic factors, and organizational factors. These studies provide information on who is likely to be successful in actually completing a career change. In terms of personality factors, individuals with high levels of Openness to Experience and Extraversion have been found more likely to make a career change (Carless & Arnupp, 2011; Higgins, 2001). This might speak to the process of career change being easier for people who are open to new ideas and experiences and who have the social skills common to extraverts such as sociability and ease of making new relationships. In terms of demographic factors, studies have found that younger people are more likely to make a career change than older individuals (Blau, 2000; Parrado, Caner, & Wolff, 2007). This may speak to a greater ease of career change among individuals who, due to younger age, are less likely to hold responsibilities such as marriages, children or mortgages, or to a more flexible mindset among younger people more generally. Studies on gender and education level in relation to career change have been mixed (Carless & Arnupp, 2011; Carless & Bernath, 2007; Parrado et al., 2007). In their longitudinal study of career change antecedents, Carless and Arnupp (2011) found an interesting interaction between education level and organizational tenure (i.e., how
long an individual has been with a company) in relation to career change. Individuals with higher education and lower organizational tenure were more likely to make a career change than individuals with less education and significant organizational tenure. This may suggest, for example, that individuals with higher education have more options and flexibility when it comes to career change and may be less reliant on organizational tenure for job security.

Interestingly, and contrary to most previous research, job dissatisfaction in the Carless and Arnup (2011) study was not found to be a predictor of career change. The authors argued that this finding may be related to methodology concerns whereby most previous research has explored career change intentions rather than actual career change behaviour. This finding suggests that career change is more complicated than simply no longer being satisfied with one’s career and thus making a change. In the only other study to examine actual career change, job dissatisfaction was also a non-significant predictor (Breeden, 1993). This idea is supported by the fact that in the related job change literature, the relationship between intention to change jobs and actual change behaviour is modest at best (Griffeth et al., 2000). These findings speak to the need to explore the variables that inhibit, discourage, or otherwise prevent a job or career change.

Another way job and career change is conceptualized in the career development literature is as a career transition. Schlossberg’s (1984) theory of transitions, for example, suggests that a transition is “any event or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles” (p. 33). Transitions can be anticipated (e.g., moving into the workforce after graduation), unanticipated (e.g., losing one’s job), “chronic hassles” (e.g., long commutes, difficulties with supervisor), or non-events (e.g., not
getting a promotion one expected). Career paralysis, while related to these transitions, is not adequately captured by these categories. Career paralysis is differentiated by an, as of yet, still imprecise sense of thwarted desire or intention for change taking place over a prolonged or protracted time period. Within a transition theory framework, it may be likened to a kind of chronic or protracted non-transition, a mix of chronic hassles, non-events, and other still-to-be defined elements.

In relationship to the present study, the experience of career paralysis could account for some of the gap between intention/desire to change jobs or career and actual behaviour. In other words, it may help us understand what is occurring during these non-transitions.

**Career Decision-Making**

While career paralysis is a new concept which remains to be understood and defined, there exist some correlates or proxies in the career development literature that provide some level of foundation on which to anchor our exploration. Specifically, the existing literature on career decision-making is of interest. This body of literature is largely based on studies examining initial career choice and selection among young adults and students (versus career change in already working adults), however, may still provide useful insights.

**Career Indecision**

In the career decision-making literature, there is a long-standing distinction between at least two subtypes of indecision, namely, developmental indecision and chronic indecision (Dysinger, 1950; Guay et al., 2006; Holland & Holland, 1977).
Studies have shown that while around half of college students are decided when it comes to career choice, approximately one quarter are developmentally undecided and one quarter are chronically undecided (Cohen, Chartrand, & Jowdy, 1995; Guay et al., 2006). Moreover, these subtypes have been shown to apply, to some degree, to adult populations as well (Callanan & Greenhaus, 1992; Slaney, Stafford, & Russell, 1981).

Developmental career indecision refers to indecision resulting from a lack of information and, in the case of young people, is often considered to be a natural state of adolescence (Chartrand & Nutter, 1996; Salomone, 1982). These individuals are most often able to resolve their indecision either with time and/or by acquiring additional information about themselves and the world of work. As individuals learn more about themselves, the world, and possible occupations, a career choice reveals itself. Counsellors often assist such individuals by facilitating career exploration, knowledge, and self-assessment, and by affirming resulting career choices (Multon et al., 2007; Salomone, 1982). In contrast to developmental indecision, chronic career indecision has been described as a more permanent inability to make a career choice, even in the presence of adequate information, because of other important factors such as difficulty forming a coherent self-concept to guide career decision-making, personality characteristics which impede decision-making more generally, or as a result of specific social and situational factors (McInnes & Chen, 2011). Chronic career indecision, as opposed to developmental career decision, appears to be the closer correlate to the notion of career paralysis.

Career indecision generally, and chronic career indecision specifically, has been associated with various forms of psychological distress (Multon, Heppner, Gysbers,
Zook, & Ellis-Kalton, 2001) including depression (Saunders, Peterson, Sampson, & Reardon, 2000) and interpersonal difficulties (Felsman & Blustein, 1999). Moreover, individuals who are chronically undecided with regards to career have reported higher levels of life stress in general and less positive work attitudes (Callanan & Greenhaus, 1992). It has been postulated that such lack of career focus may also result in deteriorated levels of performance thus putting these individuals at risk for losing out on an organization’s reward system, for example raises or promotions (Callanan & Greehaus, 1992). Individuals who have difficulty choosing or committing to a career also face intense social pressures to both make a decision (any decision!) and to make a socially prestigious decision. Krumboltz discusses both these issues in his article The Wisdom of Indecision (1992), and laments the fact that in today’s society, there is absolutely no tolerance for ambiguity—an observation he notes as unfair and which automatically casts a negative shadow and stigma over undecided persons. While this paper was written over ten years ago, it remains relevant and speaks to the experience of many people today who feel torn over career choices and who must bear both self and other-imposed pressure to make a career choice.

**Models of chronic career indecision.** Chronic career indecision is a multi-faceted issue and researchers have recognized the need for precise and complex models of the problem. A powerful motivator behind this drive is the fact that the career intervention literature has demonstrated that while career interventions for career decision-making difficulties are, on the whole, effective, the magnitude of their effects are modest at best (Brown & Ryan Krane, 2000; Whiston, Brecheisen, & Stephens, 2003). The complexity of career decision-making difficulties is thought to be at the crux
of this only moderate effect (Brown et al., 2012). For example, over 50 different variables have been explored for possible relationships to career indecision (Brown & Rector, 2008). Recently however, several factor-analytic studies have attempted to integrate research in the area to create more helpful models.

Two important models of career indecision are the four-factor model (Brown et al., 2012; Brown & Rector, 2008) and the Emotional and Personality-related Career decision-making difficulties (EPCD) model (Gati et al., 2012; Saka & Gati, 2007; Saka, Gati, & Kelly, 2008). The four factor model (Brown et al., 2012), developed using a bottom-up approach from data on college students, proposes the following four factors influencing career indecision: 1) Neuroticism/Negative Affectivity -- this factor refers to an underlying tendency to ruminate on possible negatives of decision-making along with corresponding negative affect. Individuals high on this factor may become buried in the possible negative consequences of decision-making. Possible behavioural correlates of this factor include avoidance of decision-making or pre-mature foreclosure of possible options due to worry about possible negative outcomes. 2) Choice/Commitment Anxiety -- this factor reflects difficulties in decision-making due to difficulty in commitment to one particular choice in the face of many additional options. People high on this trait may experience themselves as being indecisive and may feel frustrated and trapped. They are likely scared of making a choice that they believe they may later regret and like to keep all options open. 3) Lack of Readiness -- this factor refers to a lack of decision-making skills, such as goal-directedness or planfullness, and feelings of low self-efficacy with regards to decision-making. It could be argued that this factor relates most closely to the developmental indecision described earlier, and may reflect a lack of career maturity.
This factor may respond to structured educational and counselling initiatives around decision-making skills and beliefs. 4) Interpersonal Conflicts -- this factor refers to interpersonal conflicts interfering with the decision-making process. The classic example of this factor is a difference in opinion regarding career choice between a young adult and his or her parents.

The EPCD model (Saka & Gati, 2007) was developed through a top-down theoretical approach based on variables that consistently correlated with career indecision in the literature. The model includes the following three main clusters (that are then broken down into smaller variables): 1) Pessimistic Views -- this cluster focuses on pessimistic views about the world of work, about the decision-making process (low decision self-efficacy), and about the level of control one has on the decision process and outcomes, and reflects a cognitive schema or bias at play, 2) Anxiety -- this cluster refers to anxiety regarding several aspects of career decision-making including the process of decision-making itself, uncertainty about choosing and outcomes, and anxiety around committing to a choice and taking responsibility for making a decision, and reflects an affective component to career indecision, 3) Self-Concept and Identity -- this clusters refers to concepts including trait anxiety, attachment issues, self-esteem, and uncrystallized identity, and reflects developmental and personality related components to career indecision.

Ongoing research continues to explore, refine, and integrate these models (Brown et al, 2012; Gati et al., 2012). We can state with some degree of confidence, however, that at least when it comes to initial career decision-making (specifically among college students and young adults entering the work force for the first time), many factors affect
levels of career decidedness and career decision-making including developmental factors such as readiness/maturity, coherence and clarity of sense of self and identity, personality factors and affective factors such as trait anxiety and commitment anxiety, cognitive factors such as pessimistic schemas, and social/interpersonal factors such as discord among significant others with regards to career choice. It is likely that some of these factors are also at play during the experience of career paralysis among adults.

**Stage/Cycle Models of Career Change and Career Paralysis**

The literature revealed three models of career change that seemed to speak either directly or indirectly to the idea of *paralysis* or *stuckness*, at least in passing, when it came to career change and decision-making. These models all present a stage or cycle theory, in which we can conceptualize career paralysis as a *stuckness* between or within stages.

The first model is an adaptation of Claes Janssen’s “The Four Roomed Apartment Model of Change” to career change (Hind, 2005). Janssen’s theory (2005) uses existential psychology to understand, manage, and negotiate the process of change. The theory rests on the assumption that all change is a cyclical process involving different frames of minds and emotional states (the four different rooms) -- understanding the frame of mind at work in each room is essential to navigating through that stage of the change process. The four stages are:

1) Contentment or satisfaction (the “Contentment” room) -- in this stage, people are content with their present circumstances, complacent, and relaxed; if people become too contented and disconnected from reality, however, they may find themselves lost in the “Sun Lounge.”
2) Denial or self-censorship (the “Denial” room) -- in this stage, people have begun to slip out of the contentment phase and are on the lookout for reasons external to themselves that may be responsible for their burgeoning unhappiness. They may be defensive or aggressive and in denial about their own role in the coming crisis. People will be stuck in this phase until they acknowledge the need for change; if they don’t, they will fall into the “Dungeon of Denial.”

3) Confusion or conflict (the “Confusion” room) -- in this stage, people have moved past denial and are overwhelmed by feelings of tension, doubt, and confusion. They know that change must come but struggle to find the best way to make this happen or even to identify what kind of change is needed. When in the Confusion room, people may stumble into two adjacent rooms; the “Paralysis Pit” in which it seems impossible to ever emerge from their confusion or the “Revolving Reality Door”, in which people move through and explore option after option for change without being able to commit to any one change.

4) Renewal or Inspiration (the “Renewal” room) -- in this stage, people have moved through confusion and begin to have feelings of rejuvenation, inspiration, and engagement; they begin to make plans, accept responsibility, and take concrete action; change is now seen as a challenge and opportunity for growth.

Within this model, the current study conceptualizes career paralysis as the experience of people in the Confusion Room and its annexes, the Paralysis Pit and the Revolving Reality Door. People experiencing career paralysis are thought to be aware of wanting a change (and so are therefore past the Contentment and Denial rooms), but unsure or unable to move forward with such a change.
The second model is that described by Dr. Timothy Butler in his book *Getting Unstuck: How Dead Ends Become New Paths* (2007). In the book, designed as a self-help tool for people struggling with career and looking to make a change, Dr. Butler describes a ‘cycle of impasse and vision’ through which people must progress on their way through change. This cycle consists of six stages: 1) Crisis, 2) Impasse and self-doubt, 3) Letting go, 4) Shifting, 5) Seeing anew and 6) Taking action. The cycle begins when someone enters a stage of psychological crisis, brought upon sometimes by significant life events and/or by a more gradual deepening of unhappiness or unfulfillment over time. The crisis then deepens in stage two and people realize that they cannot continue the way they are; they feel confused, frustrated, and painfully aware that their current state of being-in-the-world is no longer working. In phase three, all of someone’s traditional coping tools and strategies have failed and, having a hit a subjective sense of rock bottom, they feel themselves letting go of old ways and opening up to new ways of coping and living. In phase four, now open to new ways of being and open to new information, people begin to see things in a different light. People find themselves coming in to contact with a deeper, less logical part of themselves and begin to sense the seed of new inspiration from within. In phase five, people have begun to emerge from the crisis, stronger, and more in touch with who they really are. They take stock of their life and their choices, and notice a perceptible shift in self-identity and self-awareness. In stage six, people channel their new self-awareness into concrete action for change.

Dr. Butler also provides a model for the experience of being stuck in the cycle. When we are stuck in the cycle, we experience crisis, but instead of opening up to new ways of thinking and being and resolving the crisis, we simply “muscle through” using
our old coping strategies. We experience the pain and confusion of crisis but mobilize our pre-existing defenses to deal with the problem. Our ability to “tough it out” in this manner confirms that there is no need for real change and we return to the status quo. While this leaves us feeling relieved in the short term, there is no true resolution to the crisis, and therefore it will re-surface again when precipitated by new events. To be fully released from the crisis, we must go through the complete cycle of impasse and vision.

Within Dr. Butler’s model of change, the experience of career paralysis could be viewed as some sort of mixture of the first four phases. Perhaps people in career paralysis are unable to move through crisis and impasse to the higher stages of letting go and shifting. Or, perhaps they are unable to make use of new information or new feelings about self developed in later stages to produce concrete actions or shifts in self-perception. Many of them may experience the feeling of “staying stuck” and have “muscled-through” feelings of career crises again and again over many years without ever feeling they have made real headway toward change.

It is relevant to discuss a third stage/cycle theory of career decision-making from which it may be helpful to conceptualize career paralysis. Cohen’s (2003) four-stage career decision-making model uses an existential perspective. He first describes career choice or career transition as a boundary situation. According to Yalom (1980), boundary situations are those that make the individual more aware of existential concerns and often involve life-changing decisions. In Cohen’s first stage, Responsibility, the existential concerns of responsibility and freedom emerge. Individuals become aware of their responsibility for vocational choice and development or they avoid this responsibility. During the second stage, Evaluation, individuals search for meaning and evaluate what
conditions are needed to be their authentic selves. In the third stage, Action, individuals pursue a career choice, ideally an authentic one. Two existential concerns can derail this stage however: impulsivity, whereby individuals act prior to truly examining their preferences and values, and compulsivity, whereby individuals act according to the desires of others. In Cohen’s fourth and final stage, Re-Evaluation, individuals re-evaluate themselves and their career as sources of meaning. If meaning is absent, they may feel an existential vacuum or existential guilt at not fulfilling their authentic self. These feelings may or may not lead them back to first stage, to begin the process of career-decision making anew.

In this model, someone who is struggling with career paralysis may be having difficulty with any of the three first stages. They may be avoiding taking what responsibility they can for their unhappiness or their desired career change. They may be struggling to evaluate and articulate what would be meaningful to them or what, for them, would constitute authentic living. They may be unable to translate values and sense of authenticity and meaningfulness into concrete action. In essence, they find themselves stuck at some stage of the existential decision-making process.

All of these three models are presented as cyclical and recurring processes though which we all move at various times throughout life. They present crisis as a necessary experience that marks the need for growth and change. After we come through each cycle of crisis and change, however, we learn new skills and acquire self-knowledge that leaves us better prepared to meet the next cycle of crisis and change when it arises. If we fail to move through the cycle, we become bogged down with old and recurring issues of meaning, and will feel stagnant, empty, and depressed.
The Present Study

The present study aimed to explore the experience of career paralysis. The preceding literature review provides a context for the phenomenon through an exploration of existing research, theories, and models, and creates a scaffolding within which to place the phenomenon of inquiry. This study hoped to make some contribution to bettering our understanding of the experience through an analysis of the narratives of individuals who are actually currently experiencing the phenomenon, thus exploring the in situ experience of career paralysis. The central research question in this study was to examine:

“What are people’s experiences of career paralysis?”

Secondary research questions were:

a) How do people define career paralysis for themselves? How do they define “where they are stuck?”

b) Are there common/central themes and/or parameters to the experience of career paralysis across individuals? For example, are there common behaviours, thought patterns, or emotional experiences?

c) What are people’s subjective understanding of the maintenance of their career paralysis?

Through an analysis of individuals’ narratives, as guided by the above research questions, it was hoped that this study may be able to provide a preliminary working model of career paralysis. A preliminary model of this kind would be invaluable in guiding future research and in offering a first roadmap to counsellors, psychologists, therapists, and other professionals working with clients struggling with career paralysis.
CHAPTER 3: Methodology

The present study aimed to illuminate the experience of career paralysis through an exploration of people’s in situ experience of the phenomenon. With this in mind, a qualitative methodology was used, consisting of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with the participants, followed by phenomenological analysis of the texts and narratives. This chapter begins by situating the study in methodological context by describing the history, nature, and use of qualitative methods generally, followed by an in-depth review of phenomenological analysis, in particular. The relevancy of the methodology to the aims of the study are described and highlighted. This chapter concludes with a description of the methodological procedures used for the study, including recruitment, selection criteria, data collection, and analysis.

Qualitative Methodology

Qualitative methodology has a long-standing history in the social sciences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Morrow, 2007; Tesch, 1990). It locates its roots within the fields of anthropology and sociology, with European and, later, American researchers developing accounts, ethnographic and otherwise, of their encounters with what they labeled ‘other’, ‘primitive’ and ‘alien’ peoples-- peoples whose way of life differed significantly from the European and American paradigms of the researchers themselves (Vidich & Lyman, 1994). Qualitative methods evolved with time and near the end of the
20th century, their ethnocentric and colonialist assumptions began to be seriously challenged. This paved the way for a broader array of qualitative methods and the more encompassing, pluralistic, and modern underpinnings of qualitative methodology today (e.g., Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Vidich & Lyman, 1994;).

Indeed, qualitative methodologies today are prized for their efforts to explore phenomena from the inside out, either attempting to be free from, or in explicit acknowledgement and dialogue about cultural, researcher, or other biases (Morrow, 2007). Qualitative methodology, as a whole, rests within an interpretative and constructivist paradigm that recognizes multiple realities as constructed by each individual and as influenced by social, cultural, historical, political, and personal context (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). As such, qualitative methodologies are widely acknowledged as useful when researching the “How?” or “What?” surrounding deeply subjective or complex phenomenon and as the most useful approach to questions around how people ascribe subjective meaning to their experiences (Morrow, 2007). Polkinghorne writes, “a primary purpose of qualitative research is to describe and clarify experience as it is lived and constituted in awareness” (2005, p. 138). Using language, text, and narrative, qualitative inquiry is able to explore experiences that are difficult to measure from outward, objective observation and that some may argue defy concrete quantification (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005). To fully explore and understand such phenomena, one must access the deeper and underlying emotions, meanings, value systems, and other processes at work during the moment of experiencing. Qualitative methods are widely acknowledged as tapping into these additional layers of experience (Thomson, 1981).

Given qualitative research’s emphasis on meaning and subjective, personal
experience, it is no wonder that many psychologists and psychotherapists have felt drawn to its methods. For instance, Morrow (2007) describes growing interest among counselling psychology students for research methods and research paradigms that are more congruent with actual practice. While psychology as a discipline once consciously distanced itself from qualitative methods in an effort to gain credibility in a prevailing academic atmosphere of positivistic, quantitative, and objectivist perspectives, qualitative methods are now beginning to enjoy a slow, but impressive resurgence in the discipline (Morrow, 2007). Psychology and psychotherapy practitioners and researchers alike are realizing the potential of qualitative methods in exploring the depth and complexity of the human experience—something of immeasurable value for those working with clients towards personal meaning-making, growth, and development (e.g., McLeod, 2001; Ponterotto, 2005; Morrow, 2007).

Under the broad umbrella of qualitative methodology there exist multiple different approaches that, while varying in terms of certain ontological, epistemological, axiological, and methodological assumptions, remain grounded in some general principles (Morrow, 2007). For example, qualitative methodologies are characterized by data emerging from the “insider” or participant perspective (Lee, Mitchell, Sablynski, 1999; Morrow & Smith, 2000). Categories of data or interpretations of data are not presupposed or imposed by the researcher, rather they emerge from the participants themselves. Related to this emergence of knowledge from within, qualitative methodologies adhere to the principle of inductive, rather than deductive, data analysis. As such, qualitative inquiry works to explore research questions rather than test research hypotheses. Qualitative analytic strategy begins by inductively exploring research data,
most often in the form of rich, in-depth, and detailed narratives as told through
interviews, to discover emerging themes and categories. Emerging themes and categories
are then compared and contrasted with existing and new data in an iterative and recursive
process that ideally results in *theoretical saturation or redundancy of data* (Lincoln &
Guba, 1985; Morrow, 2005, 2007). Qualitative methodology is also characterized by an
understanding of the social context and subjectivity of research. The researcher is careful
to acknowledge and work with his or her own subjectivity along with the subjectivity of
participants in a collaborative and intersubjective manner. Together, researcher and
participant contribute to the research process and research findings (Heshusius, 1994;
Morrow, 2007).

**Methodology Rationale**

The current inquiry used a qualitative design. This choice of methodology was
grounded in two rationales. Firstly, qualitative methods are widely favoured when
exploring understudied or, as of yet, unidentified populations or phenomena for which
there is little or no existing research (Hacket, 1997; Fassinger, 2000; Morrow & Smith,
2000; Morrow, 2007). Qualitative designs are able to assist in the nascent development of
theory-building and conceptualization around such phenomenon (Creswell, 1998;
Marshall & Rossman, 1999)-- in this case, around *career paralysis*. Indeed, with regards
to career research, it has been suggested that the use of traditional quantitative
methodologies before exploring participants’ subjective experiences of phenomenon may
risk limiting the researcher’s ability to access and understand the multiple and dynamic
realities of individual participants and thus lead the researcher astray in their theorizing
(Young, 1984).
Secondly, this choice of methodology rested on the assumption that career paralysis is a deeply meaningful and personal phenomenon that would best be illuminated through an in-depth exploration of participants’ subjective experiences. Career experiences are unique to each person and each person relates in unique, personal, and multi-layered ways to career difficulties and concerns. The use of qualitative methods permit the researcher to delve into the deep, subjective world of the participant and thus grant access to the complex contextual information that influence his or her experience of career paralysis, including emotions, perceptions, beliefs and acts of meaning-making. This in-depth and intimate level of analysis avoids simplifying elements of a participant’s story (Slife, Yanchar, & Reber, 2005). Qualitative methods guided the researcher in analyzing and integrating content, context, and process into a fuller understanding of how participants understand the experience of career paralysis.

Finally, it is important to note that this study’s methodological rationale rested upon a greater call in psychology generally and in the field of career development, particularly, for increased use of qualitative designs (Blustein, Kenna, Murphy, DeVoy, & DeWine, 2005; Lips-Wiersma & McMorland, 2006; Savickas, 2001; Stead et al., 2012). Career researchers have recently encouraged and advocated for the use of qualitative methodologies and maintain that they provide vital exploratory information that is lacking in purely quantitative methods (Chen, 2006; Chen & Lee, 2011). Generally speaking, it is agreed that qualitative research is “pivotal in expanding the horizons of issues and problems within vocational psychology” (Blustein, McWhirter, & Perry, 2005, p. 352).
Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009), one of several approaches to qualitative inquiry and data analysis, focuses on the lived experience of the individual (Wertz, 2005). It aims to both give voice and make sense of the subjective lived experience of phenomena as they present themselves to consciousness (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006). It is focused on exploring how people make sense of and ascribe meaning to experiences and phenomena (Clarke, 2008; Smith & Osborn, 2008). IPA is recommended for open, exploratory research questions and for research into new, little researched, phenomena (Larkin & Thompson, 2012). As such, IPA does not test hypotheses, but rather works to gather information and generate theory. IPA usually makes use of in-depth semi-structured interviews--such interviews are particularly useful for complex, subtle, and nuanced phenomena and allow for rich exploration of experience (Larkin & Thomson, 2012; Wertz, 2005). Given the present study’s research questions and its aim to explore the, as of yet, little researched and little understood phenomenon of career paralysis, IPA was deemed to be a particularly useful methodological mode of inquiry. Career paralysis is thought to be a deeply subjective, dynamic, multi-faceted, complicated and personal experience that requires in-depth and rich exploration.

IPA is rooted in the phenomenological philosophy of Edmund Husserl (1859-1938). Phenomenology is the study of being, of experience as presented and understood in consciousness (Larkin & Thompson, 2012; Wertz, 2005). Phenomenology has evolved with time and has greatly influenced not only philosophy, but the discipline of psychology as well (Halling, & Nill, 1995). European phenomenological philosophers
and psychiatrists, including Karl Jaspers, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Ludwig Binswanger, and Viktor Frankl have made significant contributions to both our understanding of basic psychological processes such as perception and cognition, and to mental health and clinical psychology more broadly (Halling & Nill, 1995; Spiegelberg, 1982). American researchers and practitioners, including Irvin Yalom, Eugene Gendlin, and James Bugental, have also made important contributions to phenomenological psychology and psychotherapy (Halling & Nill, 1995; Wertz, 2005).

Phenomenology is often conceived of having two important historical stages: the transcendental, and the hermeneutic (Larkin & Thompson, 2012). Husserlian transcendental phenomenology is focused on the essence of experience, the essential core features of a phenomenon, and aims to transcend existing biases, assumptions, preconceptions, and other knowledge (Larkin & Thompson, 2012; Phillips-Pula, Strunk, & Pickler, 2011). This is done through a series of phenomenological reductions, whereby the researcher systematically suspends his or her existing mental frameworks to arrive at the core of experience as it presents itself nakedly to consciousness (Larkin & Thompson, 2012; Wertz, 2005). Hermeneutic phenomenology is based on later re-workings of Husserl’s work and suggests that the necessary reductions of transcendental phenomenology can never be fully achieved or realized as they are always conducted by an individual who exists in a social context and who has certain perspectives. As we are all inextricably involved in the world, reductions themselves are always seen through this pre-existing mental scaffolding (Larkin & Thompson, 2012). IPA is rooted in this second, hermeneutic, phase of phenomenology. It explores experience and phenomena at the
level of person-in-context and assumes an inter-relationship and inter-subjectivity between the participant, the researcher, and the world (Phillips-Pula et al., 2011; Larkin & Thompson, 2012).

Based in hermeneutic phenomenology, as described above, IPA rests on several epistemological assumptions. These assumptions are outlined concisely in Larkin and Thompson (2012):

- An understanding of the world requires an understanding of experience.
- IPA researchers elicit and engage with the personal accounts of other people who are ‘always-already’ immersed in a linguistic, relational, cultural and physical world.
- We therefore need to take an idiographic approach to our work, in order to facilitate a detailed focus on the particular.
- Researchers do not access experience directly from these accounts, but through a process of intersubjective meaning-making.
- In order to engage with other people’s experience, researchers need to be able to identify and reflect upon their own experiences and assumptions.
- We cannot escape interpretation at any stage, but we can reflect upon our role in producing these interpretations, and we can maintain a commitment to grounding them in our participants’ views (pp. 102-103).

One can see from the above assumptions that IPA requires a delicate balance between idiographic or phenomenological and the interpretative elements of analysis. The researcher must maintain central focus on the lived experience of the individual
while remaining aware of the contextual factors at play (Clark, 2008). Smith and Osbourn (2008) suggested that IPA pursues a two-pronged approach of understanding—
“understanding in the sense of identifying or empathizing with and understanding as trying to make sense of” (pp. 54). As will be described in more detail in the following section, IPA analysis and interpretation is thus an iterative and inductive process. It involves a continual dialogue between the researcher’s efforts to understand the meanings of participants, to compare and contrast meanings with each other and those of other cases, and to make sense of these meanings in a broader context of psychological knowledge (Larkin & Thomspon, 2012; Morrow, 2007).

Counselling psychologists and therapists are increasingly recognizing the potential of IPA given that it is an approach that is congruent with their philosophy of practice and values (Wertz, 2005). Practitioners “require high-fidelity knowledge of persons that maximally respects the experience and situational contexts of those they serve” (Wertz, 2005; pp. 176). IPA provides for this low-lying, deeply personal, and intimate research knowledge. Career researchers are also beginning to recognize the value of IPA in exploring and deepening our understanding of career concerns and problems (Amundson, Borgen, Iaquinta, Butterfield, & Koert, 2010; Gomes, & Teixera, 2000; Wise & Millward, 2005). The present study, which explored career paralysis using IPA, continues this development.

**Methodological Procedures**

**Participants: Recruitment and Selection Criteria**

Similar to other qualitative approaches, IPA does not specify ideal sample sizes
(Larkin & Thompson, 2012; Smith et al., 2009). In fact, and in contrast to notions of reliability in quantitative studies, IPA encourages smaller sample sizes in that they facilitate the sourcing of in-depth, detailed, rich, and complex data sets (Larkin & Thompson, 2012; Smith et al, 2009). In IPA, it is the quality of data rather than the quantity of data that allows for meaningful analysis (Larkin & Thompson, 2012).

The present researcher’s review of existing published IPA studies in the career field provided a narrow range of sample sizes with most studies hovering close to 10 participants (e.g., Jungert, 2013, N=10; McIlveen, Patton, & Hoare, 2008, N=6; Millward, 2006, N=8; Murtagh et al., 2011, N=8; Oakland, MacDonald, & Flowers, 2012, N=7; Pettican & Prior, 2010, N=8; Roncaglia, 2010, N=14; Spiteri & Xuereb, 2012, N=10; Wise & Millward, 2005, N=10). While these studies span a wide variety of topics of more and less relevance to the present study--for example, voluntary career change (Gomes & Teixeira, 2000; Murtagh et al., 2011; Wise & Millward, 2005), retirement (Pettican & Prior, 2010; Roncaglia, 2010), and other career transitions (Jungert, 2013; Millward, 2006; Oakland et al., 2012; Spiteri & Xuereb, 2012)--the range of their sample sizes is consistent with the guidelines of the IPA approach mentioned above.

Adhering to existing IPA guidelines and existing published IPA studies, 14 participants were recruited for the present study. A minimum of 10 participants was set at the outset, and additional participants were recruited to achieve high-quality and saturated data.

Recruitment occurred from May to August 2014 using a public recruitment process in the Greater Toronto Area. Electronic flyers advertising the study (Appendix A)
were posted on social networking platforms and were spread via word-of-mouth.
Criterion-based purposive sampling was used as this allowed the researcher to source
participants of the same social context or population (Berg, 2007; Creswell, 1998). In this
case, the population of interest were people currently experiencing career paralysis. The
following selection criteria (including inclusion and exclusion criteria) were used:
- Must have, at minimum, an undergraduate degree from a recognized college or
  university
- Be between 25 and 40\(^1\) years of age
- Be presently employed and have been with their current employer for a minimum of
  1 year
- Must not be currently dealing with a significant chronic or acute physical health
  ailment

Interested participants contacted the researcher and were screened for inclusion using
an initial telephone screening interview (Appendix B) to ensure eligibility and to review
study requirements. Then, if the individual was eligible and still interested in
participating, the full research interview was arranged.

**Data Collection: Interviews**

All research interviews took place in comfortable and bright rooms in the OISE
Psychology Clinic and lasted between one and two hours. Participants were told to block
off two full hours. Participants were offered a $10 giftcard to a coffee shop as a token of
appreciation for their participation. At the beginning of the interview, the researcher

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\(^1\) One participant had just turned 41 in the month preceding the interview and, after consultation with the
research supervisor, was deemed eligible to participate.
verbally reviewed and obtained informed consent from all participants as well as collected a signed consent form (Appendix C). Participants were asked to complete a short demographic questionnaire (Appendix D). Following these administrative tasks, semi-structured interviews were conducted, guided by the questions outlined in Appendix E. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by the researcher. The format of the interview and the researcher’s demeanour aspired to encourage the sharing of in-depth, candid, and personal narratives and experiences of career paralysis. Open-endedness and an informal dynamic were used in order to facilitate the addition of crucial contextual information to existing interview questions.

**Data Analysis**

Analysis procedures followed the approach and techniques of IPA research, as developed by Smith et al., (2009), and as outlined by Larkin and Thompson (2012). Transcripts were uploaded into NVivo for Mac, a specialized qualitative research software program designed for assisting with data analysis. The initial phase of analysis, termed *free* or *open* coding, involved a first-pass in-depth reading of each transcript. The researcher made note of any ideas, images, and reactions that come to mind. The purpose of this phase was to allow the researcher to give voice to her existing biases, assumptions, and preconceptions so that she could approach the second phase of analysis in a more systematic and concise way. It also allowed the researcher to develop familiarity with the narratives and to begin the delicate process of reflection with the material.

In the second phase of analysis, termed *line-by-line* or *phenomenological* coding, the researcher annotated the transcript line-by-line looking for *units of meaning* or *experiential claims*. More colloquially, these refer to *things that matter to participants or*
objects of concern. This was done first on a case-by-case level and then across cases as the analysis grew in sophistication. These initial codes were then re-coded as broader groupings and themes emerged. In the final phase of analysis, the researcher entered into dialogue between the material and her existing psychological knowledge and context to develop a structure to represent and illustrate the relationship between themes.

**The Researcher**

In the spirit of a qualitative research paradigm, grounded in notions of interpretativism and constructivism, and in line with recent calls for best practices for qualitative research (Tracy, 2010; Yeh, & Inman, 2007), I will now outline my own personal stance, history, and relationship to the phenomenon of inquiry. As qualitative research is a subjective and intersubjective undertaking, it is common for researchers to make such information and context explicit to the reader (Morrow, 2005). Indeed, this “self-” or “researcher- reflexivity” is seen to be crucial to the trustworthiness (Morrow, 2007) and sincerity (Tracy, 2010) of qualitative research. Reflexivity assists the researcher to approach her research question with an open mind, aware of her own biases and assumptions, thus allowing her to test her pre-existing beliefs openly with real data, rather than inadvertently imposing or reproducing them (Charmaz, 2006).

My interest in the phenomenon of inquiry, career paralysis, is rooted foremost in personal experience. After university, like many young adults today, I floundered. Smart, educated, from a supportive family, I felt completely and utterly stuck. I had little understanding regarding what I wanted to do with my life. I searched through page after page of jobs ads, degree program listings, latched onto characters in movies and books, just hoping to stumble upon the thing that I was supposed to do. Many of my friends
were pursuing great jobs or higher degrees, and most of them appeared happy, ambitious, and on track. I, on the other hand, felt like I was treading water, caught in a revolving cycle in my head. Eventually, I found a foothold and began working as publicity assistant at a large publishing company. Objectively, on paper, it was a fantastic job: I got to work with well-known authors and writers, I attended glamorous book launches and festivals, I was surrounded by bright, engaged, and kind people who cared deeply about what they did...but, something wasn’t right and I was miserable. It was a great job, just not for me. The real trouble, however, is that I had no clue what to do about it. I didn’t know what else I’d rather be doing, or how to achieve it...when it came to career, I was completely and totally paralyzed.

As described briefly above, I know first hand how miserable it can be to feel stuck at work. Luckily, through intense self-exploration, I eventually found my way through my own experience of career paralysis and into a career I am truly passionate for: psychology. And now, years later, having spoken to many colleagues, friends, and clients, I have realized that my experience of career paralysis was not at all uncommon or rare. Coming to the present research project through my own experience of the phenomenon of inquiry, I recognized a need to acknowledge that my experience is likely not representative of all, and that themes that resonated for me during my experience may not necessarily resonate with others. I made efforts to exercise caution so as not to unknowingly automatically impose my existing ideas regarding the phenomenon unto the research participants and interview data.

Above and beyond my own experience with the phenomenon of inquiry, my broader social location is also essential in providing a full understanding of the context I
bring to the present study (Morrow, 2005). At the time of writing, I am in my early thirties and currently a third year doctoral student in counselling psychology at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) of the University of Toronto. I am a Caucasian woman of English and Scottish descent, though thoroughly “Canadian” over many generations and by self-identity. I am a child of an intact “traditional” family and come from relative privilege thanks to the hard work and dedication of my two wonderful parents. Through my own experience with career development and through the experiences of many of those close to me, it is my belief that the impact of career is currently under-appreciated in the context of more general wellbeing and mental health. Moreover, I take issue with the popular culture notion that “there is one right career for everyone” and that we must all “find our passion” as I believe it to be a rather suffocating and pressurizing concept for those who feel lost, confused, or paralyzed in terms of career decision-making or career development. I am aware as well that my relative privilege, and that of many of the clients I work with, provide us the opportunity to be deeply affected by concerns around career, whereas others may have more pressing concerns surrounding more elemental concepts of survival. As such, I am also sensitive to possible criticism that career paralysis or other career concerns may be viewed as indulgent issues of those of the privileged and educated. Acknowledging this as a possible truth, I am still deeply convinced of the significance of career paralysis for those who experience it. Finally, as a person, researcher, and psychotherapist, I am deeply rooted in existential, humanistic, and psychodynamic philosophies.

My personal experience, social location, and other biases and assumptions have inevitably shaped the manner in which I approached the present research project. While
pursuing the project, I endeavoured to maintain a reflexive approach to my own reactions and sense-making of participants’ experiences. To this end, I maintained a journal throughout the process in which I recorded my thoughts, reactions, beliefs, and emotions towards the research including the participants, the interviews, the data, analysis, and the final interpretative process.

**Introduction to the Findings**

The following five chapters will review the major findings of the study. Chapter 4 provides a brief introduction to each participant and provides a broad overview of their individual experiences of career paralysis. While each story was individual and unique, participants, both spontaneously and in response to direct questions, described elements that were shared with and cut across the experiences of others. As such, the next four chapters review these common themes and findings. The themes are arranged into four broad groupings or meta themes: Defining Features, Other Dimensions of Experiencing, Barriers to Change, and Reasons for Wanting a Change (see Table 1 for a summary of key findings). Themes are described and elucidated using relevant quotations from participants, thus demonstrating their grounding in the data and deepening the reader’s understanding of their meaning. The reader may note that some quotations may be repeated to help elucidate different themes. The final chapter, the discussion, reviews the implications of the findings for theory and practice, introduces an emergent model of career paralysis, and discusses limitations of the study and directions for future research.
Table 1. Summary of Key Findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Meta Theme</th>
<th>Core Theme</th>
<th>Sub-Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Defining Features of the Career Paralysis Experience</strong></td>
<td>A Deep Sense of Stuckness $(n = 11)$</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>An Underlying Truth $(n = 12)$</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Other Dimensions of Experiencing</strong></td>
<td>Negotiating the Meaning of Career $(n = 13)$</td>
<td>Questioning the Validity of the Experience $(n = 6)$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Behavioural Responses and Coping $(n = 13)$</td>
<td>Detachment and Distancing $(n = 10)$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Emotions and Negative Mood States $(n = 9)$</td>
<td>Irritability $(n = 4)$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Navigating Social Interactions $(n = 12)$</td>
<td>Depressed Mood $(n = 7)$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Non-Understanding from Supports $(n = 7)$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barriers to Change</td>
<td>Deciding Who to Talk To</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>( (n = 6) )</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Navigating Societal Expectations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>( (n = 6) )</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncertainty Around Other Possible Career Paths ( (n = 8) )</td>
<td>Difficulty Choosing Among Options ( (n = 5) )</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low Self-Efficacy ( (n = 7) )</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inertia ( (n = 13) )</td>
<td>Security as a Barrier ( (n = 10) )</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Comfort Factors as Barriers ( (n = 8) )</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unproductive Action Attempts ( (n = 8) )</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External Barriers ( (n = 9) )</td>
<td>Geographical Constraints ( (n = 3) )</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of Positions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reasons for Wanting a Change</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Desire for More Meaning, Purpose, or Fulfillment and Other Existential Concerns</em> ((n = 12))</td>
<td><em>Day-to-Day Erosion of Meaning</em> ((n = 5))</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Job Dissatisfaction</em> ((n = 13))</td>
<td><em>Existential Guilt or Responsibility</em> ((n = 7))</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Boredom</em> ((n = 7))</td>
<td><em>Disconnect or Conflict</em> ((n = 11))</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Few Opportunities for Growth</em> ((n = 4))</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Skill or Educational Requirements for Change (\(n = 7\))
CHAPTER 4:
Participants

This chapter introduces the participants of the study. It begins by presenting essential demographic information to provide the reader with a basic starting point from which to understand their experiences. It then provides a brief introduction to each participant, including their education and career development, other essential elements of their personal history, and a summary of their career paralysis experience. Subsequent chapters will present the common themes amongst participants’ experiences and will review an emergent model within the broader psychological context serving to demonstrate the relationship between themes and which offers a preliminary model and conceptualization of career paralysis.

Demographics

Interviews of 14 individuals currently experiencing the phenomenon of career paralysis were conducted and comprised the data for this study. Thirteen interviews were used in the final analysis (see Table 2). The excluded interview (Participant 12) was 27 minutes long and the participant did not use exploratory, self-reflective, or self-focused language. As a result, the interview contained a poverty of personally meaningful content and was not able to adequately address the experience of career paralysis. The remaining thirteen interviews provide a rich narrative from which to explore each individual’s experience of career paralysis. These participants ranged in age from 26 to 41 with a mean age of 33 at the time of interview (26, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32 (2), 33, 34, 36, 37 (2), 41).
There were eight females and five males. 10 participants self-identified as Caucasian and five of these identified additional ethnocultural backgrounds including Finnish, Italian, Lebanese, Jewish, and Polish. One participant identified as South Asian, one as mixed-race (Canadian and Chinese), and one as Greek. Five participants had Master’s level degrees, seven had Bachelor’s level degrees, and one had a college diploma. Five participants were single, five participants were married, and one each were engaged, in a common law partnership, and separated. Only two participants had children at the time of interview, and another was pregnant with her first child. No participants had more than one child.

**Table 2. Participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Relationship Status</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Highest Level of Education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Peter</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Caucasian (Finnish)</td>
<td>BA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elizabeth</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>MA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>BA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlotte</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>BA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mansi</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>South Asian</td>
<td>BSc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tony</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Caucasian (Italian)</td>
<td>BSc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edwin</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Common Law</td>
<td>Mixed (Canadian-Chinese)</td>
<td>College Diploma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrew</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>MBA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agnes</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Engaged</td>
<td>Caucasian (Polish, Italian)</td>
<td>MA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tara</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>MA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nik</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Greek</td>
<td>BSc</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Participant Summaries

Peter

Peter is 34-year old married Caucasian male working in Operations for a not-for-profit arts-based organization. At the time of interview, he had held his current position for six years, after completing a career change out of the retail industry. He has a Bachelor of Arts degree. Peter has become increasingly disillusioned with his work citing a disconnect in personal and professional values from the workplace culture and product, frustration with some of his colleagues, a lack of opportunities for personal growth, and general erosion of vibrancy and energy within the organization as factors, among others, contributing to his dissatisfaction. He reported identifying with the sense of feeling stuck or paralyzed when it comes to career change, especially in the last two years. Peter identified a sort of growing unease or underlying truth of wanting to make a career change and has asked himself whether he should have made a career change ages ago. He describes a pervasive and frustrating indecisiveness about whether to stick it out or whether to make a change. He admits to a fear of the unknown holding him back, alongside concerns around his level of adaptability. He acknowledges and describes a feeling of inertia, anchored in the “comfort factor” – the reality that his current job is familiar, provides for his urban lifestyle, and is comfortable -- as a central barrier to pursuing change.
Elizabeth

Elizabeth is a 29-year old married Caucasian female working as an archivist within government. At the time of interview, she had held her current position for just over a year, after having held several different contracts in various roles within the Information industry. Elizabeth has both a Bachelor and a Master of Arts. Elizabeth describes being stuck in a position that is related to her career of choice but one that is far enough away to be a poor fit. She describes the lack of fit as contributing to a sense of ongoing struggle to feel competent and confident in the role. More broadly, even prior to beginning this job, she admits to a possible lack of fit between the workplace culture and environment of government with her own personal values towards work. Elizabeth has tried many things to move into a role that is better aligned with her interests and training but has been frustrated with her lack of progress. There are limited positions available and it is difficult to know what new skill or qualification will result in a successful shift. Although generally optimistic and hopeful, she describes a growing sense of demoralization about getting out of the path that she’s in. Elizabeth also describes the security of her full-time position as a barrier to change, having worked contract for some time and being reluctant to return to that lifestyle. Elizabeth describes an internal struggle and negotiation around what meaning or role career should play in her life – naturally inclined and brought up to believe that you should do what you love, she is now questioning the utility and truth of that mindset. Elizabeth also has a latent dream to make a living as an artist, but is doubtful that she has the business skills and know-how to make a successful venture.

Mary

Mary is a 32-year old single Caucasian female working as an Account Manager
for an insurance company. At the time of interview, she had been working for the company for over eight years. She has a Bachelor of Arts degree. Mary identified strongly with the proposed definition of career paralysis and reported that these feelings have intensified within the last three years. She cites the realization that there is no upward movement, no opportunities for her to grow within the company, as a central factor behind her dissatisfaction and desire for a career change. A lack of recognition and appreciation for her work from the organization compounds her discontent and she feels totally disconnected. Mary describes the fact that she doesn’t know what else she might want to do for work or as career as a primary obstacle to change. She has tried applying for other jobs with little success, and finds the inconsistency with regard to job requirements frustrating and difficult to navigate, not knowing what new skills she should invest in. Similarly, she is reluctant to pursue additional education if she doesn’t have a clear idea of what she would prefer doing. Understandably, Mary is unwilling to give up the security and comfort her job currently provides, to take a risk on something she is unsure of. Overall, she describes feeling frustrated and directionless. She describes a process of detaching and distancing herself from work over time, compartmentalizing work from the rest of her life, exercising, and implementing an unofficial “work-to-rule” as a way of coping and tolerating her sense of career paralysis.

Charlotte

Charlotte is a 37-year old single Caucasian female working in childcare and the English as a Second Language (ESL) field. At the time of interview, she had been working in her current positions for five years. She has a Bachelor of Arts degree. Charlotte describes her career path as something that just happened without intentional
planning or decision-making on her part. Over the years, she has held various kinds of teaching and childcare roles, but never felt fully settled in a position. Charlotte describes never knowing what she wanted to do with her life as a long-term struggle and as the primary contributor to her experience of career paralysis. She describes feeling paralyzed by choice, and as a result, never investing in any real direction. At the moment, while her current working arrangement provides for her needs and is comfortable, she feels a sense of shame and of guilt around not engaging more with work and doing something meaningful with all she’s been given. Charlotte admits to a growing sense of boredom in her work life alongside a desire to grow and develop but describes a lack of confidence in her ability to make a good decision about a career change, and to anxiety about what she can handle. She describes a hesitancy to spend money or take a risk (for example, for additional schooling) if she can’t be sure it’s the right path. Charlotte has thought in-depth about the role of work and career and about whether career should be a primary source of meaning in life.

Mansi

Mansi is a 26-year old single South Asian female working as a research analyst. At the time of interview, she had held her current position for two years after graduating with a Bachelor of Science degree. Mansi identifies her sense of career paralysis as a general sense that something is missing in her work life – she isn’t miserable, but it’s just not quite right, not satisfying, not meaningful. She describes, however, not knowing how to make a change or what kind of change to make. She is caught between imperfect options, none of them being able to meet all her needs. Mansi has thought of applying to medical school, to a research graduate program, and of becoming a fashion designer, but
is unable to decide on what route to take. She speaks of waiting for a sign or a signal to reassure her about what path to take. She describes her career paralysis as beginning to weigh on her more and more as times passes and that it is something that is always at the back of her mind.

**Tony**

Tony is a 37-year old married Caucasian male working in sales as an Account Manager in the Petrochemical industry. At the time of interview, he had held his current position for five years and had been working in the industry for ten years. He has a Bachelor of Science in Engineering. Tony has a newborn daughter. Tony describes his career paralysis as a slow but crystallizing realization that he was not where he wanted to be. After several lateral job changes, he describes finding himself pretty much back where he started in terms of upward movement and career growth. In addition, he cites a disconnect and lack of fit between the workplace culture and atmosphere of sales, requiring at times underhanded political maneuvering and cultivation of a personal image, with his own values. Although he admits to a possible lack of skill in these areas, he describes a lack of motivation to better these skills due to the disconnect in values. Tony’s career development was strongly affected by outside influences including the dot.com bust and the 2008 recession, which limited his career opportunities. Looking back, he notes how he wished he had been more open-minded earlier on in his career as it may have helped him to better navigate these outside barriers. Tony describes clear ideas of things he would prefer doing, such as working in solar energy, which seem more meaningful to him, but which have been frustrated due to financial barriers. He shared that he has experienced periods of intense frustration, demoralization, and depression,
around his lack of career development. At the time of interview, however, Tony was feeling more optimistic and hopeful about possible change than he had in years, describing a sense of gathering forward momentum, and having finally reached a turning point. He cites lessening financial burdens alongside a shift in perspective (opening up to other alternatives and being more flexible) as behind this recent change.

**Edwin**

Edwin is a 28 year-old common law partnered male of mixed Chinese and Canadian descent working as an Occupational and Physiotherapy assistant. At the time of interview, he had held his current position for over five years and had been working in the field for over six years. He has a College Diploma. Edwin describes a growing sense of disenfranchisement at his place of work, fueled by interpersonal tensions, not feeling valued or heard by management, and a lack of growth opportunities. He is looking to make a career toward something more meaningful. He feels stuck, trapped, and tremendously frustrated. Edwin has applied for others jobs in his field but the competition for positions is fierce and it is very difficult to advance upwards without additional education, something he is reluctant to pursue. Edwin describes how his experience of career paralysis seeps into the rest of his life, contributing to bad moods, emotional chaos, and unexplained fatigue. In an effort to cope and tolerate the experience, Edwin has detached and distanced himself from work through an unofficial “work-to-rule” policy and consciously makes efforts to separate his work from the rest of his life. He also uses exercise a way to manage his emotions. Edwin has dreams of opening his own small business but is daunted by a lack of confidence surrounding the business elements of such an endeavour and feels overwhelmed by the process of starting a business.
Andrew

Andrew is a 41-year old married Caucasian male of Lebanese descent working as a self-employed consultant. He has both a Bachelor of Arts in Economics and a Master of Business Administration. At the time of interview, he had been working as a consultant for seven years and had been working in the field for 10 years. Andrew has one young daughter. Andrew describes a long-standing sense of career paralysis that was magnified significantly upon the birth of his daughter several years ago. For years, he has contemplated making a career change toward something more meaningful to him, but is unsure of what he’d rather be doing. He cites this lack of certainty and direction, alongside the fact that his current position provides a very comfortable lifestyle for his family, as primary barriers to committing to a career change. Andrew has thought in depth about the meaning of work in his life, about what would constitute meaningful work, and about the kind of life he would like to live. While he is still negotiating these questions, he reports that he would like to do work that contributes to society in some way and that leaves a legacy. He describes feeling as though he is wasting his potential, and wonders at his inability to make a change given his determination and long-term perspective and commitment in other areas of his life. Andrew describes intentionally filling his life outside of work with as much activity, exploration, and engagement as he can in order to compensate for the lack of meaning in his work life. He has day-dreamed about living a more simple life, for example, by living off the land in a small mountain town with his family, but finds it difficult to know whether he can trust this fantasy as something he would like in real life.
Agnes

Agnes is a 30-year old engaged Caucasian female of mixed Polish and Italian descent working as a Social Worker, primarily in case management. She has both a Bachelor and a Master of Social Work. At the time of interview, she had held her current position for two years and has worked in the field for a total of five years (with two years off in the middle during which she was pursuing her MSW degree). Agnes has become increasingly frustrated with her work situation over the years. Ideally, she would like to work as a researcher—even having pursued her MSW to gain additional research credentials— but she has been unable to secure a permanent research position despite excellent credentials, experience, and networking. Agnes describes an extremely limited number of research positions as a barrier to her making a change. In her current organization, she been able to pursue short-term research secondments but despite acknowledgement from management of the need for a permanent researcher, the organization has been unable to create a research position for her. Agnes reports growing frustration with the lack of recognition within the organization and with the organizational structure that doesn’t reward good work and good performance. Agnes describes an impulse to make up for time lost at work by staying up late even on weekdays and by compensating by ‘working for the weekend’. She feels strongly that her work should be meaningful and wants to be able to see the connection to the bigger picture on a day-to-day basis. Agnes is growing increasingly demoralized about her situation and feels flat and stagnant. She is hopeful that when her partner finds a permanent job that he likes, she might be able to take some more risks—for example, she might be able to forgo the security of her current position and take on a short-term
contract research job to get her foot in the door. Agnes is thoughtful about her desire for more meaning and has struggled at times with whether it is a legitimate desire or whether, for example, the impulse is childish or whether her personality is such that she might never be truly happy at work.

**Nik**

Nik is a 32-year old single (separated) Greek male working in IT Network Administration. He immigrated to Canada six years ago and has worked and lived in Germany and Brazil. At the time of interview, he had held his current position for two years and had worked in the industry for over 10 years. Nik made a career change within the field from programming to network administration while in Germany. He has a Bachelor of Science degree and a College Diploma. Nik describes a growing sense of career paralysis over the years, beginning as a sense of feeling saturated in his current field and intensifying with desires to start his own business and work for himself. He cites indecisiveness, anxiety, and a lack of confidence as primary barriers to career change into another field. He also described how, until recently, a level of comfort with his current and past positions position interfered with his motivation to make a change even when the desire was there. Recently, he has begun to initiate action, partnering with a friend, to launch a business. He is still working in his current position.

**Tara**

Tara is a 31-year old single Caucasian female working in Marketing Research/Brand Strategy. At the time of interview, she had held her current position for over four years and had worked in the industry for over five years. She has both a
Bachelor and a Master of Science. Tara links her current experience of career paralysis back to as early as high school where her focus was only achieving good grades rather than on truly understanding what she might want to do with her life. She describes a career pathway that wound here and there but that was never really anchored in a clear plan. Tara relates how her current job is objectively a “good” job but that she’s just not passionate about it and there is a bit of a disconnect between the company’s products and her own personal values. She cites difficulty deciding what other kind of work she might prefer alongside a struggle to actually define what she might find meaningful as primary barriers to career change. She is anxious about making the wrong decision, especially if that means leaving the security of her current job, which provides well for her lifestyle. Tara worries that she is not living up to her potential and is keenly aware of the success of her friends and sometimes wonder how much further she might be along in her career had she originally studied something that was a better fit. As things stand, she feels like a bit of failure for not having yet figured these things out.

**Lillian**

Lillian is a 36-year old married Caucasian female working as a Supply Teacher for a Toronto School Board. At the time of interview, she had been working in her current position for seven years and in the field for 10 years. She was also pregnant with her first child. Lillian holds both a Bachelor of Fine Arts and a Teaching degree. Over the years, Lillian has complemented teaching with other kinds of work from tutoring, library work, and working in the service industry, and has continuously worked to build her profile as a video-editor, writer, and story-teller. She describes how after being encouraged to study music, something that she loved, she drifted into teaching. She
relates how, from the beginning, she lacked skills on the practical end of things in order to build a career in music or other art form. She had difficulty envisioning debt as an investment in her future and so always had a short-term focus that she describes as lacking vision. Lillian has been trying to launch a more independent artistic career but has found it hard to self-motivate, especially when you’re tired after a long day of teaching, and also cited an anxiety about reaching out or taking risks as a barrier to career change. She describes a series of fits and starts, where she would try to pursue something, feel like a failure, and then take a break (which could last a year). She describes a recent shift in perspective, however, that is beginning to help her move through some of these anxieties. She is trying to challenge herself to push through the wall, persevere, and be gentler to herself in the process. Lillian has thought deeply about the link between career and identity, and about what defines career success and is still negotiating these questions with herself.

Debra

Debra is a 33-year old single Caucasian female working as a Policy Advisor for the Ontario Public Service. At the time of interview, she had held her current position for three years and had been working in the field for approximately seven years. Debra has both a Bachelor and a Master of Science. Debra describes how, in theory, her job is a great job—it’s good money, interesting people, and she is contributing to the public good—but how in practice, the day-to-day work can be mind-numbing and boring. Debra relates how she does not feel challenged in her job, feels bored most of the time, and feels as though she is not living up to her potential. Debra has thought about many different other careers, such as law or business, but is totally paralyzed by choice when it comes to
making a decision and so does nothing. She describes a strong pull of inertia (anchored in the security and comfort her current job provides) that compounds her doubts about what else she might rather do. Debra cites an inability to commit to a choice as the primary barrier to career change. Debra has struggled with the question of what role work should have in one’s life and whether she should just seek meaning elsewhere and be happy as, objectively, she has a “great” job. To deal with her career paralysis, Debra cultivates an active life outside of work, distracts herself from thoughts about career change while at work by doing interesting personal projects, and talks to family and friends.
CHAPTER 5:
Defining Features of the Career Paralysis Experience

This chapter presents findings for the first of the four meta-themes that emerged from the data analysis. While participants described and reflected on diverse aspects of the career paralysis experience, it became clear during analysis that there were some core features that were absolutely fundamental to the phenomenon. To the researcher, these features became anchoring points, helping to visualize and to more fully understand the subjective experience of participants. These descriptions were related as participants reflected on how they spoke about their experience to others and to themselves, as they reflected on their hopes for coming through the experience, and as they reflected on the term *career paralysis*. This chapter presents findings for these defining features, organized into two core themes 1) A Deep Sense of Stuckness and 2) An Underlying Truth.

A Deep Sense of Stuckness

Firstly, participants (n = 11) described a deep sense of *stuckness*, one that remained in spite of, and which was, at times, even exacerbated by, efforts to become unstuck. Five of the participants used particularly vivid metaphors or stories to describe being stuck. Mary and Mansi described their stuckness as a feeling of sinking.

It’s that feeling of...kind of like circling…it's this emotional quicksand of 'you're trying, you're trying, you're trying' and it's almost making it worse, or you're not sure if it is, but...you know, ‘I'm definitely not getting better, nothing better is happening, so am I actually just sinking?’ (Mary, age 32)

You are stuck, you can't move. You're stuck in a swamp. You want to get out but you keep sinking… but I feel the sinking thing for me is that time keeps passing and I'm not making a decision. (Mansi, age 26)
Along similar lines, Debra and Tara spoke of the stuckness using the metaphor of a car that was stuck in ruts, spinning its wheels. In Tara’s case, she also describes a sense of despair that she might never get unstuck.

I guess I would say feeling stuck in a job or a career path that is unsatisfying, unfulfilling, not stimulating, and feeling like you can't, for whatever reason, can't escape the path that you're on… and whatever you do or think about, you're stuck. It's ruts in the roads and the car can't get out of the ruts. You're on that tread. (Debra, age 33)

The word stuck comes to mind... Just not knowing what I'm doing. Not living up to my potential. Probably stuck. Spinning my wheels… I want to say that I'm hopeful because oh my god - I cannot... I'm 31... I cannot continue on like this. I need to do something. So I feel like I'm going to need to find a way to figure something out but in terms of right now how I'm feeling, I'm not feeling hopeful because I'm still like 'what am I doing?' I feel I've made zero progress. Even though I probably have made a lot of realizations about myself but they're just not gelled together. So it just feels like a mess. (Tara, age 31)

Charlotte relayed a story that she had heard in Sunday school as a child to describe her experience of feeling stuck.

I think so much about the story I heard in Sunday school. I don't remember it exactly, it's some bible story about a man who has three sons and he gave his sons two silver coins each (I'm sure I'm totally changing it, but this is how I remember it). And he says, "Go invest these coins and come back and show me what you've done with it." And the sons went away and came back after a month and one son said, "Father, here I have 4 silver coins. I invested them and made a profit' and the man says 'Well done, my son, I am pleased'. And then the next son came and says 'Father, I'm so sorry. I invested my coins but I lost everything.' And the man says 'Well that's too bad, but you learned something. Well done, my son, I am pleased.' And then the third son came and said "Father, I didn't know what to do. I buried my coins in a hole. I kept them there safe and at least I can bring them back to you". And the man cursed his son and flogged him and threw him out... I feel kind of like that third son. Not investing, not using what I have. (Charlotte, age 37)

Several other participants spontaneously used the word stuck or a variant to describe their experience.
I would say the word "stuck" came up a lot...feeling like it's difficult to get out of the path that I'm in. I feel stuck because I'm in a related-path but not necessarily exactly where I'd like to be. And it's difficult to recognize where to bridge that gap and how to bridge that gap between [the two fields] (Elizabeth, age 29)

I guess I think about 'stagnant' a lot...Flat, stuck. Just words like that...It's not that you're falling into despair or a crisis but you're just kind of like 'oh yeah, there goes another day. Oh yeah, there goes another day...' So like flat. (Agnes, age 30)

Agnes further elucidates this sense of stuckness with a review of her expected timelines for change.

I think two years ago I would have seen myself in a research position guaranteed by five years and now that's three years away and I don't know how realistic I think that is. I think it's like a three out of ten unless I really liked networked the hell out of this city …so it's quite depressing to think that in five years I might still be at this same job. (Agnes, age 30)

Edwin’s sense of being stuck has translated into intense feelings of frustration.

I describe my situation as just being stuck. Or feeling trapped. Feeling really frustrated. I used to say, out of frustration, not serious for the record...I used to say out of frustration, 'if I don't get what I want, I'm going to burn this building down.' (Edwin, age 28)

The term stuck also resonated with Peter.

What would my future self think about my current self just sticking around? So I think that is a sort of, as you might say, a paralysis. It feels a bit stuck I think…I think actually the word stuck did come up. It's got a good ring to it as well. It sounds like that onomatopoeia thing…stuck...stuck…stuck… (Peter, age 34)

Later Peter elaborates on the strength of this stuckness through a reflection on what might be required to get him moving.

I don't know, really. Because it seems like it's taking forever even though it's only been a couple of years…Maybe it would take something drastic…I don't want to be morbid about it, but something like a parent dying, or realizing, 'wow, life is short, you really need to jump at it'...I kind of feel like it might have to be something a bit more drastic, because I've just been twiddling my thumbs. (Peter, age 34)
Nik describes his stuckness as a *paralysis by analysis*—an agonizing rumination that prevents him from moving forward.

Like..thinking, thinking, thinking, analysis.....paralysis by analysis. Sometimes you're thinking, thinking, thinking too much. And it paralyzes you. Different ideas, different things going on in your brain but it's not helping you. You know, you need to have your target, your destination, just be simple. Simplify the things. (Nik, age 32)

Tony understands his stuckness through a realization that he’s both not moving and he’s feeling directionless.

Sigh, it's just a little bit nauseating. It's like, 'God, this is the same stuff I was doing eight years ago and wow, I'm getting paid better for it but...I haven't moved in eight years, I haven't done anything different in eight years.' So, it is a level of frustration that you realize every morning that you come in that it's not something that you want to do and you're direction isn't there as well (Tony, age 37)

**An Underlying Truth**

Secondly, participants (*n = 12*) described a sense of knowing that at some point a change had to happen, that change was the right answer—they described a kind of underlying ever present truth, one that nagged at them constantly and which they were only sometimes able to suppress.

For Tony, this underlying truth felt like a cloud or a haze that was always hanging over him.

I would have called it career malaise. Just a general malisima of directionless mediocrity… So part of being in that kind of haze, directionless haze, it's not like you're starving, you're not living on the streets, you're going on your vacations and you're having fun on the weekends and your life can be pretty good outside of work but you go to work and it's kind of this, there's no...There's this cloud. And that's exactly how it feels. (Tony, age 37)
Peter who thinks about these things “on a weekly basis, at least half of the days I'm at work” describes this underlying truth as a recurring self-dialogue about whether he should stay or go, but knowing that underneath, change is the right answer.

So you think, you know, are there better opportunities out there? Is it actually a wise decision for me to stay on…or would it be a smarter thing to go and do something else…I don’t what the answer is right now, I really feel like maybe it is smarter to go and when I look back and if I were to change jobs in the next little while, will I have this feeling of relief, like 'oh I should have done this so long ago?'

About half the time it's a pretty happy environment but you have this thing sort of gnawing at the back of your head, that 'it could be better.'… It's great on some days and I'll hold on to that a little bit and say "its not so bad, it's not so bad", but in the back of my head, I think I know I gotta go, I gotta make a change. (Peter, age 34)

Elizabeth describes a sense of her need to change breaking through at times, and that acts as a nagging reminder that there is something that’s still not quite working in her life, that the career piece of her life puzzle isn’t quite fitting.

Sometimes I'm so busy that I don't have time to think about such things, but I would say probably on average, two to three times a week the thoughts pop into my head. I check the job boards for postings almost daily. I'm always kind of on the look out for other things so I feel like that's definitely a sign of me not being happy in my job…Some days I just have the thought of "I have to get out of here"…You spend so much time at your job that I guess that's why even though I do feel fulfilled in other areas of my life for sure, I'm definitely happy in general, that's why I feel there's just this one thing that's kind of keeping me from being completely satisfied with how everything's going. (Elizabeth, age 29)

Charlotte describes how she thinks about these things daily. “Daily…I often wake up and that's what I'm thinking about. And it's not a good thing to wake up thinking about. Really it's not helpful.” She shares a sense of knowing that change is necessary for her mental health.
In the next year I would definitely like to be doing something different because it's not healthy to get bored and to stay bored, you know? And because I don't want to go back to some personal habits which are negative, and those kinds of things can become much more active when you're bored and unfulfilled. It's important for me to get more engaged...But I think I’ll feel even more bored and kind of crusty and complainy if I don't change anything. (Charlotte, age 37)

Lillian describes how thoughts of career paralysis “are still there day-to-day. I think I feel unsettled…So I think it must be on my mind.” For Mansi, thoughts and feelings about her experience of career paralysis are ever present, even though she tries to keep them inside.

[I think about it] every day, when I go to work. Like when I wake up. Because every day I just say 'let me call in sick' - like I want to avoid it. It’s very frustrating. I try to not let it affect me, but…it does. I keep it inside, I try not to show it but…it's not something that just pops up, it's always there. (Mansi, age 26)

Several participants spoke of a gradual intensification of this underlying truth as time wears on. These results possibly suggest some kind of progression of career paralysis—at first, one is able to rationalize it away, but the as times goes on, knowledge of this underlying truth becomes stronger and more difficult to repress.

It went from ‘is this what I want?’ to 'I'm pretty sure this is not what I want". It went from this back of the mind realization that something I thought was not permanent was becoming a lot more permanent-seeming to knowing that no, I don't want this… Over the years I've talked to people about it a lot. It's not as much a conversation that I have these days with people because it's just that I'm tired of it. They're tired of it. It's not anything new… I think that I will feel stuck until I'm out of there. I don't see a change happening where I embrace where I am. (Mary, age 32)

Edwin, who think about these things “every day, all day” describes:

Every year this feeling of paralysis and this desperation to change careers increases. So when it started four years ago, it was just a fleeting thought and a fantasy of 'ooh, I'm going to change careers'…But, as time has gone on, my frustration's increased. The idea of changing careers becomes less and less of a
fantasy...I think I always knew that this wasn't going to be a long-term career for me, but I think for the first couple of years I was repressing that thought and I was really telling myself that I could go, I could just push through it. (Edwin, age 28)

Tara, who thinks “about this stuff everyday almost” described a kind of taking

stock of her life that highlighted her growing feelings of career paralysis.

I think they have been there in the background but maybe I wasn't fully knowing what they were. Because I feel I've been thinking about it a lot more in the last few years so I probably have a better self-awareness about it now...I think it's partly for that reason that it's stronger and also because I'm thirty-one...and I kind of wish...going back to what I said about when I was in high school, I'm kind of naturally a keener so I feel like if I had had a plan, did a degree in something that was actually useful to my life and then started a career, I would be in a really good place right now... (Tara, age 31)

She also describes an awareness that career is her biggest problem even though she may not focus on it as much as she should.

I do try to do things that make me happy when I'm not at work. But then I wonder is this good? Ok, I'm going to the gym, socializing, whatever, but it's not helping me. I should be focusing on my biggest problem but, as I said, I'm very good at distracting myself. (Tara, age 31)

Andrew spoke often about how the birth of his daughter acted as a catalyst for latent feelings of career paralysis.

I think the other kind of impetus is we have a young daughter now and so now I'm kind of starting to think more and more about how do I provide a positive example for her. Kind of being stuck in a career, how do I say to her, 'Do everything you want to do' when I'm not actually doing it myself...at first it was more just like a little niggling thought and you're kind of like 'yeah, I don't really know if this is for me but it's ok. I'm young, I've got lots of time.' And then it became more pronounced into 'I don't actually like what I'm doing. I'm not that fulfilled and I'm not that happy to be getting up to go to work in the morning.' (Andrew, age 41)

In describing the process of this progression, Andrew reflected:

I honestly think it's coming to a head because it seems to be focusing more. I'm just...angry is not the right word...I'm just kind of...when I think about it, I'm
through with it...I think that we can make the adjustments and even if I choose to go off and do a different career I know my wife will support me financially and I think I have the ability to do that so I just need to figure out what it is now.

I think it's two cows: I think it's my daughter and I think it was going out west last year and just doing that trip. And those were two just big catalysts for me. So I think those have been life-changing events and have just really focused a light on this. And I've kind of always known it's been there, it's just now, as I said, it's becoming more... I just can't hide from it...I don't know if 'hide from it' is the right word but yeah...I can't forget about it, right. (Andrew, age 41)

Agnes describes a sense of growing demoralization over the possibility of change as time wears on and a growing awareness of time passing by. When asked about how hopeful she was of coming through this experience in the near future she reflected:

I don't know how to rate it. With time, it just keeps plummeting lower and lower. When I first took this job I was like 'I'll just stay here for six months, have money while I'm applying for other jobs' and then I noticed 'oof, it's been two years.' It's just like, oh this is it, this is my career now. It almost feels like when we get our annual raises, when I get that letter I'm not like 'yay, 50 bucks more a month' or whatever, I'm just like 'it's been a year and I'm still here.'… I do value the security a lot more. So it makes me feel happy about that but then, you have that feeling of...something's missing... (Agnes, age 30)

As Agnes reflected on the experience of being interviewed she noted:

It was really good to talk things out out loud. I didn't realize how upset I feel thinking about it. At some moments I would feel my voice getting a bit shaky and I was like 'oh, this upsets me.'…talking about it out loud, I'm like 'oh yeah this sucks' and it's something that I think about all the time. (Agnes, age 30)

For some participants, this underlying truth was presented to them through a harsh self-critical voice. Debra, who thinks about these things “all the time” and who is “constantly think[ing] about what else I could be doing” says to herself:

Get your shit together, and do something. Why wouldn't you do something? The longer you wait, the longer you wait. It makes no sense to wait and to do something you don't like because you're just going to get older and all these things are just going to get more entrenched. If you do something now, then the me five
years from now might have a totally different situation. But if I don't do anything then I clearly won't. (Debra, age 33)

Andrew echoed these statements when reflecting on what the version of himself in five or ten years from now would say to his current self.

I think five or ten year Andrew would be like 'get off your ass and make a change!' I don't think it's that hard and I think sometimes I'm making it harder than it needs to be…I think five year me would just say 'Make the change. Just do what you need to do because this isn't going to get better if you don't' and 'I've made the change and now I'm better in five years.' I think the other thing five year me would say would be like 'If you think it's worse now, it's going to continue getting worse. It's not going to get better...why would it improve?' I've let the cat out of the bag, so to speak, now so it's not going back in…It's just going to keep getting worse and my daughter's going to have more and more questions which I need to be able to truthfully answer. And how do I do that if I don't make the change. (Andrew, age 41)
CHAPTER 6:
Other Dimensions of Experiencing in Career Paralysis

This chapter presents findings for the second of the four meta-themes that emerged from the data analysis. In sharing and reflecting on their experience of career paralysis, participants related the pervasiveness of the phenomenon in their lives and the diverse ways in which it was experienced. This chapter presents findings for these other dimensions of experiencing organized into four core themes: 1) Negotiating the Meaning of Career, 2) Behavioural Responses and Coping, 3) Emotions and Negative Mood States, and 4) Navigating Social Interactions. The four core themes are then further divided into several sub-themes.

Negotiating the Meaning of Career

A common theme to the experience of participants \( n = 13 \) was that of an ongoing internal negotiation with themselves about the meaning of career. Is career an identity? Is it a way to pay the bills? How meaningful does work need to be? What are the boundaries between career and personal life? Every participant was grappling with these questions and had thought about the meaning of career to some extent. While some were more firm in their perspectives, the majority related an ongoing discussion and questioning.

Peter reflected on his shifting perspective of whether a career could just be a job and on his hope of finding a compromise somewhere in the middle.
Right now, [for me] it feels more like a job than a career. And, when I started it seemed more like a career kind of thing. And I think it's just really the lustre has worn off a little bit...I'd say in the past few years it's really changed and I think it's more just 'get-in, get-out and have a fun weekend'. And it pays the bill and it's not super great. I'd like to think that that there's something a little bit better out there.... Again, I don't want to be the CEO of the ROM or something where you're on all the time, yeah you'd be...prestige and making a lot of interesting contacts and salary and all that, but I'd just like to think that there's somewhere in between. (Peter, age 34)

Elizabeth reflected on her perspective that career should be a primary sense of purpose in one’s life and on the difference between that opinion and that of her husband.

It’s funny because I'm definitely the kind of person that takes a lot of personal satisfaction and personal success from the career that they're in and I think it really does shape my identity and I thought that a lot of people felt that way but, surprisingly, my husband does not feel that way. He likes his job well enough but he doesn't really get any kind of personal satisfaction, he doesn't feel that it shapes him as a person. So that was really interesting to me because I've had discussions with him about it and we're really on different ends of the spectrum that way and I think he's helped me see that it doesn't necessarily have to inform who you are as much as I think that it should.

Later, Elizabeth wondered about whether lowering her expectations could be an effective way to mitigate her disappointment with her current work life and lessen her feelings around career paralysis.

I do think [that perspective] is valuable and I think it would lead to a lot less stress even if I am in the same career path. It would just be better overall if I didn't put so much pressure on myself to be in a career that is completely fulfilling and found fulfillment in other areas of my life… (Elizabeth, age 29)

While Mary shared the general opinion that her career doesn’t necessarily need to be a primary source of meaning, she did reflect on how some disconnects can cause tension.

Probably more than most people I don't mind separating myself from my career. I wouldn't be the person who lived my career. That isn't likely. But at the same time, in my current position, the way the management handles situations doesn't
line up with personally how I think things should be done and how people should be handled…that causes problems too. (Mary, age, 32)

For Charlotte, career is important to identity and she describes how changing her career over the years has impacted her sense of self. She is open, though, to the idea that not everyone requires meaning from their career and that people may have a different definition of career success.

I don't want to be teaching. But if I don't teach, who am I am? Because we get a lot of our sense of self from what we do and I've kind of discarded what I do periodically throughout the years. So every time…’well, who is Charlotte?’

I always thought that I am a person that doesn't care about money...because I do these jobs that don't pay me much because it's meaningful!...I think meaning is really important...but I don't think you actually have to find meaning in your work and people have said that to me too. 'You can just do a job that you find ok and make money and then meaning is in your other activities, maybe your volunteer work or your family' - I think that's possible too. (Charlotte, 37)

When asked whether it was important for her career to be meaningful to her, Mansi responded, “Yeah, because a career defines you. To an extent.” She later added:

“If your work doesn't impact anything, then what's the point of working? I feel that. Because you go to school for however many years, and then you do a job but if you're not happy and if it doesn't have an effect on anything, then what's the point? You should just stay at home. (Mansi, age 26)

Tony shared how he slowly realized with time how important it was for his career to be meaningful and to align with his values.

It’s taken me awhile to realize that but I think fundamentally, deep down, there needs to be an intrinsic human value to what I do…When I was in water treatment, I was doing a lot of waste water and at the end of the day you knew that that pollutant was not going to be in a stream. You knew that that system would be more efficient and would not be wasting water. You knew that you were doing...actual good things for the environment….At the end of the day in my current career path, I can say ‘well, this engine I made 2% more efficient’ but really I didn't because it was a big heavy duty diesel engine that sucked up a lot of crap anyway…and it's just not enough anymore.
So, I've certainly made my share of mistakes but part of that mistake is not aligning my values with what I'm doing. And finally, I'm coming up to that realization - 'you have to do that, you have to do that' and everyone else I've known who've made big satisfying career jumps are like 'yeah, I'm really satisfied with where I'm at because it aligns with my values'. (Tony, age 37)

Andrew describes a personal internal struggle about what career means, and reflects on how things have shifted with time: “I kind of wrestle with the concept of sometimes I think that there should be more to life than our work and sometimes I think that work is just work and you really need to separate that.”

My rational mind tells me that work and personal life are distinct…there's a distinction between the two, but it's becoming harder. I just think because you're at your job like eight hours a day, you're at your job like one third of your life and not including sleeping so it really...it's becoming harder to make that distinction so I don't think that I see it as a clear line anymore. I would never define myself by my career but I think that the line is more blurred more for me. (Andrew, age 41)

For both Edwin and Agnes, having a meaningful career is paramount.

I think, for the type of person that I am, having a meaningful career is tremendously important. It's more important than income. I would rather have a career where I'm enthusiastic to go to work every morning and at the end of the day, I don't want to leave than have a job that I feel miserable in but pays well. That's the type of person that I am. Not everyone subscribes to that belief. Some people are satisfied working in jobs that they dislike because of the income. But the type of person that I am, I need to feel passionate about the work I'm doing, I need to feel engaged and...I need to feel like I'm having an impact. (Edwin, age 28)

It's very important for my work to be meaningful. Like times that I have taken retail jobs or doing something like, it's just bad, I'm just not happy in life. I think, because you spend so much time at your job it needs to be good for me...While I was applying for grad school and I was saving up, I was pretty sure that I was going to get accepted, I worked for Ontario Works for six months. It was an office job and you were still sort of helping people because you're doing applications and you're helping people get on assistance but it didn't feel meaningful to me. The way that the women, and some men, in the office talked about the people on Ontario Works...they were all jaded. And I remember just being like, 'I can't work in this office forever' and what I noticed about the people who did work there forever, it seemed like they had really rich family lives so they could come in and
sort of punch the clock and their job didn't seem to need to be meaningful for them because what was meaningful was their family, children...Their meaning was elsewhere...and I'm not saying that my life is meaningless outside of work but I do put a lot of weight into my job...I want to do well in job to feel accomplished as a person. (Agnes, age 30)

Nik’s response to a question around the importance of a meaningful career indicated that he didn’t believe it was one or the way, but that it depended on the context of one’s career within one’s broader life.

I can answer this question in a different way maybe. If I would have succeeded to become a tennis player, than I might ...job is going to be my life. But in IT, it’s not the same. It pays my bills. But if I'm a tennis player, it's my life. Even if I don't make that much money, I'm still going for it. (Nik, age 32)

Although it is important for Tara to have a career that she is proud of and passionate about, she has debated the option of finding her meaning outside of work. She also explores the influence of her father’s career, and whether or not she’ll have children on her shifting perspectives.

I go back and forth. It's like, ok - should I just keep doing what I'm doing because I'm relatively good at it, can make a decent living, wouldn't have to go back to school. If I could just find a company that had cool people, maybe that would be fine. And then my external, outside of work life, I can focus on things I'm passionate about because I know that exists. People make that work. And then my job would just be like a 9 to 5 kind of thing...I play around with that option because I don't really want to waste these things over there that I've done. But then sometimes I think, 'shit, maybe I just need to do something crazy and like quit my job and just figure it out.'

I do have outside interests so it's not like my job is my whole life. I don't know if I could actually have a career that totally consumed me unless it was something I deeply loved - and I have no idea what that is. But I do feel like I would like to be somebody who had a career I was proud of and interested in and was happy to talk to people about it. Something that I could be passionate about. And maybe that's going back to my role model growing up, my dad. He was just so passionate about it. So I know it's possible so I would love that for me. I don't fully know if I want to have kids so it's like, ok...if you don't do that, you should probably have a career that's kind of amazing. (Tara, age 31)
Lillian described how having a meaningful career is important to her, but how over the years, she has also re-evaluated the weight that having or not having an objectively successful career should have on her sense of self, and on her expectations for career.

I think it is important for me [that my career be meaningful]. You only live once and so it's good to fill your time with things that you really believe in and that you enjoy. So yeah, for me, I think it is. I think that's part of the searching maybe...a searching too much...But then as the years go by and the struggle...I try to be like 'you know what, it's just...enjoy life and it doesn't matter so much sort of what you've achieved.'

Emotionally, I never imagined, I guess I always thought that 'oh, I'll go to school and do fine and do well' and then that whole discovery process, which I think a lot of people do, just like 'oh wow, life is different than you think' and then figuring out, coming to terms and being like 'well where I am is fine' …You compare yourself to a friend who is a full-time lawyer and is working towards owning their own house and things and you think 'What about me? How come I'm not in a full-time position moving up some ladder?' and being able to slowly see the similarities and then also say 'Ok, I'm capable of critical thought as much as that person but I'm, for some reason, in a different spot and that's fine.' Being like...that’s not the only definition of success. A lot of redefining...there are a lot of professionals in my family and so redefining whether... that it's ok for them to be professionals, sociologists or whatever and that's great, but it's also ok to respect that and not be in that position for some reason or another. (Lillian, age 36)

Debra describes an ongoing negotiation about the role work should play in her life and where she finds her meaning.

I think I'm a bit of a pendulum so I swing both ways, depending. On the one hand, I do think that I don't live to work and I will never live to work. I want to work to live. I want work to pay for me to have the life that I want. And everything basically is more important than work. Work is, at the end of the day, work. And it's not life. And, for me, it shouldn't be. However, I also recognize that people are generally defined by what they do and the first question you're asked in a social situation is "So what do you do?" So actually when I meet someone, I try to be mindful not to ask that. Because I don't want to be defined by my career or what I do with my day. But that's how it is. And that's society and that's just the context, that's reality. That's North America...And I do swing to the other side...the reality is that I spend most of my waking hours sitting at work. So it does matter what I
do. Because I spend so much time doing it…because it's so much of my life that I spend there. (Debra, age 33)

**Questioning the Validity of the Experience**

As part of their negotiation around the meaning of career, six participants described, at some point, questioning the validity of their career paralysis experience. There was a sense of doubt surrounding the legitimacy of their experience—Was it all in their heads? Should they just get over it?

Peter wonders, “Sometimes I think the reasons are all maybe in my head…I know they're not but do I build it up too much? Doesn’t everyone go through a lot of this kind of crap job stuff from time to time?”

Agnes has thought a lot about the legitimacy of her situation, prompted in large part by the perspective of her parents. She’s also wondered whether part of her career paralysis is fuelled by a personality that’s just always just looking for more. In her words, “I guess when I'm thinking about what's going on with me – I’m trying to balance what is an ambitious person with what's someone who is not ever content and how to you balance those.” She later reflects:

I sort of question if I'm being juvenile by needing this, talking about this vague meaning, concept of meaning in my life or something. It's sort of like you're supposed to be happy with security and be happy to have a job …so I feel like it's almost childish...or [my mom] sees it a childish to have these inner turmoils when really you should be fine because you're not in a really bad struggle…You have a secure job, you're living comfortably, what is this you're talking about 'from inside you're not happy'?

I sort of wonder if when my mom says 'get a grip' if it's just my personality or if it's a real thing, like I'm paralyzed. I move a lot. I move apartments a lot. Because I'm always looking for something better and so if my lease comes up I'll always start looking for better apartments at the same price range. This is something about me; I'm always on the move. I'm always looking for something better…I’ve
been wondering about that. Because when my mom says 'get a grip', I'm like
'maybe I got to get a grip.' (Agnes, age 30)

Like Agnes, Debra has also wondered both about the legitimacy of her feelings,
and about whether some of her career paralysis experience is due simply to her attitude.

I think probably some messages I'm receiving externally, which have now become
internalized, are age - so I'm 33, no spring chicken, it's not time to be changing
things up, it's time to maybe settle down in a career; financially, I recognize that
I'm lucky. I have a good job with the government, it's really stable, it pays very
well, all these things and not everyone has that kind of good fortune…There is
definitely a sense of 'you better feel pretty damn lucky' and I do and I should, and
that's true…And it makes me feel...maybe less justified in being discontent.
Because not only do some very qualified and educated and intelligent people not
have good jobs, some of them don't have any jobs. And I myself had a stint of
unemployment and it sucked. So, there's that. And there's also the general
thankfulness that I live in Canada, have a really good job, have a very comfortable
lifestyle and am fortunate enough to be here. So...'don't complain.' …It's privilege.
I'm extremely privileged. It doesn't negate the feelings of discontent but I
recognize that I'm privileged enough to be sitting in a position where I have a
great job that pays well and still feel "arrgh, there must be something better."

I think maybe what I should be doing, instead of looking for this perfect job, and
there is no perfect job just like there is no perfect partner or whatever, maybe
what I should be doing is not looking out there but looking inside. And saying 'ok,
this is the career path I have. What can I do within this career path that will be
more satisfying a), even if the pay is maybe less, and b), what can I do to my own
psychology and to myself and how can I neurally reroute my synapses so I'm just
more content and less dissatisfied…should I be changing myself rather than
looking outside for solutions?... So then that also adds to the paralysis. Because
then I think, 'well maybe I wouldn't like anything else, and parts of this job are
exciting. And maybe I have to change my attitude.' Maybe that's what I need - an
attitude readjustment. (Debra, age 33)

Andrew’s questioning was also influenced through a comparison with the lives
and careers of his parents. In addition, however, he explores how this questioning and act
of rationalizing himself out of feeling discontent is becoming more difficult to sustain as
time goes by.

Part of my brain still honestly thinks, well it's a job from 9-5, I work Monday to
Fridays, I should be able to just leave it at the office and not everyone gets to do
things they love with their life. So part of me still believes that. I'm not happy with it and I'm wrestling with it but...so my dad worked in an auto factory for 30 years. He never enjoyed doing that but he didn't have an option and it put food on the table.

I think the money was good enough and you kind of just suppress your values...that sounds really horrible. It's not about suppressing your values, it's not like I'm doing anything wrong, it's just like you kind of just ignored the fact that you're not as fulfilled as you want to be. And I think a lot of the times, in the early days, you can rationalize your way out of it and you can say to yourself, there's a lot of people who work who don't have the choices that I have that are forced into jobs, like I'm sure no one really wants to pick up the garbage but they have to do that, right. So you kind of just go 'ok, this is a job. It puts food on the table. I get to enjoy my life so I'll do it.'…Like my parents didn't have all this choice, my parents didn't come from money and they worked hard to put food on the table so you know, it's like 'ok, this is fine, I can do this.' And then I think the rationalization doesn't hold as much weight as you continue doing it, right.

(Andrew, age 41)

Charlotte had an interesting perspective on this notion of questioning the validity of one’s career paralysis experience and the resulting mental anguish.

I think maybe it's not the idea, but the feeling that keeps you stuck. That feeling of “There's something wrong with me”, “Why am I not happy at this great job?” “Other people have found what they want to do, other people are happy here”. Maybe if people can get over the idea of “I'm such a loser because I'm not happy,” maybe they will have the courage to try a change.

Charlotte also reflected on whether she was just locked in a pattern of unrealistic expectations for career.

A friend said something useful to me which was that he thought I began things with tremendous enthusiasm and idealism and thinking 'this is going to be perfect this time' and when it would just be a real life experience with its ups and downs, I would be completely disillusioned and want to leave. (Charlotte, age 37)

Elizabeth’s questioning was described in terms of feeling guilty for not being happy with a “great job.”

I feel like I'm in a position where I could have this job forever if I wanted it. Which, in some ways is nice, but in some ways also adds to that feeling of being
stuck. In the sense that, I feel a bit guilty that other people would totally love this job and it would be a great career fit for them and I'm in this position and potentially taking it away from someone else who really wants it…On paper, it's like a great job. (Elizabeth, 29)

**Behavioural Responses and Coping**

**Detachment and Distancing**

Ten participants described a kind of detachment and distancing from their work. This was evidenced through a range of feelings and behaviours, from a reluctance to go to work in the morning, to a decline in motivation at work, to the implementation of unofficial “work-to-rule’ policies. Across cases, it was clear that participants were not feeling engaged or motivated by their work, and that they responded to this through various forms of detachment and distancing.

In Mansi’s words, “I don't look forward to it…Because like every day I just say 'let me call in sick' - like I want to avoid it.” Nik reflects, “I’m not motivated anymore. No motivation.” Several other participants echo these kinds of statements.

…it's really more numbing than it is depressing. I don't wake up hating that I have to go to that job, just that I have to get out of bed…If you're not going to motivate me, I'm tired of motivating myself… the fires gone out (Mary, age 32)

I feel it's difficult to have the motivation to go to work sometimes. I'm just like ohh…I don't necessarily want to be in this environment and so getting that kind of motivation…I pride myself in doing the best work that I can and all of that, that kind of motivates me, but in terms of the job itself, I feel like that's where…there's less fire to do it. (Elizabeth, age 29)

As I said I think I used to be able to swallow it a lot more when I was younger and it was really purely about money. But I think as it's become more important, I think it's affecting my mood. So I don't like to get up necessarily…I do like to get up in the morning, I don't like to go to work in the morning. I don't like the weekend to end. (Andrew, age 41)
It's sort of like, 'this is fine' but when I start thinking about when I feel stuck I notice that I'm just spending a lot of time of my day at my job, and then I come home at night and just start thinking about how I don't want to go there the next day. And you know that 'everybody's working for the weekend' song...like when I'm feeling like that, that song is just so depressing to me...I'm working to get through to my weekend and then, that's it...and that's miserable. (Agnes, age 30)

… myself being someone who wants to be involved but not necessarily the peak of the organization, I do feel that sometimes a leader needs to be a little more active, and it just, it's not providing me with the right kind of motivation on a day-to-day basis. So how long can you self-motivate? And traditionally, I can create that [drive] in myself most of the time, but I dunno how long you can do that for. It feels like a wearing down. (Peter, age 34)

Tony, Elizabeth, and Tara all reflected on how it was difficult to sustain motivation to try to make the most of, or grow in their current situation, when it really isn’t where they want to be.

… I guess on one hand I'd like to be able to embrace [my job] and jump in and pursue that network of people and the time it would take to develop that, and on the other hand, when it's not necessarily the career that I want to follow, I almost feel like it's not worth the effort. (Elizabeth, age 29)

That's another thing. I could probably be doing better at my job but I just have that whole 'don't totally care' thing. Like I could probably be in a higher position by now. I've been in the field for five and a half years so then that kind of makes me feel bad about myself too because I am kind of a go-getter but at the same time I don't care enough about this area to really push myself (Tara, age 31)

I think that's a key to me probably not moving up is that if I paid more attention to the internal stuff like being more spit and polished, having shinier shoes, having a better shirt, rehearsing my elevator speech when I'm with the management, playing more golf, stuff that won't actually affect the actual job that I do, that I'm doing, but it will affect my career path. I haven't been very good at that, at least not in the last two years…and I knew that I wasn't putting that effort out because I just wasn't motivated at it. So it's one of those difficult situations people find themselves in where you're de-motivated so you're vector is downwards but you know you have to point it upwards. Not just lay it flat, like you really have to take an about-face. (Tony, age 37)

Tony goes on to reflect how his lack of enthusiasm isn’t doing anyone any good.
...it's been three years that I've really been feeling stuck. I've noticed that in my last one year, maybe even a bit more than that, my performance, even my level of satisfaction with my performance has gone down. And I feel like I'm doing the company a disservice and myself a disservice by continuing at this kind of low-level of enthusiasm...no one's winning here. I'm not winning, the money is good but, the money and the bank account is winning but that's it. (Tony, age 37)

Mary and Edwin described implementing a kind of ‘work-to-rule’ as their dissatisfaction with their careers and their frustrations increased.

I [used to go] above and beyond. I did so many things when I started. I used to run a cooking group at work. I brought my interests to work with me, so I did a cooking group and we would gather patients together and I would cook in a lounge and every week I'd make different things...and over time, as my frustration increased, I stopped putting energy into these sort of extra tasks. And now I just define what I do as work-to-rule. (Edwin, age 28)

I don't feel drained from my work but that's because I've dis-engaged from my work and I refuse to. Like I'm kind of working-to-rule, like I work my hours and I don't work more than them. During the first mat leave I worked for a month straight and I was like 'You're never getting this again.' And so when it's go-time, I am out the door.  (Mary age 32)

Coping Behaviours

Participants ($n = 11$) described using a wide range of coping behaviours to cope with or tolerate their experience of career paralysis. Four participants shared how they actively compartmentalized and separated their work life from the rest of their life.

Through taking different steps and doing different things that interest me to sort of pull me out of 'my life isn't limited to just going to work', really pulling myself out of that and putting my energy and my time into things that really interest me, really helps balance. Yes I have to go to work but I only have four more days until I can go to my volunteer job...It was difficult to put up those barriers, but I had to do many different things to sort of separate myself. (Edwin, age 28)

... I'm good at leaving that at work and I have quite an active life outside of work, a lot going on, because I like to be busy. So even if I'm grumpy for an hour, usually it doesn't last because I'm pretty happy outside of work...outside of work I'm social, I'm engaged and at work I'm....not. Because I'm bored. I don't like it and I'm bored. (Debra, age 33)
Mansi shared, “I try to keep work different from personal life.” Tara describes, “not thinking about it sometimes is a good thing which is kind of what I've been doing lately…big time. I'm pretty good at compartmentalizing.” In addition to purposely not thinking about it, Tara has taken concrete steps to keep her work life separate from the rest of her life.

Well when I first started this job I was stressed out and I felt like I always had to check my email at night because I was told that I should do that. But I've recently stopped doing that. I don't know if they've noticed. So I've made a conscious effort to not check my work email. Which kind of goes back to...I probably could be better at my job but I don't care. So yeah...I made an effort, almost on purpose, to separate it... (Tara, age 31)

Andrew, Agnes, and Lillian described feeling compelled to compensate for time lost at work. There was a sense of wanting to make the most of the time that was their own.

I will be completely honest, I think drinking and going out, back when I was younger…I think that was probably my coping mechanisms back then. I think now I probably just try to live my life...I'm just living my life to the fullest outside of work. So I spend every moment with my wife and my daughter. We go and we do fun things, we enjoy the city, we try to travel. I don't watch TV. I don't waste my time outside of work…let's go have fun, let's experience things. So I'm compensating in that way…And trying to get involved as much as possible in kind of everything that I can find that's kind of fun. (Andrew, age 41)

I think I try to sleep less. I try to make my weeknights much longer, just so that I try to keep time that's going on my own. My partner has even said, like because he's not happy with his job, he'll be like 'we should just drink during the week…let's just enjoy our Tuesday night because it's our Tuesday night.’ We just try to make our evenings ours…although at the same time, we're not doing healthy, fun, active activities. We're still just like, ‘let's watch Netflix all night and drink wine.’ So we make our nights longer but we're not doing good, important things with our time…I get this sense of...ooof 40 hours of my week is a huge chunk of my week and I don't feel good in it so I want to use my time as much as I can. (Agnes, age 30)

…often times I would spend the day teaching and then I would come home and feel like I wanted to have another full day where I'm doing what I wanted to do
and so I would stay up quite late, which I never did before in my life, that wasn't a pattern that I had. So I found myself doing that and then thinking 'why am I eating dinner at midnight? Why am I staying up so late?' and I think it was that I had this six hour day and wanting another six to eight hour day where I'm inventing my own stuff. (Lillian, age 36)

Tony, Edwin, Agnes, Lillian, and Debra shared that they engaged in volunteer work or other work-like projects on the side, both as an effort of finding fulfillment elsewhere but also to keep up their skills to support an eventual career change.

Since I have been in a field that isn't as technical, I like to keep up my technical skills so on a hobby level, for the full 10 years that I've been working and even a little bit before that, I've always kind of had side projects...Nothing major but there were two projects before I decided to really go whole-hearted into this solar energy thing on the weekends and nights. That's kind of something I've been doing for a while, it's probably the big component of what I've done outside of just looking for jobs and stuff. (Tony, age 37)

The other thing I've done is I've actually taken up a volunteer job once or twice a week...Hugely beneficial...that's been a balm to my nerves. Just having an opportunity to do something that I really enjoy with people that enjoy doing the same work as me. People who have for the most part the same work ethic. (Edwin, age 28)

...so even if I'm doing a lot of the volunteer stuff and I'm not getting paid, that's fine. I just want to keep something current in what I want to do constantly going. So that helps but then it'll also not help at the same time because then you'll be doing all these things and a job posting will come up and I'll be like 'this is written for me', this should be my job and then you won't even get called for an interview and so then it hits...so I don't know how much the volunteering and stuff is intrinsically...because I'm motivated to do that or if it's because I want to stay current, build my resume and get a better job. (Agnes, age 30)

I think I've found that just going and doing the activities that I like, that I feel would possibly lead to something in the future in terms of a career change - that can be therapeutic in itself...if I'm feeling uncertain, or if I'm applying to things and I haven't heard back or something. I've been applying to different positions, but then, you know, once a week or two goes by, you just drop it for a day or two and think 'ok I'm just going to write or I'm just going to learn a new program, just for myself.' And so just stopping the worries, stopping trying to reach out all the time and just being like 'ok I'm just going to do the activities that I want' or something totally unrelated. (Lillian, age 36)
Some of my time at work, a good portion feels like wasted time...so what I do is other things. My friends are all applying for jobs, I write their cover letters and resumes. I do all that. Or, I read about investing issues. Or, I study something else. Or, I learn some French. I mean it's great that I'm a fast learner but I think because I do things quickly, there's just not enough to do so I have to create work and I hate creating work. But if there isn't work, I'm not just going to sit there...I can't...[To cope] I have an active life outside of work. I whine about it to my friends and family. I do things at work like I was saying...like I try to do other things, try to motivate myself to study, do this, learn other things...acquire skill sets while I'm not doing anything else. And I constantly think about what else I could be doing. (Debra, age 33)

Participants also described a range of other coping behaviours, from listening to music and exercising, to therapy and mindfulness. Mansi shared “I listen to music [to cope]. That's a big thing. It just calms me down. During work.” Mary and Edwin both use exercise a way to cope with their experience. Mary says, “I walk everywhere, I'm training for a 5km – first time ever!- have to do something to keep myself sane!”

I've adopted several somewhat anti-social behaviours to cope with work so I no longer eat lunch at work, for example, I go home for lunch or I go for a bike ride. Just to be physically out of the building for as long as possible. I have to do a few things to sort of cope with my frustration so one of them is bicycle riding, the release of endorphins really helps manage my emotions. So if I don't ride my bike one day I am slightly more frustrated or agitated than I normally am. (Edwin, age 28)

Charlotte, Nik, and Tara describe other ways of coping. Nik shares, “I use some supplements… and I’m doing meditation once a week.”

A few things. One is to look at what's good in the current situation, always. One is therapy. One is going to things like this career workshop that I did a year ago. And one is that I'm really interested in Buddhism and mindfulness and certainly with Buddhism and mindfulness it's not about putting attention on what your job is or...figuring things out. So, that is, that's a way to just be more present with my experience. (Charlotte, age 37)

And then, you know, I have been to therapy before. Which was also for family stuff but we obviously talked about career kind of things so that was helpful, and learned a little bit through that about if I'm starting to feel negative about stuff, how do kind of pull myself out of it. So yeah...that's been helpful. (Tara, age 31)
Emotions/Negative Mood States

Irritability

Four participants described an increase in irritability during their career paralysis experience. They describe being grumpy, irritable, or just in a bad mood more often than usual, especially when they are at work. Debra shares, “…it does [affect me] because some days I just...I'm grumpy. I'm just unhappy because I hate the work. I hate going to work so much that it affects everything.”

As I said I think I used to be able to swallow it a lot more when I was younger and it was really purely about money. But I think as it's become more important, I think it's affecting my mood. So I don't like to get up necessarily...I do like to get up in the morning, I don't like to go to work in the morning. I don't like the weekend to end. I think it's just...I think I'm still able to come home and kind of shut off the work brain and still be a happy functioning person at home but it's definitely becoming harder. Because I think there's a little bit of bleed now. I'm not able to shut if off. I'm kind of of an in-the-moment kind of person but I think I'm becoming less of that. So it is transferring over...so my mood might not always be so good during the middle of the week. It's always fun on the weekends but maybe during the middle of the week, when I've had a really challenging week, I come home and it's just...I'm in a worse mood. I'm taking it out on people around me. (Andrew, age 41)

Mood with my friends and family I think has been unaffected. I think it's been status normal for sure...I think the days I go to work maybe I'm slightly more irritated by subway delays or slow walkers, or stupid people...with co-workers, it's stressful. I know it's not mature, but I'm a jerk towards people sometimes...Short. Sarcastic, for sure. And especially when I'm in that building. I know that when I leave at some point or things change or something happens, I know I'm going to look back and think ‘I didn't treat some of my co-workers with the best...I'm treating people in the job with a bit of curtness and insensitivity. (Peter, age 34)

I’m irritable, stressed. I’m either somewhat emotionally chaotic - short fuse...I might say things at work that are slightly inappropriate. I wouldn't swear at anyone but I definitely show people that I have no patience for them if I'm frustrated with them…I'm a relatively patient person and even-tempered but certain people at work really agitate me and after four years of working with them, I have little to no patience. So yeah, a bit of emotional chaos. Sometimes fatigue. Fatigue for no physical reason. I know it's emotional. I know that some days are so emotionally exhausting that it plays out as a physical symptom… It's
definitely not beneficial to my life feeling the way that I do about my job. Often I come home in a bad mood. (Edwin, age 28)

**Depressed Mood**

Seven participants also described a lowering and dampening of their mood as a result of their dissatisfaction with career and their sense of career paralysis.

...yeah, it's not so much a lack of meaning because currently I get a lot more of my meaning from relationships that I have, friends, family, wife, the things that I do, travel is a huge thing. That's where I'd get my meaning from. But yeah, the idea of feeling down, a little bit sad, and just like..kind of like a bit of a shrug....*demonstrates shrug* (Peter, age 34)

...it's this emotional quicksand of you know 'you're trying, you're trying, you're trying' and it's almost making it worse, or you're not sure if it is, because...you know, I'm definitely not getting better, nothing better is happening, so am I actually just sinking? (Mary, age 23)

Recently, I don't know if I'd call it depressed, there are times when it makes me feel sad. I feel sad and I feel restless and, as I said, as I get older it's becoming more concerning right because...like my time's not running out...that sounds really morbid but obviously...I'm wasting years. I don't want to be 60 and look back and go 'what have I done?!' (Andrew, age 41)

Definitely [it’s affecting] the emotional well-being. It hasn't made me an abusive husband or shit like that but there have been bouts of depression over the last year where I'm like 'oh my god, I can't believe I'm here' Especially around September, October, December timeline where I just knew 'like ahh, crap. I can't believe the performance. I'm just not good. It's just not good.' (Tony, age 37)

It's sort of like, 'this is fine' but when I start thinking about, when I feel stuck I notice that I'm just spending a lot of time of my day at my job, and then I come home at night and just start thinking about how I don't want to go there the next day. And you know that 'everybody's working for the weekend' song...like when I'm feeling like that, that song is just so depressing to me. I'm working to get through to my weekend and then, that's it...and that's miserable...See I guess when I have that feeling that I'm just working all day and then going home in the evening, I don't...I find I actually just do less in the evenings. I'm not doing anything in the evening but I don't want to go to bed because then the next day's coming just to go to work. So it's this weird...I'll stay up super late just because 'oh, once I go to bed, I'm just going to blink and wake up and go to work.' So I guess I was saying that it feels flat not that you're falling deep, like into a despair, but it does lower my mood. (Agnes, age 30)
It just makes me feel bad about myself. Because that is typically what people, for better or worse, evaluate you on. As I said, when you first meet someone it's always like 'oh, what do you do?' Like...next question. I don't want to talk about it...I'd like to be one of those people where it's like 'this is what I do', 'oh that makes sense!' So then it kind of makes me feel like a failure, a little bit, because like...why don't I have my shit figured out... (Tara, age 31)

Tara later describes her sense of demoralization about moving through career paralysis.

I want to say that I'm hopeful because oh my god - I cannot...I'm 31...I cannot continue on like this. I need to do something. So I feel like I'm going to need to find a way to figure something out but in terms of right now how I'm feeling, I'm not feeling hopeful because I'm still like 'what am I doing?' I feel I've made zero progress. Even though I probably have made a lot of realizations about myself but they're just not gelled together. So it just feels like a mess. (Tara, age 31)

Both Agnes and Tony also commented on how their mood and energy levels dropped, likely contributing to weight gain.

I was definitely gaining weight, I was lower energy, I wasn't enthusiastic about my life and my wife even mentioned that - 'you know, last year you weren't very enthusiastic'...she noticed it. She used to call me Eeyore, you know. Who goes around "wahh, wooahhk ooooh " (Tony, age 37)

Yeah it seems like a funny coincidence because I don't know if it's just getting older either but I never thought about my weight but I was always slim and then I moved back to Toronto and I just quickly gained weight...like more quickly than I ever have in my life so I don't know if it's just...feeling a little down about being back in the position that I'm in and then like being less active...(Agnes, age 30)

Elizabeth spoke about how she is normally able to keep her spirits up but that she is becoming somewhat demoralized as time wears on. She described a particular incident where she interviewed for a dream job but was too nervous to perform well.

I feel like as time wears on, I get a little more down about it. Just because, as I said before, there's not a lot of opportunities out there so I feel like with the ones that do come up...I recently applied for a position and it's one of the few positions that I've seen come up recently where I felt like I actually had something that I could talk about for each of areas of the job that they wanted… I felt really qualified...and I spent a lot of time doing my resume, doing my cover letter, and I ended up getting a phone interview which was great, but I feel like I had so much...
pressure on myself to succeed with this one and I really wanted it, and then...I...
ah...I didn't get it, I don't think. Like I haven't heard back but...*tearful* I was so nervous. I felt like even though I had a lot of skills I could contribute...articulating those was difficult and I feel like I didn't do the best jobs answering their questions that I could have so...that was hard...I feel so emotional about that one job because I really wanted it. (Elizabeth, age 29)

Navigating Social Interactions

Non-Understanding from Supports

Seven participants described their experience of talking about their career situation with friends and family. For many, there was a particular flavour to these interactions wherein people attempted to provide support and be supportive but ultimately, either failed to understand the situation, or weren't that helpful or comforting in the end.

I feel like even when my friends say, 'it will work out', I am hopeful that it will and I do believe them, it's just I think sometimes they don't realize how few positions there are out there, specifically in Toronto, with all of the characteristics of the job I'm looking for, like the job security and benefits and all those kinds of things...so they are supportive but...(Elizabeth, age 29)

My friends have heard this refrain so often that they say 'yeah, Debra, we know. We know it's not right for you. So what are you going to do?' and that's where that ends. And some of them suggest things and they try to be supportive and they say 'yeah...go back to school, do this, do that, do this' (Debra, age 33)

I feel like people can relate but then everybody tries to help you. 'Oh, well, if you can do anything, what would you do?' and I'm like 'Do you not think that I've asked myself that question before?' So it's almost like I don't really want to talk to people about it because I know they're going to try to solve the problem for me...and I don't think you're really going to ask me something ground-breaking that I haven't thought of before. So then it makes me feel uncomfortable because I do know quite a lot of people who are in careers that they love so I don't want to talk to them about it because they have their shit figured out, so it just makes me look like I don't know what I'm doing...And I know that they're not going to be able to help me, really...they think they're helping but I'm like 'ok...seriously... If I knew what I wanted to do, I'd be doing it. So, like thanks but...' (Tara, age 31)
I've talked to them but they just say the same thing, 'if you want to do it, then just go for it, just make sure that if you do something, that you have a secure job to fall back on'. And then my friends are like, 'yeah, if you want to go for it, just make sure that it's something you really want because you can't keep changing'…I think they are right but at the same time, I feel they should be more, not accepting, but more supportive. (Mansi, age 26)

For the most part, people are pretty supportive about verbalizing support but not necessarily actioning. Like there are not too many people who have said 'oh you know, here's this opportunity…' which I don't necessarily think is their responsibility but it's definitely just been more people just saying 'hang in there, it will be ok" and stuff like that…and you know I'm like 'ummm, thanks...' (shrugs, laughter)...like I appreciate the thought but at the same time, it's not actually useful. (Mary, age 32)

Mary describes how sometimes the non-understanding can cause tension: “It's caused fights, yeah. Just in terms of people getting to be the boss of me, 'you have to do this, you have to do that' and the whole situation where 'don't you think I have?!’” She later describes another situation.

I talk to other people and everyone's got their own idea about 'oh you should do this.' One of my friends decided that she thinks I should be an accountant and I was like, "No, you’re an accountant. You're just sucking me into your world." (Mary, age 32)

Andrew reflects on how although his wife it very supportive, sometimes it’s just difficult for her to understand.

So she talks to me about it a lot and I think...she either tries to be encouraging or it's also a source of frustration for her because I don't think she understands why I can't find what I want to do and why I just don't go do it. It's hard for her to understand because I think she does what she loves right now and that's good for her. I think it's a little hard...because she sees what she believes is a lot of talent in me and me not being there and she doesn't understand why I'm not there. She’s like ‘Go do something. Fix it.’...I mean I don't want to give you the impression that she's not very supportive because she is. I think it's just hard for her to understand sometimes. (Andrew, age 41)

Nik describes how it’s difficult for his mother to understand his situation because she has different priorities for him.
Because she wants me to get a life partner, not a business partner. She wants me to see the rest of my life with a prospective partner. That's her priority. Women are always thinking in different ways from men most of the time. Because she thinks if you have a good family life, you're going to have more ideas and more motivation to do something. (Nik, age 32)

**Deciding Who to Talk To**

As part of, and sometimes in anticipation of, this non-understanding, several participants ($n = 6$) described having to make decisions about who to talk to about their career paralysis experience.

I don't unload as much on [my parents] as I do my friends because they've got enough stress...I know that if I told them, 'everyday I'm frustrated' that would put my mother in a bit of a panic. And where with my friends they are grounded and are ok ' well what can you do about this' instead of like...I don't know...parental freak-out. (Mary, age 32)

My family relationships are a lot more fraught than friends so I don't tend to share as much and I'll just say 'oh, you know, things are fine. I'm doing this, I'm doing that.' With one sister I'm closer to, I've mentioned ' you know, I feel kind of stuck. I think about doing different things. I'm not sure what to do' and she just listens. So she's aware. (Charlotte age 37)

I don't think I talk to my parents about career stuff anymore. I think they know that I'm successful and they've heard me talk about this stuff a lot...I would say my mom is more cynical so I wouldn't talk to her about this kind of thing because I think she'd just be like... 'stop complaining about it.' So, yeah... no. (Andrew, age 41)

And I think that all that does is make me select who I complain to. So I don't complain to my friends who have much shittier jobs about feeling like I'm in career paralysis. With my relationship, I almost feel like I can't complain as much because his job is shittier. So I think I just keep it... I don't feel like I'm a child for feeling this way but I select who I talk to about it. (Agnes, age 30)

It (the lack of support from his family) used to affect me more but over time I've learned to cope with that. I've learned that 'well, you can't go to them for help in this regard.'...So you're going to have to turn to other people.' (Edwin, age 28)

Tony talks about the difference in level of understanding between some groups of people and others who have been in a similar situation.
Most people I talk to it just sounds like I'm bitching and complaining. 'Well just get off your ass and make it better' that type of thing.'…And I can understand where they're coming from because I sound like I'm bitching and complaining, sound like I'm just a whiner and negative, not a very good scene. But when I talk to people who have had similar experiences and have had to change careers…I have a couple friends who are in that boat, they always have really helpful, constructive advice for me. Two of my buddies that have been through a lot of this career paralysis thing too and have overcome it to a certain extent…they're a little bit more empathetic… (Tony, age 37)

Navigating Societal Expectations

Several participants (n = 6) described the difficulty of navigating various social expectations and norms around career. Mary shared, “When I meet new people and they ask me about my job I'm just like 'My job's my job.' I don't even want to get into that again because it's just like...no.”

On the one hand, I do think that I don't live to work and I will never live to work…Work is, at the end of the day, work. And it's not life. And, for me, it shouldn't be. However, I also recognize that people are generally defined by what they do and the first question you're asked in a social situation is "So what do you do?" So actually when I meet someone, I try to be mindful not to ask that. Because I don't want to be defined by my career or what I do with my day. But that's how it is. And that's society and that's just the context, that's reality. That's North America...(Debra, age 33)

I was at a gathering of friends yesterday and some of them I hadn't seen in months, one maybe a year, a year and half. And they were like, 'So what's new? What's going on? What's different?' And I'm like, "Ummm nothing actually...’ I really have nothing to say for myself. And of course there are others things to talk about besides one's work but …Although it's almost become a counter-culture thing where people very obviously refrain from [asking about work] and it's interesting when those two people meet and clash because you get someone being like, 'So what do you do?' and the other person goes, 'I breathe regularly'...laughter...even though the breathing regularly person has a very interesting job, he's trying to send the message, 'hey that's no longer cool, we don't classify people that way"....and so I kind of feel there is this counter-culture running against that. (Charlotte age 37)

I was just doing it because I didn't know what else to do and I'm kind of good at it but I'm not…and whenever you meet someone it's always like 'what do you do for a job?" and I hate talking about it. And then it makes it sound like I don't have a job or whatever because I just don't want to talk about it. But, you know,
technically I have a pretty decent career, it's just like...it's just not something I'm passionate about. (Tara, age 31)

Tara later expands on the emotional impact of these kinds of conversations.

It just makes me feel bad about myself. Because, you know, that is typically what people, for better or worse, kind of evaluate you on. As I said, when you first meet someone it's always like 'oh, what do you do?' Like...next question. I don't want to talk about it. But it would be nice to be able to be like 'this is what I do and it's awesome.' Because it's like, to me, it's kind of a reflection of your personality or it could be...if it's like a good...you know, I'd like to be one of those people where it's like 'this is what I do', 'oh that makes sense!' … So and then it kind of makes me feel like a failure, a little bit, because like...why don't I have my shit figured out...(Tara, age 31)

Lillian, who has been working to build up an alternative career pulling together video-editing and other artistic endeavours describes coming up against a lack of tolerance for uncertainty around career.

Family tends to have, like one family member is open to discussing different options and others seem to be like 'You went to teacher's college, you're teaching, you're a teacher" and so there's not really an openness to hearing about other things until you have a full time gig as say a video-editor, then it's "Oh!..ok"…it's like an identity.

[When talking about the experience] I'd say...'I'm hoping to transition to something else' or 'I'm interested in…'What I'd say at the beginning of teaching was 'well I'm teaching but I have various interests', 'I also enjoy BLANK', I'd say 'oh yes, I'm teaching but I also enjoy writing, or video-editing...' Kind of just adding things in which I think is the way I'm doing it too. My husband will just say 'Just tell people that...don't tell them that you're doing what you don't want to do, just tell them what you're doing that you do want to do.' So I struggle with that. I'm like well that's not honest but...and I think it's the security of…that people know what a teacher is and it paints a picture for them and they're holding on to that word. (Lillian, age 36)

Edwin shared his experience of feeling as though he is up against an entire culture oriented to dissuade him from making his desired career change of opening up his own business.
I think it's important to mention that culturally people still follow the sort of traditional beliefs, it's not just my family that's been discouraging, many people have been discouraging about quitting my job and starting my own business. I think that we live in a culture where well-paying jobs, full-time jobs, are such a rarity that it's incredibly insane to the majority of people to quit your job and start your own. You'd only start your own business if you had an excessive amount of capital, you come from a position where you have the wealth to open your own business and so it's entirely safe because there's no risk. So you're wealthy, and even if your business fails, your loss is minimal. And so I think that's it's important to note that this isn't just individuals in people’s lives discouraging them, it's a culture…I commonly hear ‘well no one likes their job’ …It's frustrating to be the odd one out. And frequently, I am the odd one out. But in a situation where you can't compromise on your beliefs then it becomes incredibly frustrating. (Edwin, age 28)
CHAPTER 7: Barriers to Change

This chapter presents findings for the third of the four meta-themes that emerged from the data analysis. Participants reflected on various barriers to change within their career paralysis experience and explored factors that maintained their stuckness and made it difficult to take action and move forward. This chapter presents findings for these barriers to change, organized into four core themes: 1) Uncertainty Around Possible Career Paths, 2) Low Self-Efficacy, 3) Inertia and 4) External Barriers. The four core themes are then further divided into several sub-themes.

Uncertainty Around Other Possible Career Paths

Eight participants described uncertainty about what they’d rather be doing as a central component to their experience and as a significant barrier to career change.

Mary describes her experience when she realized that there weren’t opportunities for her to grow at the current company.

I was like, ‘well what else do I have to do?’ And I started looking at other jobs and I thought 'I don't know what I want to do'. And so you know that feeling of ...because I don't know what direction to head in, I'm not heading anywhere so where I am becomes more familiar and that's the permanency...it's like... ‘I'm not moving.’ (Mary, age 32)

Charlotte reflected on how she is not only uncertain about what she’d rather be doing, but also on how she may have lost confidence in her ability to make such a decision.
People will often say when I have this kind of conversation with them, 'well if you could do anything, what would you do?' and that's where I'm stuck because, I don't know. Because I feel like I've had a few ideas...and all of them, I explored and went 'oooh, I don't think so’ eventually, and since that's the case, I have lost confidence in having any idea of what I will actually enjoy or what would make me happy. (Charlotte, age 37)

When reflecting on where she felt stuck, Mansi shared, “...like being bored, for sure, and then not being satisfied and not sure what my next step should be...And I'm not sure where to look.” She later continues that it’s been a long time, “I think for me at least, to keep thinking and not do something. And that's because I don't know what I would do.”

In trying to examine and make sense of his situation, Peter compared his experience to that of a friend.

One of my friends, when we were talking about career and job recently...her job at the moment is kind of up in the air and she doesn't know whether her job will be in existence in the next few months and she doesn't really know what she's going to do and so she's pretty frightened about things. I don't know how much of that I see in myself in terms of her situation being like mine. Maybe not the fright, but the 'what am I going to do?' Yeah, frightened might not be the right word, but the 'Oh my gosh, I don't know what else to do'. (Peter, age 34)

Interestingly, Peter also spoke about how this indecision and uncertainty around career conflicts with his usual sense of self.

...and that's probably a source of tension because I'm not an indecisive person at all, so the idea that this is a big indecisive moment....arggh...yeah, I don't know if I've ever thought about that before...but, yeah it runs counter to the rest of my being...sigh....the indecision about what do I do next...(Peter, age 34)

Similarly to Peter, Lillian describes an incongruity between a decisiveness in the rest of her life and an indecisiveness when it comes to career.

Sometimes I'm very decisive...I think specifically this, that's it, let's go, and then for career I just feel very indecisive. Sometimes I feel that there's something out
there that I could do and be interested in but I have no idea what it is. (Lillian, age 36)

In reflecting on the factors that keep him stuck, Andrew shares, “So honestly, what is it internally...First of all, I don't know what I want to do. I have no idea what to go into.” He later adds:

I'm 40 years old and I still don't know what I want to do yet. Like little kids...I want to be cowboy...I don't know what I want to do...I don't know what I want to be when I grow up because I still haven't. (Andrew, age 41)

Andrew also reflects on the elements that may go into deciding what would make a meaningful career for someone, and for himself.

I had a teacher who taught me the phrase 'everyone has passions but in order to find what you're passionate about you really need to sit down and think about it and you need to really take a deeper dive.' I mean we all like a sunny day but what does that actually mean? So for me, there's a lot of ideas kind of bouncing around...you know, I'd like to do something that's physically active, and I'd like to do something where I get to talk and interact with a lot of different people. I'd like to do something where I can still make money and still be financially sound...and it's like, finding the meld of all these things and what kind of career that is? (Andrew, age 41)

Tara describes how she ended up staying at her previous position because she didn’t know what else to do. She shares, “I ended up working there for four and a half years which is probably too long but I just got kind of comfortable and I didn't know what else to do.” She then shared her reasons for accepting her current position, “I was just doing it because I didn't know what else to do and I'm kind of good at it.” Like Andrew, Tara also reflected on the difficulty of defining the meaning behind her possible career choices.

So I feel it would be cool to help people, like I've thought about that before, helping people would be cool but what does that even mean? So I feel like helping
people from that perspective, helping people feel good about themselves would be meaningful to me. Helping the world is like, you know, very vague. (Tara, age 31)

Debra very succinctly describes her difficulty when it comes to pursuing a career change: “I don't know what I would do instead. I don't know. And I don't know how to figure it out.”

**Difficulty Choosing Among Options**

Five participants further elaborated on their uncertainty about what to do as including an inability to choose among many options. Charlotte reflected on being paralyzed by choice.

I think many of us feel 'oh yes, something perfect is out there' and so if you're really holding out for the perfect thing you're not going to end up doing anything because you're keeping yourself eternally available. And it's better to just choose something and go at it…I do think choice paralyzes people and the idea that there's a right thing out there makes any kind of commitment very hard but committing yourself to something and sticking with it is how you learn things you can't learn otherwise…I’m definitely paralyzed by choice. (Charlotte, age 37)

Like Charlotte, Mansi also describes her difficulty choosing a path among imperfect options.

Maybe more research. And maybe med school, I'm not sure…maybe a [Masters degree] or, and this is totally different, in high school and university I was really interested in fashion design. I know that's totally off-track but I wanted to do that since like forever but I never got the chance. So maybe, I don't know, maybe that. …I don't what my next move would be because there are so many options and none of them seem perfect to me. And, I know there's nothing perfect, but none of them seem to fit what I really want. Cause some of them have something that I want but some of them have another. None of it has all of the things that I want, and I want that. (Mansi, age 26)

Andrew describes his inability to choose as rooted in anxiety about what he might be giving up by choosing one option versus another.
I think it comes more with age, there are only a limited number of things that I'm actually going to be able to accomplish in my life. I'm going to die eventually or I'm going to become too old to work so I need to choose. And so you do kind of cycle through that in your head - you're like 'If I take on this project...,' if I decide I was to undertake the writing of a novel and that takes me two years, that's two years that I...that's an opportunity lost...I can no longer do something else for two years. (Andrew, age 41)

Andrew’s indecision extends beyond choosing between career options to choosing between lifestyle options.

My wife and I have talked about getting out of the city and going somewhere more...not like a suburb because I really don't like suburbs, but more like a village. So if I was to picture an idealistic location I would live in, and again I'm just kind of rambling because I'm not sure how this fits in to the whole thing, but if I was to picture an idealistic...I went to Switzerland on our honeymoon, for example, and so we spent time hiking in the mountains in these tiny little hamlets and towns and it just seemed like a very idealistic place to live. You go build a little house there and you have a very simple life. You have a modest amount of food and you have a modest amount of clothes and things that you live with and you can walk out on your porch everyday and enjoy the view or go for a hike in the mountains if you want. There's a lot of work to live there but it's very simple. But, as I said, at the same time I don't think that I actually want that full time. I don't know. (Andrew, age 41)

Tara and Debra describe their difficulty in a similar way. They both reflect on the number of options available to them, which although in some ways is a good thing, can present a huge problem when it comes to their decision-making.

Well I think one of the big things is that I have multiple interests so when I think about making a change it's not like there's just one thing. Looking back, when I was a kid, there was never a ‘oh I want to be a chef, so I'll just do it.’ Because I feel like yes, I'm interested in food, I'm interested in psychology so I've thought about counselling. I like drawing and making art so what if I could be an artist? And then I think about whether there's anyway I can make this - what I'm doing now - work in another kind of form. Like maybe if I just work for a company that's more fun. Or, like I like interior design...So I just think about all these different things and ask 'what if?' for each of those so it's not like there's just one...I get kind of scattered and then I'm kind of bad at making decisions. (Tara, age 31)
That's part of my problem. In one sense, I have too many options. Because I'm really lucky with money, I don't really need to worry about money, I have no dependents. I have no obligations, I don't have anything like that. I learn really quickly. I'm pretty smart. I've always gotten really good grades with not very much effort. So I put in 30% of my effort and I get like 80% of results. The 80-20 equation, whatever it is. But that means that I have all these options and I can't... what I don't have is any ability to decide...or commit...If I was only really good at one thing, and that's what I did and that's all I could do, then I'd just do it. But I just don't think that's the case. (Debra, age 33)

As a result of this, Debra reflects, “I don't know [which way to go] and I don't know which is right and so I just stay where I am.”

**Waiting for a revelation.** Of those participants who described difficulty with choosing between options as fundamental to their experience of career paralysis, four of them described a yearning for someone or something to come along and point out the correct path for them.

When contemplating how she’ll know which direction to take, Mansi shared, “I'm waiting for the signal, or for something to trigger that would be like 'yeah, ok, go for it’…where I would be convinced that this is for me.” For her part, Lillian reflected, “…I just don't know what road to start on…I need a bit of a map or somebody to just be like 'just go there' 'Ok!’” Tara and Charlotte shared similar hopes for something to point the way.

Maybe this is related to all the other things I've said, but I've even tried to find mentors of some kind. Like it kind of ties into my decision-making -I just want somebody to tell me, assess my life and be like 'ok, I think you'd be really well-suited for this' and this kind of goes back to my original problem in high school where one of my teachers was like 'hey, you're good at chemistry so maybe you should do it' and I'm like 'oh, ok. Yeah.' Like I didn't even think about it. But, at the same time, that is kind of appealing to me because it's like a loop-hole for my inability to make decisions. (Tara, age 31)

I was thinking about looking forward to coming in here and talking about this stuff and I thought 'well why am I looking forward to it?’ and I thought, well
'maybe there will be some revelation and it will all come together and I'll be like...yeah, that direction!" and then I thought that maybe that's the problem right there...that I'm waiting for a revelation. (Charlotte, age 37)

**Low Self-Efficacy**

Seven participants described a low or limited sense of self-efficacy when it came to making a career change. For some, this low self-efficacy was expressed through a perceived or real lack of skills, adaptability, or ability to navigate, initiate, or succeed in career change. For others, it was expressed through negative self-talk and negative beliefs about the self. Low self-efficacy undermined participants’ confidence and motivation to make a change.

In thinking of making a career change, Peter shares doubts around his level of training and adaptability.

Under-training for sure. After doing some of the things I do on the job for six years, do I have that adaptability? I like to think I do, but maybe I don't. I am from a strange generation, in my mind, that some of my younger friends are a little more quick on the uptake with technology, I don't have Instagram, I'm not as old as my oldest friend and definitely not as young as my youngest friend...Some of my younger friends jump around from job to job really quickly and easily and it's no big deal...but I do feel that, the example of my parents, they both did one career pretty much for the entire lives, so I don't know whether I feel that I'm of the older generation or of a younger and obviously the older I get, I feel more of the older generation for sure. Hard to know if I step into a job that's full of young 20-year olds, am I a bit of a dinosaur? So that's a bit of a social stress...I like to think I'm adaptable but is that only because I'm the youngest person in my current environment? (Peter, age 34)

Elizabeth, whose current job is fairly close to her ideal situation, but far enough away for her to feel very dissatisfied, is unsure how to navigate a switch.

I feel stuck because I'm in a related-path but not necessarily exactly where I'd like to be. And it's difficult to recognize where to bridge that gap and how to bridge that gap between [the two fields]. (Elizabeth, age 29)
Tony has also wondered about whether lack of skill has contributed to his sense of being stuck in career through limiting his ability for change with his current company. He describes how he has struggled with certain soft skills, like personal image management and the savvy cultivation of relationships, which are key to moving up or developing in his present company.

Whereas the internal parts and the more softer stuff, I seem to have a lot of difficulty with. Like the kissing-butt to the management, trying to be a little more spit and polish because there's a whole image thing that I haven't quite nurtured as much, even though I've had my series of sales successes, I haven't nurtured as polished and as slick an image as a lot of sales guys do or what the expectations of sales guys are…I have become keenly aware, over the years, that the stuff I don't enjoy, is the stuff that will get you ahead…I think that's a key to me probably not moving up is that if I paid more attention to the internal stuff like just being more spit and polished, having shinier shoes, having a better shirt, rehearsing my elevator speech when I'm with the management, playing more golf, stuff that won't actually affect the actual job that I do, that I'm doing, but it will affect my career path…I think that's, unfortunately, a very important aspect of work that I haven't quite mastered. Maybe that could explain the whole career paralysis thing. Maybe I just have that feature about myself, and I need some professional coaching or something like that. (Tony, age 37)

Nik, Elizabeth, and Edwin have all thought about opening their own business. All three of them, however, doubt their level of business skills and knowledge.

And I feel really daunted by the business aspect of it. In terms of the actual art-making and everything, that would be a job that I would feel really confident in, but the side of managing your own business, processing payments for things and all of that side...managing your own affairs, I find really daunting. I don't have any experience in business...to make a career out of it, it's a different skill set from just the actual art-making. (Elizabeth, age 29)

Because I didn't run my business at all, I didn't run anything like that business or project myself...I work for a business, a company but it's not the same. I didn't feel...when you're the owner of your own business, the boss of your own business, it's a different thing...[I have a lack of confidence in my knowledge]. (Nik, age 32)

Second biggest hurdle for me, is confidence. I have little to no experience or knowledge in the field that, in the career that I want to start. So as much as I can
go and research how to become involved in this field and what it takes to open your own business—As much as I can research, as much as I can reach out through multiple avenues for help and assistance, I don't have any confidence in myself to go and do that. So I lack the motivation to do it because I don't have any confidence that I can do it, yet. (Edwin, age 28)

With regards to her experience Lillian shared, “I guess I just kept listening to fears instead of desires of what I would like to do with my time during the day…” She adds, “I really enjoy story-telling but having your own say picture book or novel to be published…it's like trying to be a rockstar…it's great to pursue but I'm hesitant to put everything into that. It seems like a wild dream.” She also reflects on how a lack of confidence in her skills stopped her in the past from reaching out and taking risks:

I guess the wall's been something where I think...say working on the CBC...that sounds like a huge professional job, what a great experience, but I always think 'somebody else is more qualified to do that'...So that wall is always like 'oh it's somebody else. Somebody else could do that. I'm not that type.' (Lillian, age 36)

When speaking of some the things she’s tried to move through career paralysis Charlotte describes anxiety around her competence.

And even when I've done various little volunteer activities over the past few years, you know, I have applied for a different job here or there...or got it and then left. That happened last fall, but, I can feel how it's stretching me. And I can also feel this return of tension and anxiety and 'will I be good enough' but I'm also learning new things. (Charlotte, age 37)

**Inertia**

In one of the most interesting findings to arise from the study, all thirteen participants described to some degree a barrier to change that was captured under the core theme of inertia. These were factors that contributed to the tendency to do nothing or to follow the path of least resistance. In other words, all things being equal, no change was
the default response. Within this core-theme, two sub-themes were identified that contributed to resistance to career change, or, in other words, that strengthened the pull towards doing nothing: Security and Comfort Factors.

**Security as a Barrier**

Ten participants reflected on the role security played in the maintenance of their career paralysis. Many discussed a reluctance to leave a secure position in order to make a change, especially as the outcome of change is uncertain. Security was often linked to financial security in that in their current positions participants were able to pay for both life necessities but also for various lifestyle preferences.

In Mansi’s words, “I want something to fall back on if that doesn't work and I want to be sure that I have that… Security, and stability.” Like for Mansi, job security is seen as a primary barrier to change for Elizabeth and Agnes.

In terms of job postings in those fields, they tend to be either temporary or contract positions and so I find it hard to leave a permanent job with benefits to kind of take that leap and pursue those options, just because they won't have the same job security and there's no guarantee that they would lead to a permanent position.

I have toyed with the idea of just doing my own artwork and making a career out of that, but that has very little job security and also, you don't how much money you're going to be making from month to month and that kind of impacts other factors of my life, like we're trying to save for a place and so things like that where it's great to have a stable income. (Elizabeth, age 29)

When I left to go back to school that was a big financial hit. I was no longer working full-time and so I started to piece together all these different part-time jobs and I just got this feeling like 'I can't live like this anymore, I need to know I have a permanent position with benefits somewhere'…And so it was just feeling like in order to get into research, you had to like really put in your time for free for a long time. So even when I see positions now, I wouldn't want to take a contract in order to get my foot in the door somewhere because I have the security of being permanent now. So now I know I can plan for taking trips, I can plan my
wedding, I'm comfortable with my lease for my apartment, so I feel stuck taking a permanent secure position or staying in a secure position. (Agnes, age 30)

Interestingly, both Agnes and Elizabeth compare their current circumstances to earlier periods of their work life when they didn’t have job security. In comparison to those times, while their current job security is nominally a good thing, they both reflect on how without it, they might feel less stuck. In a way, a good thing—job security—is seen to be deepening the rut, making it harder to change paths, possibly because there is more to lose.

So the only career I've had was I did social work and then when I moved to San Francisco I was doing research positions and so it was a change. I never felt paralyzed with that, I just felt 'never let in.' I was never like 'I feel comfortable and happy in this job I have now.' So yeah, I wouldn't call it feeling stuck because I didn't have the security... (Agnes, age 30)

I've had jobs before where I kind of knew they were contract, or that I knew weren't going to be extended whereas this position, it's a permanent position. Being within the government there is a lot of job security in that you don't feel like you're going to lose your job in the immediate future...I feel like I'm in a position where I feel like I could have this job forever if I wanted it. Which is, in some ways is nice, but in some ways also adds to that feeling of being stuck. (Elizabeth, age 29)

For Mary, Edwin, Tony, Lillian, Andrew, and Tara, the pull of their job security is essentially financial. They have real financial responsibilities that they aren’t willing or able to put at risk by making a bold or drastic career change. In Tony’s case, these financial burdens have recently begun to ease up, creating room for him to think more seriously about change.

I'm not willing to quit when I got my mortgage, but if they fired me, I think I would be pretty happy...I want to get out, I'm not clinging to the job hoping that it will change. It's almost an abusive relationship at this point...And I want out. I'm just not willing to put myself in a jobless situation where I can't get EI. (Mary, age 32)
I have no idea what I'm doing. And what I wish I could get is a mentor. Or even just an opportunity to work part-time in some aspect of the industry. While making the same amount of money that I make now...I live with my girlfriend and I'm supporting both of us right now. So without an income, we can't survive. She doesn't have an income at the moment. (Edwin, age 28)

Until very recently, I've been kind of thinking, I really need to focus on cash because I had some money issues over the last little while...those have all been resolved and it's flipped from being not so great to being very reasonable, so I'm living a lifestyle right now of...I've got enough money saved up that if something happens, if I have to take a dial back, also my wife is now finishing her PhD, so she's only a year away from making money on her own. So it will no longer be just a single income family. I've got a bit reserved up, I can afford to transition to something that may not pay as well but something I'm more passionate about. (Tony, age 37)

But then there tends to be the fear of filling your day with something that doesn't immediately pay you...I really enjoy story-telling but having your own say picture book or novel to be published...it's like trying to be a rockstar...It's great to pursue but I'm hesitant to put everything into that. It seems like a wild dream. So the story-telling's always been something I work on bit by bit and build bit by bit, but not like a paying thing. (Lillian, age 36)

There are many people who succeed going off on their own and making things or opening up a business that really suits them. And I think the thing that holds me back is just concerns about being able to fund my family...and it's just walking away from a very successful career and just going like...ok, so best example: Years ago, probably about 10 years ago my wife and I, she was my girlfriend at the time, decided to leave our jobs and we travelled to Australia for a year. And at the time I was young, we didn't own a house, we didn't have a child, but it was still a weird experience. Like I'm going to walk away from my job and I'm just basically going to be a bum. It was really cool, probably the best experience of my life. But...it's kind of that same kind of feeling...can I walk away from all this and do something that's fulfilling and what if that thing's that fulfilling doesn't make me any money? What do I do? (Andrew, age 41)

Sometimes I think, 'shit, maybe I just need to do something crazy and like quit my job and just figure it out' - but that is terrifying, because it's just me. It's not like I have a partner where they could pay the rent...I don't think it would be as scary if I had a clear direction. Like if I quit and was like 'I'm going back to school.'...The scarier part of that is quitting and not having a plan. And then it's like...ok, I need money. I was broke for just a couple of years, when I was doing my masters and it was...I didn't really like it, I mean who does, really...but, you know, I've become accustomed to being able to afford certain things. (Tara, age 31)
Debra, Andrew, and Edwin underscored the value of money, in speaking of how easy change would be if they had more or unlimited funds. Their comments highlight the value of security that money provides and represents.

If I could just get $200,000 - perfect. But no one will give me that much money… Financial is huge because I don't just want to change careers, I want to start my own business. And, financial is probably the biggest hurdle. (Edwin, age 28)

...if I had a ton of money, if would be awfully easy wouldn't it. Just try a bunch of things. I would probably try everything. Because then I would just say, life is about learning and I'll just do this, that, and the other... (Debra)

If I have unlimited money it would an easy choice, right. Because who cares. I could go and do whatever I wanted without having to make a living at it. I could just do things that I wanted to do. And I don't think I'd watch TV, I think I'd go out and build things that didn't have to sell and that I didn't have to be successful at, because, who cares...I'm rich... (Andrew, age 41)

Comfort Factors as Barriers

Eight participants also reflected on the role comfort factors play in the maintenance of their career paralysis. For some, it was the sense that things in their current position are good enough, their jobs provide for a certain lifestyle, the job is familiar or easy, or maybe it’s fairly close to the desired career. These comfort factors seem to contribute to a larger sense of inertia and to a questioning of ‘is it really worth it to make a change? Is it worth shaking things up, giving up comfort, for the sake of something uncertain?’

When speaking of his current job, Peter identifies comfort factors as a primary barrier to career change. “It’s comfortable, yeah. That would be the star reason for sure.” He reflects on the comfort and convenience of his current job.

It’s just very convenient. That would be a word that I use. It's very convenient and comfortable. Comfortable is a funny word because it's not comfortable while I'm
at the job all the time, but it allows me to have a pretty reasonable lifestyle at the moment, which is great...and I don't want to break that for...The comfort factor is great. Outside of work especially...after work I'm situated in [the middle of town], the world is my oyster, I can go downtown, I can go home, I can do whatever. So it's great from a social standpoint in some ways. (Peter, age 34)

Comfort factors are also important in the maintenance of Charlotte’s career paralysis. For her, her present situation feels comfortable and easy, and even though she’s not as fulfilled as she’d like to be, she questions whether it’s worth changing things up. She relates, “The first thing that comes to mind is comfort and a sense of discomfort. Wanting comfort, and not wanting discomfort. And right now, things feel comfortable. And doing something new is uncomfortable. And stressful.” She elaborates:

I’ve talked about settling with people before and they have said things like 'Charlotte, you don't settle, you don't settle" and I'm kind of proud of that: ‘I don't settle’...but now I'm looking at my life right now and I think, ‘no - I've settled.’ At least for now. And I feel more settled in a good sense of the word. You know, there are different senses. There's 'I’ve settled' as in this isn't great, but I'm not going to try any harder and then there's 'I'm settled' as in 'I feel grounded and not unstable. I feel stable’ [And maybe that’s part of the stuckness] because there is a feeling of 'oh my gosh, I've finally calmed down to some extent, do I really want to shake everything up again?' (Charlotte, age 37)

Andrew also struggles with whether it’s worth it to change things up.

I think the big thing is now at this point in my career it almost feels like, I have a family to provide for, we have a lifestyle that we're comfortable with, that we enjoy - so if I step out of my current career, am I going to take such a financial hit that I'm going to like turn my life topsy turvy and is that really worth it? (Andrew, age 41)

In Debra’s case, she describes being used to a certain level of material and financial comfort and how she isn’t really willing to make a change that would impact that.

I'm also stuck in the sense that I'm now 33 and while I sort of like the idea of going back to school, I don't like the idea of giving up my fairly nice pay cheque
and paid sick days and paid vacation days and bank account to go back to school for something which I may in the end also not like.

I want to be paid pretty well. I'm not willing to go back...It gives me a few things: Safety...Because if I make it to my retirement, I want to be comfortable. And I'm not relying on the system, which is deeply flawed and partially broken. I rely on myself. So I have to start saving now if I want to be comfortable when I'm older. Some family member might need my help, a friend might need my help and I want to be in a position to give that help. And also, I like being comfortable. I'm used to it. I'm privileged. I have a lot of privilege. (Debra, age 33)

Andrew has also grown accustomed to a certain lifestyle and is uncertain about risking that by making a change.

And then externally, I think it's really just financial more than anything, right. So if I had a job, if I knew what I wanted to do and I said 'oh I would love to do that', and I could go do that I think the only thing holding me back would be financial. Because it would be like, this is where we live now and I have expenses and bills and this is what we're used to being able to do, travel and etc. And taking a big hit to that pay cheque...can I do that? (Andrew, age 41)

Tony reflects on how the money is part of the reason he’s stayed in his current position for so long.

...to think you're moving up and actually just being completely flat for five years is a bit frustrating. Now, don't get me wrong, the pay has been going up and the pay had kind of, not correlated to career position, so, you know, that's kind of why I stuck around. (Tony, age 37)

Mary, Peter, Charlotte, and Tara reflected on the familiarity of the job as a barrier-their work is easy enough, it’s comfortable, and so they just stay doing it.

It's an administrative position, I have a lot of flexibility with my job which is one of the reasons why I've stayed is cause I have little to no supervision so I just get my things done…and I like the fact that I can make a lot of decisions on my own. I like that I can prioritize for myself for the most part and I know the job so well that I like that...it's easy. (Mary, age 32)

That's another thing that makes it so easy to stay in the job where I am now is kind of an idea of control. I know what I'm doing every day. I know what to expect and I have a dominance over the tasks and things that I have to do...[maybe] it’s a fear of the unknown. (Peter, age 34)
On the other hand, it's easy-going work. I feel very un-stressed. [It] pays better than anything else I've done. It's about 50$ an hour. And, that's really attractive and that's part of the reason I keep doing it... It gives me, you know, the very basic income that I need, but I've done it for five years now and it's not as exciting. (Charlotte, age 37)

Now that I'm thinking about it, originally I wasn't supposed to stay there very long because the person I was replacing was from Ireland and she had problems with her visa and she was maybe coming back. I totally forgot about that until now. But she didn't end up coming back and I ended up working there for four and a half years which is probably too long but I just got kind of comfortable and I didn't know what else to do. (Tara, age 33)

Tara also wonders, “Should I just keep doing what I'm doing because like I'm relatively good at it, can make a decent living, wouldn't have to go back to school?’ Nik also muses about whether a sense of being comfortable played a role in his stuckness.

Maybe because I was premature or something at that time, so I didn't go forward, step up to doing something else. Wasn't brave enough. Or had enough encouragement. And I wasn't that saturated at the time. So those are the things. Maybe I was comfortable, still. (Nik, age 32)

Andrew had an interesting reflection on his difficulty making a career change. He explored a realization of an impatience with his career as compared to other life activities, that could be viewed as a reluctance to be uncomfortable—to have to put in a lot of work for uncertain and delayed financial and personal reward.

I think another big thing so last year I turned 40 and so that was another big milestone so I went out west and did this four-day hiking trip by myself and for myself, and it was through the mountains and it was something I'd never done before and it was a really big accomplishment and I meant that to be a learning trip for myself. And I did learn a lot from it and now it's driving me more because I learned a lot and what I learned is that I can really do anything that I set my mind too. And that great things...accomplishing great things takes patience. And I've always known that, like I go through a lot of different...like I go the gym and I've been going to the gym for let's say 20 years and that's an exercise in patience but for some reason with my career, I've never been able to exercise that patience. It's like I always want it now...why am I not willing to make a choice, even if it has a financial implication, for something that's good that's going to come five years down the road? For some reason with my career it's more about instant
Sometimes I think some of my careers come fairly easily to me. School came fairly easily and I kind of fell into the career. I've never really had to work that hard. So I don't know but it's like this impatience with my career. I don't take a five-, ten-year viewpoint. [I would be a little bit uncomfortable, a little bit anxious about that]…Whereas in my personal life, I seem to be able to commit to things that really don't have an instant pay-off. (Andrew, age 41)

**Unproductive Action Attempts**

Eight participants described unproductive, frustrating, or cyclical action attempts toward change. There was a sense that it was difficult for participants to sustain their motivation for change in the face of various factors.

Charlotte, Mansi, and Tara reflected on how they keep doing the same thing with little result. Charlotte described, “I really just keep doing the same thing which is sitting around maybe reading a book occasionally, talking about the same things and thinking something's going to be different.” Mansi keeps gathering information, “[I] talk to people. Google everything…Like requirements for medical school, or fashion degrees…” even though she reflects, “I have my options, it's not like I need to search... I just need to find the perfect balance.” Tara shares similar efforts.

I feel like I keep doing the same things over and over again. I'll read a lot of articles about finding your passion, 10 steps to find your passion or reading Oprah magazine, those kinds of things. Or taking career quizzes, personality tests just when I'm bored at work. But I've done them all before so it's not really getting me anywhere. And then I'll look for classes I can take that will help me feel like I'm making a move. But then, again, I kind of get held back because I only want to do something if I know it's going to be good. It's like, okay - do I really want to spend $600 on a class, what if it sucks?

I probably think about it every day when I'm at work. Because I Google stuff like that all the time, which is, as I said, kind of hilarious because I've done it all before but I just want to distract myself or feel like I'm doing something even though I'm doing the same thing that I've always done. (Tara, age 31)
Nik describes his attempts for change as being thwarted by over-thinking and rumination.

Like..thinking, thinking, thinking, analysis.....paralysis by analysis. Sometimes you're thinking, thinking, thinking too much. And it paralyzes you. Different ideas, different things going on in your brain but it's not helping you. You know, you need to have your target, your destination, just be simple. Simplify the things. (Nik, age 32)

Edwin, Andrew, Lillian, Tara, and Debra described a particularly cyclical nature to their attempts at change. They describe gaining momentum to take action, beginning some kind of action, but then eventually losing motivation or being distracted by day-to-day life.

I get incredibly frustrated and upset with myself for not doing anything and I'm driven to research and I'll put in a little bit of research, maybe an hour or two, and then I start feeling really overwhelmed and I stop. (Edwin, age 28)

So kind of motivation peaks and you kind of get sucked back in to regular life. I mean I've got a lot of...there's logistics of having a three-year old kid, so there's just a lot of work and we have a pretty busy social life and we're travelling this year a lot so it's kind of like...you go back into the day-to-day routine and you kind of forget about it for a little while...not forget about it but it's under the surface and you take care of the things that need to be done in life and then it comes back up again. There definitely is a motivation cycle there. (Andrew, age 41)

I feel like it is kind of cyclical but it's always kind of at the back of my mind. But I go through phases where I'll get out a piece of paper and I'm writing out goals and writing a vision for my life. But then whenever I do that it's like...when you have to write about the career stuff, I just write very vague things but then I know what I want my house to be like, I know what I want the rest of my life to be like but the career...it's like...ughh....but that's the one thing that I should be trying to crystallize but I can't. And then I'll write a list of goals that will maybe get me going in the direction but then the list is crazy long so it's like 'how's that even possible that I'm going to do all these things?' And then I've found a list from like a couple months ago and yeah, maybe I've done some of the things off of it but then kind of forgot about it. But then I'll make one again and yeah...(Tara, age 31)

I think that at the beginning, say years ago, when I first started doing things, learning programs, or starting a website, definitely there was the "wow, this is the
answer, this is going to move everything forward' and then doing that and then, of course, nobody immediately gets a position or a great opportunity from that...after that initial rush and then feeling 'oh, there's failure, it didn't work' then I would never let myself give up on that so if that happened I would take a break. But a break, unfortunately for me, might be like a year...[The break would last a year because of] self-doubt and just losing all hope that...there's something that you really wanted to do or really liked doing and then you don't get any response so you think 'oh, I'm never going to get a response' For some reason, that one incident then paints the picture for everything. (Lillian, age 36)

Lillian also reflected on this kind of motivation cycle on a smaller scale.

And I think that also, you go to work in the day and then you come home and you have these intentions of 'ok, now I'm going to build my reel, I'm going to write a script' or whatever and I will do those things but very very slowly because you're tired at the end of the day and you just want to make dinner and hang out...(Lillian, age 36)

Debra described how her attempts at change would either fizzle out or shift toward a different option.

So I think of something, usually based on the fact that I know someone in the field, and I think 'oh yeah, I think I could do that' and then I spend a day or two researching it. So I go online and I look at schools offering courses and I try to figure out what the career looks like, what the pay scale is, how long would it take to study, etc. And then it either fizzes out or I pursue it a little more. Change gears and think of some other career. (Debra, age 33)

When asked about why her efforts kind of ‘fizzle out’, Debra replied, “I don't know. I don't know. I don't know. Inertia?’ She then goes on to explore this idea and it ends up linking up with her difficulty, discussed earlier, with choosing and making a decision.

I don't know if I can describe the inertia. It just sort of...I start slowing down and I say 'well, you know, I'd have to do this, this, and this, and why would I do that because I don't know if I should be this or if I should be a creative writer and write children's fiction, or try to write adult fiction, or if I should do this...so if I don't know what I should do, why am I going down this road? [It’s hard to sustain the motivation] because at the end of the day, I don't know and I constantly doubt myself. 'Is this the right choice? Is this the right choice? Is this the right choice?' and so I just do nothing. (Debra, age 33)
Mary describes a particularly frustrating cycle where she ends up circling through attempts at change as a result of being unsure what exactly she should try, where she should start, and then in response to a lack of movement from her efforts.

I started thinking 'how do I change this?' and then I get caught in that loop..."what kind of training can I do, what kind of training do I need? What are the jobs? What do I want" and I end up circling...because...I don't know.

She then elaborates on this circling.

Well the whole process of the change is like...Do I look at the education part? Do I look at the opportunities now? Do I send my resume to pretty much everyone I know?...and then the process starts again if I look for different education, look for a job that would use that education, apply for said job...and then I'm doing it again and again....this is the cycle of...where do I go? Ok I've found something, I think. Let's try it. Doesn't work. Ok, again. (Mary, age 32)

External Barriers

Nine participants described how their experience of career paralysis was at least partially maintained by various external barriers that limited their ability to make a desired career change in some way. These barriers included geographical limitations, the state of the labour market and the availability of desired positions, and skill or educational requirements for change.

Geographical Constraints

Three participants felt that they were limited in making a career change by geographical constraints or preferences. Peter shares, “I've looked at other job descriptions and other opportunities and there are a lot of things I'm either not qualified for or don't take place in Toronto and I don't want to move.” In Elizabeth’s case:
...in terms of environmental factors while I feel a bit stuck is that I do feel tied to take a job in Toronto. Because, well my husband has a well-paying job here and he's not really keen to move and also, my friends and family live either in Toronto or relatively close to Toronto so from that perspective, it does limit job options. (Elizabeth, age 29)

Edwin discusses geographical limitations and also describes a tension between where he can work and where he can afford to live.

What I've learned is that I have a well-paying job and I can't move out of Toronto because the populations [with whom I work] don't exist in other cities, in other communities to have this type of job or there may only be two or three positions in that community, so I can't move to another community and work this type of well-paying job. If I stay in Toronto where the jobs do exist, I can't afford to live. So the income that I have, even though it's good, I'll never be able to afford property in this city. I'll never be able to make the money it takes to buy a home for $600,000 (Edwin, age 28)

**Lack of Positions**

Four participants specifically described a lack of positions in their desired career as a barrier to career change.

Also, I guess it would be categorized as member services or something to do with the membership, because we are a membership organization as well so that is what I would be suited to...but, looking at the job opportunities that come up in those places, especially, it's kind of few and far between. (Peter, age 34)

The market is quite over-saturated. So for example, I've applied to 20 positions from October to January and I got two interviews from 20 applications and I've got six years experience. So it just shows you how many applicants are out there and how few jobs there are...It's frustrating knowing that you have this much experience but you can't even get an interview because there are 100 other applicants and they have so many people applying that you don't stand a chance. (Edwin, age 28)

I almost feel like it's just availability of what's out there. I think like, when I was graduating from undergrad in 2006, it almost seemed easier to find jobs then. Coming out of undergrad, I got a job right away and...it just feels harder now. I keep gaining more skills and more experience and it seems harder now to get different work than it did when I graduated in 2006. (Agnes, age 30)
In discussing the kinds of positions she is looking for, Elizabeth reflects, “I feel a little bit stuck because those are obviously really specific positions and they don't come up on job postings very often.” She later continues, “…I feel like as time wears on, I get a little more sceptical about it. Just because, well...as I said before, there's not a lot of opportunities out there.”

**Skill or Educational Requirements for Change**

Just over half of participants (n = 7) described the skill or educational requirements for change as an important barrier. Mansi, for example, feels that one factor of her career paralysis is that, at present, she is limited by her education. For some of the other careers she has been considering, she would need to go back to school. To open her own fashion boutique, for example, “I would need to have a degree in fashion, which I don't have.” She also reflects that, “with the bachelor's degree there's not a lot of things you can do…a lot of my friends did their Master's and then they went to do their PhD’s, some are in med school, some are in nursing.”

Tony and Edwin feel that they are similarly hindered by their level of education in relation to career growth. In addition, however, they both lament the growing trend in society for the requirement of advanced degrees for promotions.

I've also noticed a trend that kind of is disconcerting to me a bit, and I don't know whether it's a dilution of the value of a further degree or it's just that because there are so many people getting further degrees that that's what companies can get away with now, a lot of people with MBA's are taking positions that are like...‘what the hell do you need a Master's of Business Administration for in this role?’ For instance, the two candidates that were chosen for the promotion position, both had MBAs. All it was a senior sales position, a sales position and you need an MBA? I mean, it wasn't even management… what the hell do you need an MBA to do this job for? It's mostly technical, a lot of sales…That concerns me...I have absolutely no interest in the degree from an interest level but
from a career level I know that it might have to be required at a certain point. Maybe even at this point, maybe once my wife’s done her stuff. And I've got to consider that. Once she's done maybe I need to dial back my job and think more about the MBA, even though I kind of have a low desire level...the desire's not really there. I'd do a Master's in Engineering before I did an MBA. (Tony, age 37)

The other frustrating case of my personal career paralysis is that I'm consistently told 'well, can't you get a promotion?'...But in my field, I can't get promotions. In healthcare, you only get promoted to manager if you have a master's degree in health management or you're seeking a master's degree in health management and you can show the organization, if you hire me, I'll complete this master's degree for you. Yeah, so the belief of 'you get a job and you work your way up' is no longer true. And that's disappointing for people that would excel at a promotion. In different organizations, you promote the best person available and what we're seeing I think now is you hire management, you promote the best educated, not necessarily the best person for the job. (Edwin, age 28)

Mary and Elizabeth both describe the difficulty at times in determining what skills a certain position or company is looking for, or in deciding on what skills might be helpful to gain in order to pursue a career change. Along somewhat similar lines to Tony and Edwin, they are seeing a degree of specialization for any one position that makes a possible career change difficult to navigate.

I do feel generally qualified for the jobs that I want to get into, but I think I also would be open to other things in the field but it's difficult to know precisely what other courses I would need to take or what skills I would need to enhance to get those jobs. Because I find that of the things I've seen posted, there are so many different, so many precise qualifications that it's hard to know more generally what skills would be applicable. For example...I thought about participating in [this important conference/workshop in the field] but a) that's like a lot of money to shell out and I think some of the skills I already have through training that I've done but of course you can't just do piecemeal parts of the workshop that would apply. And also, you don't see a lot of jobs necessarily that require specifically those skills. They might be a sub-set of another job so it's hard to justify that expense if you don't necessarily see the relevance. (Elizabeth, age 29)

[I feel] frustrated and directionless. Like I start looking up different websites with careers listed and I'm like 'what looks applicable?' And I've applied to a bazillion of these jobs where I thought yeah it seems of interest. But then, one of the problems I've had is, there is not consistency in the requirements for the jobs I'm looking for. For example, the designations you need, the schooling that you need, so it's all different, so I can't even say 'in the field I'm looking for I need the A+
computer certification. Ok, that's going to help me' because it will help me with this one but not the other 50 I applied for. (Mary, age 32)

Mary also worries that by staying in her current position, she isn’t going to be able to acquire or gain new skills that will eventually help her move to a new career. She worries that in continuing in this position, she is pigeon-holing and limiting herself.

So just picking apart little things in my job that I was doing and thinking 'what is this skill really going to help me with?" And I was finding that a lot of the skills are just very specific to that position. They use a lot of in-house software, so even in that respect, I'm not getting something that's easily transferable...I'm certainly not growing. Certainly not giving myself more opportunities by staying there. Getting more years on that experience is nothing. (Mary, age 32)

Like Mary, Debra and Lillian worry that they might be limited with respect to career change by the experience they have already built up in a certain area. They have both contemplated additional schooling of some kind to deal with this barrier.

On one level, I'm stuck because now I have this breadth of experience and it's all in this field. I have developed expertise and experience and the skill set that's all relevant to policy. So I'm stuck...an external stuck because to move into other kinds of jobs...I don't have experience in anything else. This is what I'm good at it. So I'm stuck in that sense.

When I think of my transferable skills, I write well, I'm good with people, I'm smart, I understand numbers. But when I look at the job ads [in the private sector], they're like...we need a specific experience and I don't have that. Hence, [my idea of] the MBA…it puts letters to experience. And you can jump, essentially six to seven years of work experience, you can leap to something probably. (Debra, age 33)

And then I also thought maybe just beefing up my administrative skills. I mean I know how to use many software programs but having that be specific…Because often times, and I have a couple friends who are in the same position and they say ‘I applied to basic office positions and I don't get anything' and I'm like 'I know!' so just trying to prove somehow that yes, you could do data entry for someone, haha…I've sent resumes out but there's a lot of people looking for work so I've never gotten a response for something that wasn't related to teaching. So that's what makes me think I need to have [some other qualifications]. (Lillian, age 36)
CHAPTER 8: Reasons for Wanting Change

This chapter presents findings for the fourth of the four meta-themes that emerged from the data analysis. Over the course of the interviews, participants reflected on their current career circumstances and explored their motivations for career change. This chapter presents findings for participants’ reasons for wanting a career change, organized into two core themes: 1) Desire for More Meaning, Purpose, Fulfillment, and Other Existential Concerns and 2) Job Dissatisfaction. The two core themes are then further divided into several sub-themes.

Desire for More Meaning, Purpose, or Fulfillment and Other Existential Concerns

Twelve participants described a desire for more meaning, purpose, or sense of fulfillment or engagement (or a lack of it in their current position) as a central reason behind their desire to make a career change. This was expressed in various ways: through a desire to work in a job that is more meaningful or rewarding, through reflection on the day-to-day meaning of their current jobs, as existential guilt around not contributing to the greater good as much as they would like, and through feelings of wasting or not living up to their potential.

Peter, Mary, Mansi, Agnes, and Charlotte describe wanting to feel a bit more invested, engaged, connected, or challenged in their work.

So the idea of the stuckness I think too is that, wouldn't it be nice to come to a job where it's a little bit more vibrant, a little bit more interesting…it's a cool place, it allows me to pay the bills and stuff like that, but it's not…it's not all that rewarding in the job. (Peter, age 34)
I guess [I’d like to] just see more end product. I do a lot of repetitious database work, which is just like 'load this file, load that file, load this file, load that file.' One of the strengths of my job is that I have a lot of decision-making ability so I'd like to have that in an ideal job but I would just like to see each thing I do being more significant as opposed to just running a bunch of generic things that you do every day and you never really see, other than an error, you don't see when things work out. (Mary, age 32)

So what I like is there's a lot of variation, because there are a lot of studies going on but I'm not part of all of them…the bad thing is that I don't get to interact a lot. I do a lot of recruiting but not anything with them. And then, when the study is finished, then we analyze it, but I don't have anything to put forward because I didn't really do it. I just did all the groundwork. Like recruiting and then making sure that everything's running smoothly…[I want] to see the results of the study. (Mansi, age 26)

I feel I need to be doing something challenging, something that uses my mind, something that makes me think. If you're just doing a job that you don't have to think through all day, I find that I just fall flat in every aspect of my life. I also feel that I need to be contributing to something. And I need to believe in that, so that's why I wouldn't want to work just for a for profit company. I'm always going to work in non-profits. Yeah so it just needs to be something I believe in that way, and then something that challenges me. (Agnes, age 30)

…I in the next year I would definitely like to be doing something different because it's not healthy to get bored and to stay bored. And because I don't want to go back to some personal habits which are negative, and those kinds of things can become much more active when you're bored and unfulfilled. It's important for me to get more engaged. (Charlotte, age 37)

In discussing her need to feel more engaged, Charlotte described a volunteer activity she had tried. Although it didn’t work out, she does view it as evidence that she’s looking for more meaning in her life.

I think [my meaning has] often been in work and in teaching and so in the past few years, there hasn't been as much. I try to be kind and helpful to the people around me and to my sister and to my friends but there isn't, I don't have a sense of a great deal of significance for me personally. And I've tried different volunteer things and sometimes it was chasing after that significance…But it was kind of this, what now looks to me like a kind of misguided attempt, but it was an attempt to do something that would make me feel more meaning through something valuable. (Charlotte, age 37)
Tony has asked himself about whether he should pursue a career change towards something that would be more meaningful to him, in his case, solar energy.

Do I want to make a full-on career change and just say, ‘ok just leave this and do something I'm a lot more passionate about?’ …the thing about the job I'm doing right now, it's really hard to get passionate about something that's so static…it pays well, it's very stable but because it's stable, there is no growth, it's very traditional, it's very boring, and a bit, it's the petrochemical field so the field itself is not very environmentally friendly…I know that I could be working in the solar energy field because my background is in optics which is solar energy and I've always been a bit of, I'm very passionate about the environment, you know, I try as hard as possible to live as minimalist as I can. (Tony, age 37)

After all his agonizing, when it comes down it, Tony reflects, “…I'm just not passionate about petrochemicals. I'm just not passionate about it.”

Andrew also reflects on the lack of meaning in his current job.

And I mean probably the biggest thing is the nature of the work I do…it's just not very meaningful. So right now, I'll give you an example, right now I'm working for the bank and I'm doing a project for them…I understand the project needs to be accomplished and there are people who depend on the system that the bank's providing…blah blah blah, but at the end of the day, I don't care…it doesn't resonate for me at all. I don't think it makes a beneficial difference in the world. It's important to someone, it's just not important to me. (Andrew, age 41)

He compares the results and contributions of his current job with an ideal job where he would contribute a meaningful legacy of some sort.

I think a successful career…I think there would be a legacy. I think there's something left behind from a successful career and it doesn't have to be a building, [it can be] something that does good for people, for someone. So a successful career has something that at the end of that career there is something that people use that helps them in some way, whatever that is. Whether that's a building that’s aesthetically pleasing, or whether it's a program that supports people, …something tangible that...is not only important to people but is important to me as well. Because obviously the work that I'm doing right now, something will come as a result of that and it will be tangible and it will exist, it's just not important to me. (Andrew, age 41)

Nik reflects more on his desire to do something that will help people in some way.
I’m not motivated anymore. No motivation. And I don’t feel like I’m helping people. For me, in a job environment whatever I’m doing [should be] helping others. That’s the thing for me. If you don’t feel that you’re helping, don’t feel satisfied, than there’s something wrong. It’s not right for you. (Nik, age 32)

Tara has questioned the meaning behind her past and current jobs and has reflected how she would like to move toward something that feels more meaningful, both towards the greater good, but also more meaningful on a personal level.

... when I was in my previous position, we did consumer research for products and brands, and it was a lot of food stuff so that was kind of interesting to me at first because, as I said, my original plan was to work in the food industry, but then when I got in there, I just thought it was kind of ridiculous because you meet people in these marketing teams and they’re like ‘ok, how are we going to sell more of this cereal?!’ - that's like their whole life...to sell cereal. And even the language you use with your “targets”...it's manipulative and predatory and now I see it everywhere with advertising and everything. And I'm just so cynical about everything….And now, at my new company, we do a lot of research for pharmaceutical companies and now when I'm comparing that to the stuff I used to do, I miss that because...now it's pharma!! It's heightened even more. I'm like 'ugghhh.' You know, pharmaceuticals...ughh...

I think I would have to be interested in it and that would kind of create motivation and enthusiasm. And just feeling good about what I was doing in the sense that I was doing a good job but also doing something that was important…feeling like I was contributing to something meaningful but then also feeling good about the role I was playing...having a substantial part in it where I was actually voicing opinions and doing something… (Tara, age 31)

Day-to-Day Erosion of Meaning

Five participants described how the day-to-day work or atmosphere at their current job in a sense eroded the amount of meaning they derived from their work.

Sometimes it is hard to keep a handle on that big picture, though, when you're so focused on the mini-details on what you do day-to-day-to-day. So I think in a job where you do always have a sense of that over-arching significance of what you do, that would be something that I'd want (Elizabeth, age 29)

But then it got better, it got busier and because we did do some actually interesting qualitative projects, we didn't do as many of those as I would like but they happened kind of often enough so was I like ‘ok, this can be interesting
sometimes' But then a lot of the other times it's just really boring. Repetitive kind of tasks and again because it's a small company there wasn't anybody else to do it...so I did a lot of filing and office admin stuff, I was just like 'fine whatever I'll do it' even though I felt...it was below me or something. (Tara, age 31)

For Debra, the day-to-day monotony and boredom of her current job significantly erodes any source of meaning derived from working for the government. She distinguishes between the meaning of the job *in theory* versus the realities of the job *in practice*.

Well I've been working as a policy advisor, policy analysis, policy consultant, policy something for about six to seven years...and in theory, I really like the idea of that field and I sort of studied policy although not really. But in practice, I find the work really boring. It's dull, it's often very silly. So I don't actually enjoy it and yet I can't seem to change careers. Even though I know I want to.

In theory it sounds, and it is...it is sort of interesting in many ways. I've done a bunch of different kinds of policy- health policy, energy policy, environmental policy and now I'm doing education policy- and you get to explore the field, there's the public good of it, in theory, again...But the reality of the day-to-day work is that it's kind of dull. And it's you in a cubicle, looking at papers and reading things. Most of the time...On a day-to-day basis, it's mostly boring, [I don’t actually feel it’s part of the greater good]. (Debra, age 33)

Agnes describes how in the day-to-day experience of her front line case management work, she finds it difficult to feel connected to a deeper sense of meaning. It’s hard to see the work she does being translated into meaningful outcomes.

I like doing frontline work with people in a way but it can also be...like you work with...it's people who are living in our housing so it's permanent housing and you work with the same people for years. And so it's often really slow changes, or it's hard to...you start to see the fact that they're still housed as a positive outcome and it's just… you start to just feel like you're doing the same thing everyday and you're not doing anything to actually improve people's lives...it's not translated into stuff you can see. (Agnes, age 30)

Peter described how although, in theory, the organization he works for does good work, the decline in professionalism and vibrancy over the years has made it difficult to
stay engaged. He reflects, “It’s disappointing for sure because I think the organization is really valuable in theory, but the execution is kind of lacking.”

This being not-for-profit, I really like this idea that you're giving back to the community of some sorts…I like that idea, rather than going to somebody's back pocket...And the people at the time that I got hired, they seemed genuinely interesting and motivating as well...as time has worn on, that has really eroded. [At the beginning] there was a vibrancy as well, a lot of interesting people working there and for me a lot of the time it's who you're working with. And a lot of the people I was pretty close to have left as the years have gone by...the dynamic has shifted...Right now, it feels more like a job than a career. And, when I started it seemed more like a career kind of thing. And I think it's just really the lustre has worn off a little bit…I'd like to think that there's something a little bit better out there....a bit more purpose and a bit more sense that this can grow, a little bit. And right now, we're not growing...It's a bit stagnant. And I just don't see how, structurally, our organization can grow without some sort of drastic change. I just don't see how it can happen. (Peter, age 34)

**Existential Guilt or Responsibility**

Seven participants described a sense of existential guilt that they haven’t been contributing to something more meaningful or to something larger than themselves. They described a sense of existential responsibility to use their time, gifts, and opportunities to give back to the world in a meaningful way. Some of them felt an existential guilt around wasting or not living up to their potential.

Charlotte reflects how she feels settled and unstressed with her current work arrangements but how this sometimes translates into guilt about not doing more.

But psychologically, in some ways I feel healthier, I feel less stressed. I feel less nervous and anxious, but bored and unfulfilled and not really important or meaningful and that's not good for your sense of who you are in the world...There’s a lot that needs doing in the world. A lot of people who need help and a lot of problems to address and, for me to just not do very much with my days, just do the bare minimum of work and get by is kind of a waste in a way. I feel like I've been invested in by society and education and my family and myself and my own efforts and to simply not do very much with it, it's a shame...[I feel]
guilty, and paralyzed is a good word... We're lucky to have this life and to be alive. To just go through the motions, it's a shame. (Charlotte, age 37)

Tony compares his current job to a previous job in water treatment and reflects on the difference between them in terms of doing good things for the world.

When I was in water treatment, I was doing a lot of waste water and at the end of the day, you knew that that pollutant was not going to be in a stream. You knew that that system would be more efficient and would not be wasting water. You knew that you were doing actual good things for the environment... There was some greater good and I was really interested in the pollutant aspect and I was really fascinated about that and at the end of the day you could say that and at the end of your career you could say that. At the end of my current career path, I can say "well, this engine I made 2% more efficient' but really I didn't because it was a big heavy duty diesel engine that sucked up a lot of crap anyway... and it's just not enough anymore. (Tony, age 37)

He later reflects on his desire to be able to look back on his life and feel good about his contribution.

... at the end of your life, you want to look back and say 'ok, I wasn't one of those douche-bags that made the world a worse place'... I would really hate to feel like 'oh yeah, all I really did was sell more cars, more pulluting SUVs.' (Tony, age 37)

Andrew describes a deepening existential questioning, catalyzed by the birth of his daughter, around the value of his work, and about the life choices he must make.

... at first I was doing consulting for companies and working a lot of hours and travel was kind of ridiculous and then about eight or nine years ago, I said, 'ok, enough travel. I've got a wife now and I want to start a family.' So I just got out of that and went out on my own. And so I think at first it was really good because the money is very attractive... you're kind of like 'oh I'm making great money, I don't care.' And then... you know just feelings of dissatisfaction and especially having a child three years ago like, as I said, we talk to our child about a lot of stuff, whether she understands it or not, but I'm also trying to teach her lessons and so I'm finding myself going 'oh, you should go out and do what you want to do in life' and I'm not. So I think it's started to sink in more and more. Just a little more feeling of dissatisfaction and trying to find whatever I need to do. And also I mean, to be honest, I'm above 40 now so it's that feeling of 'I've got to leave a mark on the world and is this really all I want?' I have a good life and I have many nice things, and I have a great family but do I want to leave something... is this all
that life's about?!...And just doing something good for the world. (Andrew, age 41)

When discussing the possibility of making a career change towards something more meaningful but that may result in a pay cut and less money, Andrew reflects on another conflict.

And the other part of me that kind of always conflicts is...we make our own choices about what we spend our money on. We could live on much less money than we do. So that again, those are choices that we make and so I'm always conflicted...I love...so we have travel and that's an important thing for me and traveling takes money, but it's not a requirement. We could get by on much less than we do. (Andrew, age 41)

**Wasting or not living up to potential.** For some participants ($n = 6$), a sense of existential guilt was expressed through a realization that they were wasting or not living up to their potential as people. They were disappointed at what they were doing with their time, and with what they had contributed, accomplished, or achieved. There was a sense that they could and should be doing more.

Charlotte reflects on a feeling of shame at not having done more with what’s been given to her.

I'm completely paddling my own canoe which in some ways gives me even more freedom...and part of what makes it hard is that there's this feeling of shame at not being more creative, or more certain, or more engaged. Like, with all of the advantages I have, I can't do better than this?!...And we all make the best of whatever we're doing, we have to, but there's this feeling of shame. I've had these opportunities and I haven't made the most of it’...I think so much about the story I heard in Sunday school. I don't remember it exactly, it's some bible story about a man who has three sons and he gave his sons 2 silver coins each (I'm sure I'm totally changing it, but this is how I remember it). And he says ‘Go invest these coins and come back and show me what you've done with it’ And the sons went away and came back after a month and one son said ‘Father, here I have 4 silver coins. I invested them and made a profit’ and the man says 'Well done, my son, I am pleased'. And then the next son came and says 'Father I'm so sorry. I invested my coins but I lost everything.' And the man says 'Well that's too bad, but you learned something. Well done, my son, I am pleased.' And then the third son came
and said ‘Father, I didn't know what to do. I buried my coins in a hole. I kept them there safe and at least I can bring them back to you.’ And the man cursed his son and flogged him and threw him out…I feel kind of like that third son. Not investing, not using what I have. (Charlotte, age 37)

Lillian describes a similar worry to Charlotte, in that she wonders if she is making the most meaningful use of her time.

I guess it's like, [my job has] given me real big summers which have been a good thing. It's also sometimes, sometimes I feel like that's too much leisure time so sometimes I feel like, not just the summer but maybe some holidays I'll think 'oh this is great, you can have a week off' but I think 'I don't want a week off. I'd rather be doing something meaningful.' (Lillian, age 36)

Andrew reflected on a deep sense of wasting his potential, beginning with wasting his skills, and then deepening into a sense of not contributing to society.

And then I think the other thing is that, with my job, one of the challenges is that I go in and depending on the organization and the culture of the organization that I enter into, I might have different levels of autonomy or...I'll give you an example. I've been in government organizations, like I did some work for XYZ and when I went in there it's very hierarchical and you do not cross lines. I felt very like, 'this is your box' and my skills were just wasted. So I was just sitting at a desk and again getting paid great money but not being challenged and not being able to contribute to other parts of the project.

I'm starting to feel my potential is wasted. I feel engaged in the things that I read and the things that I do but I'm just starting to feel like my potential is wasted. I don't feel guilty, I do a fairly good job at what I do and I've worked to get where I am. I just feel I'm wasting my potential. I could actually be accomplishing something that would give more to society than I am. So if that's guilt, than I guess I am. (Andrew, age 41)

For Andrew, the birth of his daughter acted as a catalyst for many of these feelings—his efforts to raise her to be what she wants to be have highlighted his own shortcomings in doing just that.

So one of our commentaries walking to daycare one day was about...she was upset about something from the day before so I was explaining to her about how today was a new day and it could be anything she wants it to be, the world's open
for her. And then I was thinking, 'I'm not doing that at all and it's really disappointing.' So it's become more important to me.

I feel sad and I feel restless and, as I said, as I get older it's becoming more concerning right because...like my time's not running out...that sounds really morbid but obviously...I'm wasting years, right. I don't want to be 60 and look back and go 'what have I done?!' So there is that component of it. I try not to get too caught up in that because everybody ages but there is that component. (Andrew, age 41)

Agnes described struggling with the system in social work whereby you have to put in your hours, and everyone gets the same recognition regardless of the quality of their work. For her, she feels she has more to give, more potential, but is unable to put it to use in the given system. She describes how, with time, this system has eroded some of her motivation.

It's always 'good job' and everybody gets the same raises at the same time. It's always just even no matter how good you're doing in the position. And then I just felt there was a lot of people in line, whenever there was an internal posting, it would always just go to the person who had been there the longest. So I was feeling like, 'I'm young...but feeling like I could be doing more'. So I'm just not wanting to stay doing this for as long as they expect...

...paralysis might be a strong word to describe for this time but after working in the social work job that I got out of undergrad, probably a couple of years after that I started to feel like 'oh...I'm doing so well here, I would like to do more' and I kind of sat with that for about a year and then I just sort of got this feeling that I was going to work everyday but only really like getting through the week for my weekend. (Agnes, age 30)

Tara reflects, “…the word stuck comes to mind…Just not knowing what I'm doing. Not living up to my potential. Yeah. Probably stuck. Spinning my wheels.” Her feeling of not living up to her potential is heightened by thoughts of what might have been had she been more intentional and planful in her educational and career decision-making.
I think [the feelings] have been there in the background but maybe I wasn't fully knowing what they were. Because I feel I've been thinking about it a lot more in the last few years so I probably have a better self-awareness about it now. I think it's partly for that reason that it's stronger and also because I'm thirty-one...I kind of wish...going back to what I said about when I was in high school, I'm kind of naturally a keener so I feel like if I had had a plan, did a degree in something that was actually useful to my life and then started a career, I would be in like a really good place right now... (Tara, age 31)

Tara also describes a kind of existential striving to be unique in her career, a desire to fulfill some unique potential. She wonders, however, if this gets in her way.

…I've thought about...before I did my Master's, being a dietician. Something that held me back there was that there are so many dieticians in the world...do they need another one? So I do feel like [I want] some level of uniqueness. So there's an element of being an expert but then it's like I don't want to be like everybody else. So some kind of specialization. For example, [my father] was an expert on XYZ, which is so random but it's really unique. Which adds another layer of complication, I understand. I don't even want to get into that because, give me a break, it would be cool to just be interested in something --I shouldn't be aiming for the stars right now. (Tara, age 31)

Debra who feels, “[I’m not living up to my potential]…Half the time the work I do is silly and boring,” describes a feeling of utter absurdity at the work she does. Her potential, her skills, and her time are being wasted on something ridiculous.

Some of my time at work, a good portion feels like wasted time. What I try to do is to...instead of working, because there's sometimes nothing to do or it's just not enough time constraint, there's just not enough pressure...so what I do is other things. My friends are all applying for jobs, I write their cover letters and resumes. I do all that. Or, I read about investing issues. Or, I study something else. Or, I learn some French. I mean it's great that I'm a fast learner but I think because I do things quickly, there's just not enough to do so I have to create work and I hate creating work. But if there isn't work, I'm not just going to sit there...I can't...And that's how every policy job I've ever had is...half the time, about 60% of the time, I'm sitting there creating something to do because the expectation, which I think is absurd is that you're at your desk even if there's nothing to do. And I get that they're paying you to sit there, but...it's absurd. It's totally absurd. (Debra, age 33)
Job Dissatisfaction

In addition to a desire for more meaning or purpose, participants ($n = 13$) described job dissatisfaction as a reason for wanting to make a career change. Participants identified a range of variables contributing to job dissatisfaction. These were arranged into three sub-themes: boredom, a disconnect or conflict with some element of the job (interpersonal, values, workplace culture/atmosphere), and few opportunities for growth.

Boredom

Seven participants described boredom as a primary factor in their feeling of dissatisfaction with their current positions. Tony recounts, “I mean the issue with this current position, it pays well, it's very stable but because it's stable, there is no growth, it's very traditional, it's very boring…”

Mansi described boredom arising from repetitive work that’s always the same and never new.

…my job is research analyst. So what I do is I work under the doctor and the principal investigator of the research study. And then I recruit the participants, like you are doing, and then they come in, we do the consultations and stuff and then, we analyze…but I've only been there for, almost two years now, but in that time, it's just the same thing every day. You make phone calls, do this and that. It's not what I expected, so I'm just…bored…it's not new. You do the same thing every day. I don't look forward to it. (Mansi, age 26)

Charlotte describes being bored and also reflects on the deeper effects of boredom, for both her and those she works with.

I'm not learning any new skills…I do feel bored. And I regret feeling bored because working with people you don't want to find them boring, you want to be fully present. Boredom is not a fun feeling for me and also in terms of working with the kids and working with the candidates, how much enthusiasm I bring into the interaction really affects the interaction.
In the next year I would definitely like to be doing something different because it's not healthy to get bored and to stay bored. And because I don't want to go back to some personal habits which are negative, and those kinds of things can become much more active when you're bored and unfulfilled. It's important for me to get more engaged...But psychologically, I feel, again in some ways I feel healthier, I feel less stressed. I feel less nervous and anxious, but bored and unfulfilled and not really important or meaningful and that's not good for your sense of who you are in the world. (Charlotte, age 37)

Nik described a sense of having matured out of his field-- a kind of boredom that comes from a need to move on.

I've maybe matured in my field enough to do something else. That's my maturing and being saturated. They go together. In parallel ways. Maybe I'm more mature, I feel saturated, I did all the things...I just want to do something else, just for myself. Kind of a business, you know. (Nik, age 32)

For Tara, boredom is mixed up with a sense of not living up to her potential.

But then a lot of the other times it's just really boring. Repetitive kind of tasks and again because it's a small company there wasn't anybody else to do it...so I did a lot of filing and office admin stuff, I was just like 'fine whatever I'll do it' even though I felt it was...below me or something...this past Christmas I was shopping for Christmas presents for our clients which was kind of fun because it's something different but at the same time I'm like 'Is this really the best use of my skills? Like a personal shopper?'  (Tara, age 31)

Andrew recounts a similar feeling around boredom. He too feels unchallenged and as though he may be wasting his skills.

I [am bored]...you know, producing documents and it's always the same kind of documentation. Subject matter might be different but it's always kind of the same kind of documentation. And then I think the other thing is that, with my job, one of the challenges is that I go in and depending on the organization and the culture of the organization that I enter into, I might have different levels of autonomy or...like I'll give you an example. I've been in government organizations, like I did some work for XYZ and when I went in there it's very hierarchical and you do not cross lines. I felt very, like, 'this is your box' and my skills were just wasted. So I was just sitting at a desk and again getting paid great money but not being challenged and not being able to contribute to other parts of the project. (Andrew, age 41)
For Debra, boredom at the current job is central to her dissatisfaction. In her own words, “Boredom is my number one enemy in a job setting. Outside of work I'm social, I'm engaged and at work I'm not. Because I'm bored. I don't like it and I'm bored.” She adds:

> Or essentially, sometimes I think, well they're paying me to sit here. They're paying me to be bored. They're paying me to just sit at this desk and do nothing. They're giving me money for this right now. You know what, when I'm working for the taxpayers...[it feels] absurd. No one should be paying me money to feel bored. That is crazy. I'm paying myself to feel bored as a taxpayer. You're paying me. That's crazy...So sometimes, I go for a walk and I just spend a few hours outside of the office. Well if you're going to pay me to be bored, you might as well pay me to enjoy the sunshine, or pay me to do my groceries or whatever. It’s almost like I want to work somewhere with a boss who is like 'do this, this, this....', just a lot, because otherwise how am I to improve on my skills, how am I supposed to learn more if I'm bored 80% of the time? [It deadens yours brain]. It totally does. (Debra, age 33)

**Disconnect or Conflict**

Eleven participants described some kind of conflict, disconnect, or lack of fit between themselves and their current position. These conflicts ranged from the interpersonal, to a difference in values, to difficulty accepting the workplace culture.

**Interpersonal disconnect.** Edwin describes a huge disconnect and conflict between himself and those he works with, both in terms of work ethic and in terms of feeling recognized by management.

I like the work, it's a great job, it's very rewarding and challenging but I hate the people that I work with and I hate the, sort of, the leadership that I have at work. As a result, I want to change careers because I feel so frustrated and I feel so disenfranchised with what I do. But I feel really kind of stuck in making that change.

So I've learned that I'm very efficient, very methodical, which are great qualities but also makes me difficult to work with because I want to work with people that
are efficient and methodical as well. The people that I work with, I can't say that they are efficient, can't say that they're organized and that frustrates me. Their work ethic is completely different and any attempt that I've made to make myself useful in the way that I want to be useful has kind of been quashed. Because if I'm working this hard than that makes it seem like they should be working at that level too. So because I'm one out of, let's say five people, than it's easier to just repress what I want to do instead of having the entire team come up…When I've gone to management in the last four years to complain about this, I've been gradually getting more and more of the message 'well, you need to either just accept that this is the way it is and you're not going to be able to change these people, or just go and do whatever you want' And legally, I'm not allowed to do anything I want. Legally, I have to, I can only do work that's sort of written instructions. So if I were to go do whatever I want, I could potentially get fired…(Edwin, age 28)

Mary reflected broadly on her sense of disconnect, “…it's just nothing about where I am appeals anymore. The salary doesn't appeal, the work doesn't appeal, the people don't appeal, it’s a complete disconnect.” She describes a similar conflict to Edwin between herself and the management and procedures in place.

I dislike a lot of the people I have to work with. I dislike the policies that my bosses both make and break on their own. Inconsistency really bothers me, especially when it comes to rules…And knowing that I have to get everything in writing and harass them for it because I know that if they make an exception, they don't remember that they make exceptions so they're like 'why did you do this? why did you allow this?' and I'm like look, there's this email.... It's just frustrating that, having worked there for so long that they still question that I would be honest about it.

Probably more than most people I'm like 'I don't mind separating myself from my career'. I wouldn't be the person who lived my career, probably. That isn't likely. But at the same time, my current position, the way the management handles situations doesn't line up with personally how I think things should be done and how people should be handled. And that causes problems too. (Mary, age 32)

Nik also describes such disconnects.

Because programmers all the time, they're kind of asocial, like a nerd, they call themselves nerd, and they're in front of a computer all the time…I'm talking to those guys but I'm not getting along well with those people because they're very different mindsets. Very different...even still in IT but my mindset and their mindset and approaches are very different.
This current position is with a private company and it's a lot of stress and they want you to work overtime but I don't feel like I'm that respected so I don't feel...the respect is not there and they're just looking at you like a working animal or something. I don't like it. I like what I'm doing but I don't like the approach or feeling that I'm getting from my managers and other people. (Nik, age 32)

Peter describes a feeling of isolation at work, fuelled partly by conflicting approaches to the work and difference in professionalism between himself and some of his colleagues.

There are a lot of differences between the staff at work versus who I am. Age differences, lifestyle, and personality differences. I really do feel as though I'm of a type and everyone else is kind of another type, at work.

So when he left it was a bit of a blow because he was very professional, very business, which was nice and that spoke to me as well in terms of not just being a rag-tag sort of not-for-profit and you make it up as you go, but trying to put a bit of a sheen on things...and so when he left...it was...I do feel a bit more isolated in the way I approach things. I'm pretty procedural. I feel it's important to show up on time for things, I feel it's important to sort of have a job description and all that's a bit fuzzy right now. (Peter, age 32)

**Values disconnect.** Charlotte and Lillian both describe a disconnect between their personalities and values with the profession of teaching and school systems.

I don't really, I appreciate the school system but lots of time I doubt that marking children is the best way to move forward for them...I don't like, this is going to sound silly, but I don't like directing people...and I've managed to sort of gain skills so I can have classroom management but I don't enjoy saying 'Ok, everybody do this, everybody do that. Sit down.' I like to explain things and expose them to things but I feel like it's their choice. So that's very conflicting...there's definitely that conflict and that's what pushes me towards...it's not good to do something that you don't completely agree with. (Lillian, age 36)

I worked in a few different schools, short-term contracts until I was hired on full-time, but it didn't really fit...I was stressed almost all the time, I hated Sunday night, I found the teachers I was working with difficult and sometimes the school admin was very stressful. I was doing things like controlling the lunchroom and trying to break up food fights, and trying to prevent snowball fights from happening outside. The kids aren't allowed to throw snowballs these days. You have to tell children, 'don't throw snowballs.' I couldn't do it...I just realized that I
was in this really kind of extraverted career...standing up in front of people and
directing people all the time and I didn't want to. (Charlotte, age 37)

Charlotte also described a disconnect between her values and some of the politics in
which her ESL work is situated. She says, “And also the politics around our immigration
system don't sit well with me. I'm part of a system that is not so cool.”

Peter discusses a disconnect between the products his company produces and his
own personal values.

A lot of the items that we sell to clients, it's a higher-price point, so I don't see it
resonating with my peers. You know, $400 for [this thing], that's really nice, but I
can't afford that. So there is a disconnect between what we sell as a consumer
good with my peers. When I tell them the idea behind it, they are like 'oh that's
really cool, that's really neat, but that's not for me.'...So it's really hard to translate
the idea that you're not just supporting the luxury goods economy, you're
supporting someone's livelihood too... They can get it elsewhere, and what's the
point of buying this. Personally, that's my view, a little bit of everything in the
world, people don't need as much stuff. That's why it is a little bit counter-
intuitive that I work where I work and I do what I do, but I do believe,
fundamentally, that it is a good place to work, the not-for-profit ideal, the fact that
you're supporting livelihoods, I do believe that but it gets harder to believe as
other pressures happen.

I think that I can separate most of the time my sense of 'well, we don't need as
much stuff as consumers' vs. 'this is my job and this is what I am paid to do here'
So I can do that most of the time, but I think the pressures of the job and the
personality-conflicts and that can take you into a dark place sometimes. (Peter,
age 34)

Tony describes a lack of fit between himself and his colleagues in the United
States, anchored partly in different value systems.

When I go down to the big sales meetings, the North American sales meetings in
the United States, it feels like, part of it may be that I'm Canadian and you're kind
of like a second-tier, kind of forgotten in the background kind of thing, so there's
some of that, and maybe I don't mix well with a lot of the management, the senior
management down south. And I generally find that I have difficulty mixing well
with management. I just found it difficult. There’s some disconnect there. I don't
know what it is. Maybe I don't get along with kissing butt...haha I don't know.
I do get a lot of flack. Just a great example is I drive a hybrid. Whoopidoo - I mean it's a nice roomy car and I bought it and it's great but I get flack from people down south for that. 'Oh you drive a hybrid, does it actually get up to speed on the highway...' that kind of shit. They’re very traditional, you should have an SUV, you should have a truck...There is that value misalignment, for certain. (Tony, age 37)

As mentioned earlier, Tara has struggled with feeling disconnected from the main goals of the companies she has worked for.

... when I was in my previous position, we did consumer research. So a lot of, for products and brands, and it was a lot of food stuff so that was kind of interesting to me at first because, as I said, my original plan was to work in the food industry, but then when I got in there, I just thought it was kind of ridiculous because you meet people in these marketing teams and they're like 'ok, how are we going to sell more of this cereal?!' - that's like their whole life...to sell cereal. And even the language you use with your targets...it's kind of like manipulative and predatory and now I like see it everywhere with like advertising and everything. And I'm just so cynical about everything...And now, at my new company, we do a lot of research for pharmaceutical companies and now when I'm comparing that to the stuff I used to do, I miss that because...now it's pharma!! It's heightened even more. I'm like 'uggghhh.' You know, pharmaceuticals...ughh...

That was something that kind of bugged me about the whole consumer thing that I was doing because I was like how is this benefiting? There are brands out there that are trying to do good things but for the most part, the companies that have shit tons of money are not really focused on that. (Tara, age 31)

**Disconnect with work culture/atmosphere.** Several participants ($n = 5$) described a disconnect between their preferences and the reigning work culture or atmosphere at their current positions. There was a disconnect regarding how they like to spend their time, what was demanded for the position, and what they preferred, for example, or in how the organization was structured and functioned.

...when a work environment is very noisy and chaotic and cluttered, I'm very stressed. And I realized that influenced me in the kindergartens and other places because the last kindergarten I worked at was three classroom pods all joined together. So three kindergarten classes in the same space. There was never a quiet moment and I just...at the end of the day...laughter...I was like the cat who has fur all standing up. (Charlotte, age 37)
So when I got [my current job], I was already kind of questioning whether this was going to be a good fit...I've thought about this a lot actually and I think part of it is that it's such a large organization so of course there's a fairly complex hierarchy that you have to go through to get anything done and have any changes implemented so, any change takes a really long time and also, because I'm not very high up in that hierarchy, I feel like I'm not in a position to make any of those changes so it can be a kind of stifling work environment and not one that's very conducive to creative thought and experimentation. They have kind of long-standing policies and procedures for everything that is done and it's really really hard to change those so I find that's not really the best fit for me because I really like to think creatively and be able to engage...(Elizabeth, age 29)

And then I think the other thing is that, with my job, one of the challenges is that I go in and depending on the organization and the culture of the organization that I enter into, I might have different levels of autonomy or...like I'll give you an example. I've been in government organizations, like I did some work for XYZ and when I went in there it's very hierarchical and you do not cross lines. I felt very, like, 'this is your box' and my skills were just wasted. So I was just sitting at a desk and again getting paid great money but not being challenged and not being able to contribute to other parts of the project. And so it really depends on the organization you're in. Sometimes you're given a lot of respect, sometimes not and it's really hard to ascertain that culture before you go in...so not only are you ramping up the learning curve on the industry and the project, you're also ramping up a learning curve on the culture that you're fitting into. To actually understand if, to understand how to fit in to it and to understand what the roles of that culture are. Which is interesting in itself but once you get past the interest, being stuck in a culture where you're boxed into a little area sucks. (Andrew, age 41)

It's not growth that matters, it's how you inter-network so that you're not the guy to get the boot...It's very frustrating because I'm not that type of guy. I don't like the kissing-butt part, I really like the 'making new things happen' part and it's really frustrating... It's the exact opposite of the balance I normally like...It's a much higher degree of emphasis inter-networking than extra-networking. There's a big degree of emphasis on that and more at this company than I've ever seen in any other company, except for the government, you know, where that's all you do. So it's a very difficult situation that I find myself in because I do like what I do, but what I do is only about 30% to 20% of the actual work. The rest is just learning to kiss-butt and networking.... (Tony, age 37)

For her part, Agnes describes her frustration with the nature of the system in social work, wherein you aren’t recognized or promoted for good work.

We definitely need more promotions from within. The last three management positions at my work have gone to external candidates and it's taken a huge hit on everybody's morale. So stuff like that. I haven't completely thought this through
and this wouldn't fly at my work but maybe also some recognition for people who do better jobs than other people. Everyone is really just on the same level always and then every year, you get your same raise and stuff and I see why that makes sense because we're not in a competitive field but then at the same time, I can sometimes look at my co-workers and be like, ‘I work so much harder than them’... I know that that doesn't exist in non-profits normally because it's not competitive but sometimes you're just like ‘oh man, that guy is awful and I know he gets paid more than me and gets more vacation than me because he's been here for five more years’...it's like, ok we got to pass our time and then get these benefits that come with doing your time here...my supervisors always tell me how much they love me there but it doesn't amount to anything. (Agnes, age 30)

**Few Opportunities for Growth**

Some participants ($n = 4$) also spoke about how there were little or no opportunities to grow and develop within their current companies. Their attempts for change within the company have been thwarted, or simply weren’t possible. In Mary’s words, “...in terms of opportunities, they’re just not there.” Mary describes working for a family-run company where the opportunities for growth are non-existent.

Right now, there's admin team, sales reps, VPs. And I'm never going to be a VP. This is not going to happen. It's a family-run business and if I'm there long enough, their kids are taking my job. This is what's going to happen. The nepotism is a real...'oh you've got the family name, we've created this job for you'. (Mary, age 32)

She shared how her only opportunities have come in the form of higher volumes of work, which isn’t really growth at all and how, in an ideal world, she’d like to work for a company where it’s possible to work her way up.

I'm covering the same mat leave again currently. So that’s the only thing that they've provided me with in terms of...and that's not growth at all as a career. It's only growth in pay. It's not even giving me opportunity to do more in terms of variety, it's just doing higher volumes.

I think it would need to be a bigger company because I would need to feel like 'ok, well I'm in this position but then there's these other positions that offer more
that I could work toward' and feel like that was an option. Even if I ended up leaving the company entirely, at least feeling like 'ok, this is a path that looks good and there are things ahead of it.' I guess when I said that I don't like being a student, it's not that I don't like learning, it's just that I don't like that environment of learning. I'd rather be hands-on and so being in the job, being in a job that's under another one and getting all this information, in fact I think it's better when you are higher up to have gone through the ranks because, you know, you get a better sense of what you're asking of people, and I would like to do something where I could do that. (Mary, age 32)

Peter is deeply frustrated with his current company and reflected on his despair around the possibility for change and growth within the organization.

[I feel] frustration and resignation...just "ahhhh - shrug...this place isn't going to work"...it feels like a sinking ship a little bit, so I should get out. So the idea of sort of despair and resignation, this isn't going anywhere.

It's a bit stagnant. And I just don't see how, structurally, our organization can grow without some sort of drastic change...I think they always put on a positive spin but it feels very false to me...Just the way rent is going, and property taxes. The math doesn't add up sometimes for the positivity. (Peter, age 34)

In reference to one particular opportunity he proposed that was refused he reflects:

...so I don't really understand why that opportunity wasn't given. It wouldn't have cost a lot so... Personally, [I would have benefited] for sure, but the organization as well. And I would think that in a more... a lot of other organizations would say that's a wise move and a professional move. Professional development, right, that kind of thing. (Peter, age 34)

Tony described his frustration at his inability to move up and grow in the company. For various reasons, related to the nature of the business, the economy, and personal factors, he hasn’t found many opportunities for professional growth.

Sigh, it's just a little bit nauseating. It's like, 'God, this is the same stuff I was doing eight years ago, seven years ago, and wow, I'm getting paid better for it but...’ It's exactly that feeling of 'I haven't moved in eight years, I haven't done anything different in eight years' So, it is a level of frustration that you realize every morning that you come in that it's not something that you want to do and your direction isn't there as well.
I was given three years ago this new business development project path again and I was like 'oh crap, again, all this bs' and I remember telling my wife, when that happened, 'really? I think I just got slotted back in to where I was when I left. This is not where I wanted to be.’ So it kind of trickles down and your performance goes down. (Tony, age 37)

Agnes described how in both a previous and in her current job, there just isn’t room for her to grow, even when her supervisors are in agreement about her potential. She puts it very clearly, “If the people in power are in agreement with me [that we need a permanent researcher] and nothing's happening, then I'm just stuck.” She reflects, “I would always get really good feedback from my supervisors, everybody at work really loved me, 'you're doing a great job', but there just didn't seem any room to do anything different or go up in the agency.”
CHAPTER 9:

Discussion

The previous five chapters introduced the participants and their individual experiences of career paralysis, and then presented the common themes and findings that cut across these experiences. This final chapter will review the overall results of the current study and present the ways in which they answer the research questions. Findings will be discussed in relation to the existing career development and career change literature. The three main areas of discussion will be 1) Reasons for Wanting a Career Change, 2) Barriers to Change, and 3) Dimensions of Experiencing. The theoretical implications of these findings will be discussed, and the new two-part Emergent Model of Career Paralysis will be introduced. Implications for practice will then be presented. Finally, the limitations of this study and directions for future research will be discussed.

Summary of the Findings

The current study aimed to contribute significantly to an initial understanding of career paralysis through revealing underlying themes that are common to the phenomenon, and that are grounded in the qualitative data of real experience. This study answered the call of psychology in general and the field of career development, in particular, for increased use of qualitative designs (Blustein et al., 2005; Lips-Wiersma & McMorland, 2006; Savickas, 2001; Stead et al., 2012)— which have been deemed ‘‘pivotal in expanding the horizons of issues and problems within vocational psychology’’ (Blustein et al., 2005, p. 352). This study, which arose from a qualitative
design of interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA), provided unprecedented access to the subjective experience of those currently struggling with career paralysis. In doing so, it has hopefully enriched and deepened our understanding of the many layers and variables that define and contribute to the experience and provided a preliminary answer to the study’s central research question: “What are people’s experiences of career paralysis?”

This central question was supported by three secondary research questions and the themes and findings that emerged from the current study spoke to these questions in various ways. A visual break down of how the themes and findings from the current study answered the research questions is presented in Table 3. The answer to the first secondary research question, “How do people define career paralysis for themselves? How do they define ‘where they are stuck’?” while touched on by various emergent themes, is perhaps best anchored in the meta-theme of Defining Features of the Career Paralysis Experience. Participants in this study were stuck in the middle of a core conflict between a deep desire for change/an underlying truth that change was necessary and a deep sense of stuckness. They experienced a tug of war, a back and forth, a constant battle, negotiation, or dialectic between the two sides of this conflict. The meta-themes of Reasons for Wanting a Change and Barriers to Change can be conceptualized as fuelling this core conflict. This conflict appears to radiate out into other realms of participants’ experience and helps to answer the second secondary research question of “Are there common/central themes and/or parameters to the experience of career paralysis across individuals? For example, are there common behaviours, thought patterns, or emotional experiences?” Participants spoke to this question through the meta-theme of Other
### Table 3. Relationship of Findings to Research Questions

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Dimensions of Experiencing. The core conflict was experienced through common behavioural responses (such as coping or detachment), through cognitive negotiations around the meaning of career, through negative emotional reactions, and through the need to navigate various kinds of social interactions within their experience of career paralysis. A preliminary answer to the final secondary research question, “What are people’s subjective understanding of the maintenance of their career paralysis?” emerged through the meta-theme of Barriers to Change. Participants candidly shared the external and internal barriers that hindered their motivation for, and actions towards, change. Their narratives revealed primary internal barriers to change of uncertainty around other possible career paths and low self-efficacy that interact with reasons NOT to make a change, i.e., security and comfort factors, that together result in either no or unproductive attempts at change. The following section will further review these findings, the study’s meta and sub-themes that spoke to the research questions, in more depth and will discuss them in relation to existing literature.

Reasons for Wanting a Career Change

A necessary condition for the development of career paralysis is, of course, a desire for career change. Consistent with existing models of job and career change (Farrell & Rusbult, 1981; Griffeth et al., 2000; Hom & Griffeth 1991; Mobley, 1977; Rhodes & Doering, 1983), participants from the current study identified job dissatisfaction as a significant contributor to the desire for a career change. Participants identified a range of factors contributing to job dissatisfaction including boredom, few
opportunities for growth, and disconnect or conflict with regards to values, with colleagues or supervisors, or with the general work culture and atmosphere.

In the needs satisfaction model, work is viewed as one way of meeting financial, interpersonal, and esteem needs (Diener et al., 2002). Framed within this model, participants’ experience of job dissatisfaction can be viewed as their interpersonal and esteem needs going unmet. In the interpersonal realm, participants described tense work-based relationships, and conflict or disconnect with supervisors or co-workers. In the esteem realm, they described intense boredom and a corresponding lack of a sense of personal challenge or accomplishment. Participants did not cite financial needs, for example lower salary than desired or required, as a contributing factor to job dissatisfaction. This finding is consistent with existing research, which has found no or only weak relationships between actual income level and life satisfaction (DeVoe & Pfeffer, 2009; Durak et al., 2010). Participants in the current study made enough money to meet their financial needs, and felt some level of financial security. As will be discussed in more detail later, financial security, while not seeming to explicitly impact perceptions of job or life satisfaction negatively or positively, was in some ways experienced as a negative in that it contributed to a sense of stuckness and was cited as a barrier to career change.

Participants identified a desire for more meaning as a second significant reason for wanting to make a career change. This desire encompassed both outward and inward sources of meaning. For example, participants spoke of wanting to do work that contributed something more meaningful to the world. They spoke of wanting to make a difference, of helping people, of leaving a legacy of some kind. Participants also spoke of
a desire for more inward meaning. They described wanting to feel more engaged and challenged in their work, and expressed a desire to derive more meaning from their day-to-day work tasks. Encompassing both of these sources of meaning, some participants described a sense of existential guilt or responsibility around their current work. Participants worried that they were wasting their potential and not doing enough meaningful things with their time and abilities. These existential questionings were fuelled both by a sense of disconnection from their work (i.e., not finding it meaningful), and through real work place barriers that prevented them from maximising their potential.

The present study’s finding of a desire for more meaning speaks to the relevance of newer models of work that are centered on meaning (Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009) and which give meaning a central role in our decision-making around work (Cohen, 2003). Lips-Wiersma’s model proposes four sources of meaningful work: 1) Developing and becoming self, 2) Unity with others, 3) Expressing full potential, and 4) Serving others. Their research suggests that meaningful work arises from a combination of these four sources and also requires a balance or harmony between them. Our findings provide support for this model—both for the importance of meaning in work generally, and for the need to balance an inner personal sense of meaning and engagement alongside a sense of outward meaning through contribution to others. This finding also supports research suggesting that work life and career have incredible potential to fulfill self-determination needs (Gagne & Deci, 2005; Sheldon, et al., 2003) and thus to increase subjective well-being (Deckop et al., 2010; Gagne & Deci, 2005; Sheldon et al., 2003). Self-determination theory (Gagne & Deci, 2005; Sheldon, et al., 2003) is a theory of motivation that posits that individuals grow and function optimally when core intrinsic
needs of competence, relatedness, and autonomy are met. Examined through this lens, this study’s findings around reasons for wanting a career change could be conceptualized as participants’ desire for more opportunities to act in accordance with their own values and sense of self (autonomy), to continue to gain mastery over new skills and tasks (competence), and to experience belonging and attachment to others in their career and work environments (relatedness). Self-determination theory also examines the interplay between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. This study’s finding of a desire for more meaning could be described as participants’ distressed awareness of a lack of intrinsic motivation in their work life.

Barriers to Career Change

Findings from the current study revealed several important barriers to career change, as identified by participants themselves. Identified barriers can be organized into two main categories of external barriers and internal barriers.

External barriers. The external barriers that were identified—geographical constraints, lack of positions available, and skills or educational requirements for change which were difficult to navigate or acquire—can be understood as consequences of the new world of work where organizations are cutting back on permanent positions, are contracting work out all over the world, and where individuals are facing the need for ever more education to be guaranteed a “good” job.

Participants, however, did not give the category of external barriers equal weight as internal barriers. Indeed, while participants identified several external barriers to career change, their narratives spoke to the greater importance of internal barriers in maintaining their experience of career paralysis. This discrepancy in weight placed on external versus
internal barriers is an interesting finding and prompts additional questions. For example, if an individual feels stuck in making a career change solely due to external barriers, can they be said to experiencing career paralysis? Are internal barriers an essential component to the feeling of paralysis? Another question applies to the population, as of yet unknown, most likely to experience career paralysis. For example, this finding may suggest that those most likely to self-identify as experiencing career paralysis are less likely to be confronting several external barriers. A final question prompted by this finding is whether potential participants who were struggling with more and stronger external barriers to change self-selected out of the study (i.e., did not reach out to participate) possibly because of the very external barriers getting in the way of career change. In any case, this finding suggests the need for additional exploration of the role of external barriers in career paralysis. One possible method for further exploring this difference in weighting between internal and external barriers would be to employ survey methods to gather data on the experience of career paralysis from a larger sample. Now that the experience of career paralysis is better defined, survey methods are more feasible as there is additional clarity around the kind of questions to be posed. In addition, surveys place fewer time and effort demands on the participant and thus it may be easier to gather data from individuals confronting several external barriers.

**Internal barriers.** In addition to external barriers to career change, participants’ identified important internal barriers to change. As noted above, these internal barriers had more emotional poignancy for participants and seemingly played a greater role in their sense of stuckness and paralysis.
Uncertainty around other possible career paths. An important finding of the current study was the role that uncertainty of career choice played in maintaining participants’ experience of career paralysis. Although participants acknowledged a desire for career change and dissatisfaction with current career, they reported difficulty articulating the kind or nature of career they would rather pursue. For a subset of participants, this uncertainty was compounded by difficulty choosing among many possible career paths.

This finding can be further understood through several existing career development theories, both traditional and emerging. For example, this finding can be conceptualized within Holland’s (1966, 1997) theory of types. Participant uncertainty can be likened to having an undifferentiated type, defined as either possessing limited self-understanding in terms of preferences or as having many skills and interests that span across all five types. Both scenarios, limited knowledge of self and interests or a broad range of interests spanning types, complicate decision-making regarding other possible careers as there is no clear choice or path to follow.

This finding may also suggest a role for consistency, a related concept in Holland’s theory. Consistency refers to the similarity or dissimilarity of types—for example, Social and Artistic types have more in common than Social and Realistic types. In the case of career paralysis and uncertainty around other possible career choices, there may be an element of an individual having diverse and inconsistent interests, which again complicates decision-making as it may entail a kind of battle of values or interests. Someone who is of an inconsistent type (e.g., both strongly social and realistic) may find it difficult to find a career that fulfills both those aspects of her personality.
Uncertainty around other possible careers can also be conceptualized within Savickas’ Career Construction Theory (1997, 2002; Savickas et al., 2009). This theory rests on the assumption that people create their own career, through imbuing work, social relationships, and other career-related events with meaning and incorporating them into a personal life narrative. Participants in the current study had difficulty articulating what they may find meaningful and were unsure on where to find or pursue meaning. Some of them were stuck confronting many possible career choices and many possible selves, and were overwhelmed by the responsibility to make a choice between options. They appeared to be keenly aware that they could construct their personal and career narrative but were not clear how to do so. Their experience also brings to mind more narrative and holistic frameworks of career such as Cochran’s narrative approach (1997) and Miller-Tiedeman’s Lifecareer Theory (1988, 1997). Framed from these perspectives, participants saw their career story as stalled and without direction, they had lost the central theme to their life narrative and weren’t sure which path would lead them to the next chapter.

The sub-theme within this finding of Difficulty Choosing Among Many Possible Options is consistent with the existential concept of Responsibility for Choice. In Cohen’s (2003) four-stage existential career decision-making model we encounter this Responsibility in the first stage: We become aware of our responsibility for vocational choice and development or we avoid this responsibility. During the second stage, Evaluation, individuals search for meaning and evaluate what conditions are needed to be their authentic selves. A subset of participants in our study appeared to be locked in a battle between these two stages. They were aware of needing to make a choice, but were
unsure how to make such a choice. It is possible that they were avoiding their responsibility for choice to an important degree, however, this avoidance was fuelled by difficulty evaluating what conditions they needed for their own authenticity.

**Low self-efficacy.** Career decision-making and career change requires certain skills, motivation, and a readiness and confidence for change. A second internal barrier to change identified in this study was Low Self-Efficacy, particularly in relation to initiating or succeeding in career change. This finding is consistent with the Social Cognitive Career Theory concept of self-efficacy, which Bandura defines as “people’s judgements of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances” (1986, p. 391). Participants in this study spoke of a lack of confidence, fears about adaptability, and a lack of knowledge—factors that appeared to impede both their motivation and their efforts for change.

This theme is also consistent with Savickas’ notion of adaptability (Savickas et al., 2009), which includes the concepts of concern, control, curiosity, and confidence and which represent an individual’s readiness to cope with work demands and changes. Participants in the current study were particularly lacking in their sense of control and their sense of confidence with regards to initiating a career change. In contrast, they spoke with more certainty regarding their sense of concern and curiosity. They reported low self-efficacy with regards to change, in spite of a desire (concern and curiosity) for change. As will be explored more in the following section on inertia, however, one could argue that their level of concern and curiosity wavered in relation to Security and Comfort factors.
**Inertia.** Another finding of this study was the finding of the meta-theme, Inertia, and the sub-themes of Security as a Barrier, Comfort Factors, and Unproductive Action Attempts. This finding is more difficult to map onto existing career development, decision-making, and job change theories and as such, may represent a uniquely significant contribution to the literature. Perhaps the simplest way of conceptualizing this result within the existing available literature is as a block or stoppage within developmental and/or stage/cycle models of career development or change. For example, if we were to map these findings on to Super’s life-span, life-space theory (1953, 1990), they could be inserted as an adjunct to the Establishment and Maintenance phases of career development wherein as people become more entrenched in these phases, the likelihood of voluntarily recycling through to an earlier change, as is often required with career change, significantly decreases. These phases of career development provide many tangible benefits such as job security, financial security, and comfort and familiarity that are difficult to risk for the uncertain reward of career change. Security and comfort factors combine to decrease levels of concern and curiosity, and of motivation for change, and may result in half-hearted and inefficient action attempts towards change that are unproductive.

**Dimensions of Experiencing**

Findings from the current study indicate that career paralysis is experienced across various dimensions of experiencing. At the core of the experience, the desire to make a career change and the knowledge of an underlying truth that change is the right answer conflicts with very real barriers to change and creates a deep sense of stuckness.
This underlying experiential conflict is experienced in many ways across emotional, cognitive, behavioural, and social/interpersonal dimensions. This study’s finding of emotional consequences, including irritability and depressed mood, is consistent with previous research demonstrating that career indecision is associated with various forms of psychological distress (Felsman & Blustein, 1999; Multon et al., 2001; Saunders et al., 2000). Participants in this study were also engaged in an ongoing negotiation with the self, others, and society about the meaning of career in their lives. These cognitive negotiations are seemingly natural consequences of being a worker in a rapidly changing contemporary world of work (Sullivan & Baruch, 2009; Trevor-Roberts, 2006), where the conceptualization of career is more dynamic and fluid than ever before (Briscoe et al., 2006; Meijers, 1998; Savicakas et al., 2009). Participants in this study were participating in an ongoing fundamental shift in society’s attitudes toward career, where subjective career values, such as personal fulfillment and sense of purpose, are beginning to out-weigh more traditional career values such as salary or prestige (Dik et al., 2009; Hall, 2004; Lips-Wiersma, & Morris, 2011; Power, 2009). This study also found behavioural consequences of this conflict, wherein participants spoke of detaching and distancing themselves from their work, and of making use of various coping strategies to endure their dissatisfaction and stuckness. These behavioural consequences are consistent with various attitudinal models of turnover (Griffeth et al., 2000; Hom & Griffeth 1991; Mobley, 1977; Farrell & Rusbult, 1981) wherein low levels of job satisfaction proceed to emotional and cognitive withdrawal from work and thoughts about leaving. Finally, the present study found that participants had to navigate various social
expectations and norms around career, dealing with non-understanding, and having to make decisions regarding in whom to confide regarding their career paralysis experience.

**Implications for Theory**

The findings and themes of the current study have several important implications for theory. They further elucidate and build on existing theories and provide information regarding where in the models, in the pathways proposed, do people get stuck and what this experience is like. This section reviews the most significant implications for theory of the present study, and then contributes to theory building by presenting the new Emergent Model of Career Paralysis.

**Implications of the Desire for More Meaning**

The present study’s finding of the importance of meaning in participants’ experiences of work and career paralysis and its role in fuelling a desire for career change contributes to the job and career change literature. This finding builds on existing models, which have outlined the importance of job dissatisfaction (Farrell & Rusbult, 1981; Griffeth et al., 2000; Hom & Griffeth 1991; Mobley, 1977; Rhodes & Doering, 1983) as an antecedent to job and career change by adding a striving-oriented antecedent. In other words, the desire for job or career change is not fuelled solely by wanting to escape variables of job dissatisfaction but also through a positive striving for more meaningful work. This finding adds further context and provides a deeper understanding of the development of a desire for career change and points towards moving forward from a primarily deficit model towards a model that provides substantial weight to meaning-oriented growth as a driving force behind desire for career change.
This finding may also have implications for the *honeymoon-hangover* effect in job change. Boswell et al. (2005) studied job satisfaction and voluntary job change over five years among high-level managers. Among job changers, their results revealed a distinct pattern: low job satisfaction preceded voluntary job change, job satisfaction increased temporarily following job change (*honeymoon effect*), and job satisfaction then declined and tapered off some time after the job change (*hangover effect*). One existing explanation for this effect is the notion of a dispositional or personality-related *set point* for well-being (Diener & Diener, 1996; Judge et al., 2002). Although job satisfaction after job change may initially increase due to such factors as excitement for something new, new colleagues and managers, new work environment, possibly higher salary, etc… the effects of these changes eventually wear off and employees begin to realize the reality of their new workplace and feel the effects of the more mundane day-to-day tasks of the new job. At this point, dispositional factors, such as positive or negative affectivity, kick in and affect levels of job satisfaction. Our findings support an alternative (although not necessarily independent) explanation: it is possible that job change addresses the immediate job dissatisfaction variables, but not the additional contributing factor of desire for more meaning. In other words, could a career change to something more meaningful buffer against the honeymoon-hangover effect?

**Implications of Barriers to Change**

Research has found that, in contrast to *intention* for career change, job dissatisfaction is not a significant predictor of *actual* career change (Breeden, 1993; Carless & Arnupp, 2011). Moreover, in the related job change literature, the relationship between intention to change jobs and actual job change behaviour is modest at best
(Griffeth et al., 2000). These findings speak to the need to explore the variables that inhibit, discourage, or otherwise prevent a job or career change. A contribution of the present study was that it explored just such factors, and began to account for some of the gap between intention and desire to change jobs or career and actual behaviour. This study identified several important barriers to change with important implications for theory.

Existing models of chronic career indecision (Brown et al., 2012; Gati et al., 2012) were developed largely through research on college students and young adults. Two of the internal barriers findings of the current study, Uncertainty Around Other Possible Career Paths and Low Self-Efficacy, map, to some degree, on to these models and provide preliminary support for the use of these models in adult career decision-making. Our findings suggest that researchers and clinicians may begin using these existing models of career indecision to understand the gap between intention or desire for job change and actual job change with an adult population.

The four factor model of career indecision (Brown et al., 2012) proposes the following four factors influencing career indecision: 1) Neuroticism/Negative Affectivity, 2) Choice/Commitment Anxiety, 3) Lack of Readiness and 4) Interpersonal Conflicts. The finding from this study of uncertainty around career paths appears to be consistent with the first two factors of this model. Participants were uncertain about possible career paths, experienced anxiety around how to make a choice, and were reluctant to take action when the outcome is uncertain or the path is not clear. Moreover, a subset of participants experienced difficulty choosing among many possible options. These participants experienced anxiety about committing to a particular path.
Secondly, there appears to be consistency between this study’s finding on the importance of low self-efficacy when it comes to career change and the four-factor model’s Lack of Readiness factor. Consistent with the definition of this factor, participants in this study described a lack of goal-directedness or planfulness largely fuelled by a lack of confidence and self-efficacy around decision-making and action-taking toward career change. The one factor in this model that was not, to some degree, supported in our study of career paralysis was Interpersonal Conflicts. While some participants spoke of difficulty navigating social situations and experiencing non-understanding regarding their career paralysis experience, interpersonal conflicts were not identified as primary barriers to enacting desired career change. Indeed, several participants spoke about how significant others and family members were supportive of their desire for career change. In this study at least, direct outwardly conflict with other stakeholders as a factor in career indecision was not supported. It is important to note, however, that this finding may be a result of the current study’s particular sample of participants. For example, the majority of this study’s participants were from middle to middle-upper class upbringings, were Caucasian, were not first-generation Canadians, and had parents with relatively high education. Such demographics may have contributed to relatively low amounts of inter-generational or inter-cultural conflict between family members, and to relatively low socioeconomic stress on the family unit, all factors whose presence could be seen as likely to fuel disagreement over career choices.

The Emotional and Personality-related Career decision-making difficulties (EPCD) model (Gati et al., 2012; Saka & Gati, 2007; Saka, Gati, & Kelly, 2008;) includes the following three main clusters at play: 1) Pessimistic Views, 2) Anxiety, and
3) Self-Concept and Identity. The uncertainty finding of this study correlates with their cluster of Self-Concept and Identity—particularly with regards to uncrystallized identity and limited knowledge of what one wants—with some elements of the Anxity cluster, particularly uncertainty about choosing and anxiety around committing to a choice. The low self-efficacy finding of this study correlates primarily with Pessimistic Views, a cluster that focuses on how pessimistic cognitions and schemas about the world of work, the decision-making process, and the level of control one has on outcomes affects career decision-making and action.

Chronic career indecision, in contrast to developmental indecision which can be resolved with additional information and readiness, has been described as a relatively permanent inability to make a career choice because of other important factors such as difficulty forming a coherent self-concept to guide career decision-making, personality characteristics which impede decision-making or action-taking more generally, or as a result of specific social and situational factors (McInnes & Chen, 2011). Elements of career paralysis, as described through the narratives of participants in this study, appear to be largely consistent with this definition, specifically the difficulties with self-concept (Uncertainty around other possible career paths) and personality characteristics (low self-efficacy), which impede career change. These consistencies were reviewed above in reference to specific models of career indecision. A contribution of this study, which builds on these existing models of career indecision, is the finding around the cycle of inertia and the impact of comfort factors and security as a barrier on career decision-making. They point to another layer of variables that contribute to indecision—variables that, rather than making it difficult to make or act on a decision, make it easier to NOT
make a decision. In other words, these variables/factors increase the value of the default/no-decision position. This finding suggests that models of adult career indecision, in particular reference to the experience of career paralysis, should include such inertia variables, in addition to indecision variables, as a central component in their theorizing.

One way that this finding builds on existing career development literature is by adding new barriers to various stages within cycle of change models. For example, the adaptation of Claes Janssen’s “The Four Roomed Apartment Model of Change” to career change (Hind, 2005) posits that change is a cyclical process involving different frames of minds and emotional states (the four different rooms) – that one must pass through on the way to career change: the “Contentment” room, the “Denial” room, the “Confusion” room, and the “Renewal Room.” The Confusion room also includes two annexes: the “Paralysis Pit” and the “Revolving Reality Door.” The various findings of the current study of internal barriers to career change are fairly consistent with the descriptions of the “Confusion” room and its two annexes. What the inertia theme, and the sub-themes of Security as Barrier and Comfort Factors, may add is that in the Confusion room, there are snacks, a TV, and a couch. People in the confusion room are comfortable and well looked after, and it is difficult to build motivation to step out of that comfort zone.

Another stage model is Butler’s (2007) cycle of impasse and vision through which people must progress on their way through change. As reviewed earlier in the literature review, this cycle consists of six stages: 1) Crisis, 2) Impasse and self-doubt, 3) Letting go, 4) Shifting, 5) Seeing anew and 6) Taking action. The cycle begins when someone enters a stage of psychological crisis, brought upon by a sudden or gradual deepening of unhappiness or unfulfillment. The crisis then deepens in stage two and people realize that
they cannot continue the way they are; they feel confused, frustrated, and painfully aware that their current state of being-in-the-world is no longer working. In phase three, all of someone’s traditional coping tools and strategies have failed and, having hit a subjective sense of rock bottom, they feel themselves letting go of old ways and opening up to new ways of coping and living. In phase four, now open to new ways of being and open to new information, people begin to see things in a different light. People find themselves coming in to contact with a deeper, less logical part of themselves and begin to sense the seed of new inspiration from within. In phase five, people have begun to emerge from the crisis, stronger, and more in touch with who they really are. They take stock of their life and their choices, and notice a perceptible shift in self-identity and self-awareness. In stage six, people channel their new self-awareness into concrete action for change. The current study’s findings shed an interesting perspective on this model. The participants were deeply aware of a need for change, but this need appeared to fluctuate in acuteness and in conscious awareness. Participants did not appear to have yet hit “rock bottom” even though, at times, they were deeply upset about their situation. The findings around inertia, security, and comfort factors speak to factors that may serve, through mitigating the despair of one’s subjective experience, to slow the process of hitting “rock bottom.” This process is not easily interpreted. For example, one could argue that these inertia factors hold us back from making decisions we know deep down we need to make by preventing us from moving through the cycle of impasse and vision—this interpretation holds inertia factors as getting in the way of having to face our existential reality. On the other hand, these factors could point to a legitimate battle of values that confronts individuals experiencing career paralysis. From such a perspective, inertia factors are
barriers to change not through an inherent negative mechanism, but through being imbued with their own value that is in conflict with the values behind the desire for career change.

**Implications of Dimensions of Experiencing**

This study’s finding that career paralysis is felt through many dimensions of experiencing supports and builds on various emerging theories of career development that define and conceptualize career as within, and not separate from, the broader life-space. Participants experienced the defining conflict of an underlying truth versus a deep sense of stuckness throughout their being and the conflict had implications for various areas of their experiencing. This finding supports narrative and holistic definitions of career, given that a sense of being dissatisfied and stuck in career reverberated across their life-space.

**Understanding Career Paralysis: A Two-Part Emergent Model**

In addition to connecting with existing theories of career development, and contributing to and building on existing models of job and career change and models of career indecision, findings from the present research study provide groundwork on which to build a preliminary model of the career paralysis experience itself. The findings of the current study gave rise to the two-part Emergent Model of Career Paralysis (Figure 1). This preliminary model of the experience will be helpful in guiding future research in the area by providing a structure or anchoring point for future research questions. In addition, theoretical models can facilitate understanding of complex phenomena. Along this vein, for example, professional helpers will be able to use this model as a guide in their work
with clients, as a way of mapping out the possibilities of what might be contributing to an individual’s career paralysis and focusing in on the most relevant barriers.

The two-part Emergent Model of Career Paralysis describes both the maintenance of career paralysis through an examination of the relationships between barriers to career change, and describes the various dimensions of being within the career paralysis experience as related by participants. Taken together, these sub-models provide a useful preliminary structure in which to understand career paralysis, pointing to areas for direct intervention to break the maintenance cycle alongside outlining dimensions of experiencing to explore and unpack to help individuals make sense of their experience and free up psychological energy to work towards change.
Figure 1. Emergent Model of Career Paralysis
Maintenance of Career Paralysis

The Maintenance sub-model begins with the factors, A Desire for More Meaning, and Job Dissatisfaction, contributing to an individual’s Desire for Career Change. Although not yet in career paralysis, these factors initiate the process whereby individuals begin to examine and ask questions about their current career circumstances. It is thought that these two factors can both independently and additively contribute to the desire to change careers.

For individuals with career paralysis, their desire for career change is met with important barriers that impede their progress toward career change. These barriers include both external and internal factors. The individual factors that make up both the external and internal barriers are represented under the dotted brackets in Figure 1. External barriers arise out of the economic, environmental, cultural, and social context of the individual. For example, the individual could want to make a career change during an economic recession, or into a new field that is already saturated. In other words, there may be a lack of available positions in the field into which they would like to make a career change. Additional external barriers confronted by participants in the present study included geographical constraints, and skill or educational requirements for change (that were difficult to navigate).

Interestingly, despite the importance of external barriers and other determining contexts, participants in the current study described internal barriers to be just as, if not substantially more limiting to their efforts toward career change. The model proposes two primary internal barriers to change, which interact with an inertia cycle. For some individuals, Uncertainty Around Other Possible Career Paths will be the primary internal
barrier. For these individuals, while they know they aren’t satisfied in their current careers, they have difficulty articulating or recognizing what other career they may want to pursue. This barrier can include difficulty choosing among many possible alternative careers. For this group, in response to the question, “What would you rather be doing?” their answer will be something close to “I don’t know.”

For a second group of individuals, the primary internal barrier to change will be Low Self Efficacy when it comes to making a career change. These individuals have a fairly good idea of what they would rather be doing, but are held back by a lack of confidence or self-efficacy in their capacity to make a successful change. They doubt their ability to navigate, initiate, or succeed in career change. These doubts may include, for example, a lack of adaptability, or a lack of business know-how for would-be entrepreneurs.

These two primary internal barriers to change also interact with an inertia cycle, which is in itself an important barrier to change. The bolded arrows in the sub-model represent the relationship between the elements of the inertia cycle, and the relationship between the inertia cycle and the primary internal barriers. The Oxford English Dictionary (2015) defines inertia as “a tendency to do nothing or to remain unchanged.” Similarly, the Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2015) defines inertia as the “lack of movement or activity especially when movement or activity is wanted or needed” and as “a feeling of not having the energy or desire that is needed to move, change, etc.” Two factors, Security as a Barrier and Comfort Factors, contribute to inertia or to resistance to making a change. Comfort Factors, such as a desirable salary, commute, easy and familiar work, etc…undermine an individual’s motivation to take action toward career
change because life can be seen as “good enough.” Is making a change really worth the effort? Security as a Barrier similarly undermines motivation for change. An individual’s present job security allows them to reliably predict and thus plan for their future, and be certain of their financial situation. Their present situation is familiar, known, and secure. The consequences or outcome of a change are unpredictable and thus frightening. Both of these factors contribute to inertia and the default to remain unchanged. These two factors then interact in a feedback loop with Unproductive Action Attempts. When individuals do try to make a change, because of the resistance and inertia caused by these factors, individuals may not try hard enough or for long enough, or in an effective way (they don’t use enough force/effort to overcome the inertia). These unproductive action attempts contribute to demoralization and reinforce the value of existing comfort and security factors.

The primary barriers to change reviewed earlier, Uncertainty Around Other Possible Career Paths and Low Self-Efficacy, also indirectly influence and contribute to the inertia cycle through their influence on Unproductive Action Attempts. As a result of these primary internal barriers, when individuals do make efforts or take action toward career change (which can be as preliminary as researching alternative career paths), they may do so half-heartedly, with trepidation, inefficiently, or they may be unable to sustain motivation for change efforts. These unproductive or unsuccessful action attempts then reinforce the primary internal barriers—“I really DON’T know what I’m doing” or “See, I’ll never be able to find the right career.”

It should be noted that the maintenance sub-model is, by nature of the phenomenon of inquiry, a model of stuckness. It does not generalize to the experience of
all those who consider and/or make a career change, but aims to provide a guide for those who feel particularly stuck in doing so. Further research may build on this model to delineate effective ways of breaking the cycle and moving through the career paralysis experience.

**Dimensions of Career Paralysis Experiencing**

The Experiencing sub-model presents a way to describe and understand the various ways in which individuals experience career paralysis. This model is shown on the same page in Figure 1 and is connected to the Maintenance sub-model by a dotted bracket in order to represent that the experience is the result of a desire for career change that is in conflict with barriers. In other words, the Experiencing sub-model occurs as a result of being stuck in the Maintenance sub-model. The Experiencing sub-model presents five dimensions or layers of experiencing. The presenting concern of individuals experiencing career paralysis is a desire for career change. This desire however has thus far been, or has been perceived to be, unachievable. At the core of the career paralysis experience, therefore, at the experiential level of experiencing, is the defining conflict between a Deep Sense of Stuckness and an Underlying Truth that change is the right thing. This underlying and deeply felt conflict is also experienced in more outwardly visible and observable ways as you move outward through the various dimensions of experiencing. As indicated in the model, moving out from experiential experiencing, individuals experience the underlying conflict in the emotional dimension. They experience negative emotional consequences, including increasing irritability and depressed mood, as they grapple with the defining conflict of career paralysis. At the next level, the realm of cognitive experiencing, individuals struggle with questions and
negotiations around the meaning of career. At times, there may be a kind of cognitive ambivalence or an active working through of personal expectations and beliefs about career. Next, individuals experience the underlying conflict at the behavioural level. They may react to their dissatisfaction and feeling of stuckness through detaching or distancing themselves from their current work situation or through implementing various behavioural coping strategies. Finally, the experience of career paralysis is felt in the social and interpersonal domain. Individuals may find themselves confronted with various social and interpersonal challenges as they attempt to navigate differing social expectations around career, make decisions about who to confide in, and learn to deal with non-understanding from various social supports.

As indicated in the model, the career paralysis experience involves a deep underlying, defining, and fundamental *experiential* conflict that is felt in various dimensions or domains of experiencing. This conflict is experienced in emotional, cognitive, behavioural, and social and interpersonal domains. The model thus demonstrates that career paralysis affects individuals at multiple levels of experiencing, contributing to psychological conflict and eroding overall well-being.

**Implications for Practice**

The current study aimed to advance our understanding of an increasingly common phenomenon, career paralysis, which until now, has been little understood. Moreover, it has provided us with a preliminary conceptual model on which to anchor our understanding, and which provides guidance on where to focus our intervention efforts. As such, the results of the current study, including the new Emergent Model of Career Paralysis may have useful implications for practice.
Firstly, findings from the current study suggest a role for thorough initial assessment of individuals presenting with career paralysis. As is clear from the findings, career paralysis can affect individuals in multiple dimensions of experiencing and can be maintained via several possible barriers both individually and in relation to each other. A thorough assessment conducted by professional helpers therefore could both identify the dimensions of experiencing that are being most affected for any specific individual and could identify the specific barriers at play in his or her experience. While the experience of any one individual will be unique, findings of the current study suggest that career paralysis is best interpreted as a multi-layered, multi-dimensional experience affecting the whole life-space.

This new understanding of the pervasiveness of career paralysis suggests a role for holistic or integrative therapy approaches in working through the experience. Individuals experience career paralysis in many areas of their life. As such, the findings from this study suggest that following a thorough assessment, efforts are made to help individuals cope, mitigate, or resolve the effects of career paralysis across the life-space. These efforts should move beyond more obvious symptoms of distress such as irritability or depressed mood, and also address distress and tension in cognitive, behavioural, and social/interpersonal realms.

The new Emergent Model of Career Paralysis also has implications to guide the development of more specific intervention and treatment efforts. Assistance in problem-solving around external barriers is of course warranted, however findings point to the arguably more important need to intervene around specific internal barriers. If individuals are identified as confronting a primary barrier of uncertainty around other possible career
paths, intervention can focus on self-exploration, clarification of interests and values, increasing self-understanding, and building tolerance of uncertainty in making difficult decisions. Professional helpers can pull from several existing models of career development to guide their work. For example, they may draw on traditional trait and factor career development theories (e.g., Holland, 1966, 1997; Myers et al., 1998) to help assess and identity an individual’s interests, strengths, and “type”, thus helping individuals acquire valuable self-knowledge. The present study’s findings suggest, however, that more than just self-knowledge of interests and strengths is required—individuals require an understanding of what is meaningful to them, what they place value in, and the courage to pursue such values in spite of uncertainty and in the face of many possible choices. To address these deeper concerns, professional helpers may draw on more emerging theories of career development, such as Savickas’ career construction theory (1997, 2002) and existential theories (Cohen, 2003; Lips-Wiersma, 2002) in guiding clients in finding out what matters to them. As an adjunct to meaning-oriented work, professional helpers may assess their client’s level of tolerance for uncertainty—after all, not everyone may have a well-defined interest or career option to pursue, even after significant personal reflection. Therapeutic work around exposure to, and tolerance of, uncertainty, using for example, exposure hierarchies from cognitive-behavioural therapy (e.g., Leahy, Holland, & McGinn, 2012) or mindfulness techniques from acceptance and commitment therapy (e.g., Harris, 2009), may be helpful in this regard.

If individuals are identified as confronting a primary barrier of low self-efficacy, intervention can focus on building efficacy, through building skills, working with unhelpful thoughts or assumptions, and increasing readiness for change. The developers
of SCCT have suggested several counselling strategies to target career difficulties arising out of efficacy barriers (Lent et al., 2002). For example, professional helpers can help clients to develop new positive performance experiences and expectations, which will assist in building confidence and self-efficacy. They may also help clients to re-analyze past career or life experiences to determine whether low self-efficacy that arose from these experiences can be re-framed in more positive and helpful ways. Intervention in these cases may also involve more structured skill-building and concrete planning and strategizing around potential barriers.

In the author’s view, perhaps the most significant implication of this study in terms of intervention grows out of the finding on the seemingly central role of inertia factors in maintaining career paralysis in addition to and across other barriers to change (such as uncertainty around other options and low career change self-efficacy). This finding suggests that building and sustaining motivation for change in the face of these factors is likely a key area for targeted intervention. In some ways, assessing variables like job security and comfort factors with the intent of exploring how they contribute to someone’s sense of career paralysis is counter-intuitive—after all, in theory, these represent positives aspects of one’s career. This study suggests, however, that deconstructing with clients how these seeming benefits and advantages of their current job or career circumstances undermine the long-term benefits of change will be an important piece of treatment. By focusing on security and comfort factors, individuals can relieve their anxiety, at least temporarily, regarding making a career change. Such factors can also help one to rationalize away the desire or need for a change. The short-term effects of this rationalization are reduced anxiety through legitimization of the status
The long-term effects of these factors, however, at least for those experiencing career paralysis and who are aware of an underlying truth that change is necessary, are a potentially unnecessary delay of an important shift in one’s life and existence, denying one’s self the opportunity for more meaningful career and life experiences, and a continuation of angst that appears to slowly erode well-being across various dimensions of experiencing. In working with these factors, professional helpers could draw from techniques such as Motivational Interviewing (MI; Miller & Rollnick, 2002), which were specifically designed to work with ambivalence and increase motivation for change. Techniques from MI could also help clients clearly identify and articulate the values provided by comfort and security factors, and in so doing, can raise their conscious awareness of possible value conflicts. With increased awareness, clients can both make more conscious, deliberate, and intentional decisions around what values they want to pursue and can brainstorm other ways of meeting values that don’t impede a desired career change. Techniques from acceptance and commitment therapy (Harris, 2009) may again be of use here, specifically its focus on valued-action, or, working towards one’s values, in spite of anxiety and discomfort.

**Limitations of the Study**

One of the limitations of this study was the breadth of the questions asked during interviews with participants. This limitation was in some ways necessitated by the nature of the phenomenon of inquiry in that it was little understood prior to this study and it was unclear apriori what aspects of an individual’s career experience and development would be most relevant. As a result of the broad scope of the interview protocol, however, large quantities of information were obtained about many areas of life and career development,
which may have complicated the overall picture of career paralysis. Some may argue, for example, that an interview stronger in central focus could have provided a clearer picture and understanding. As will be discussed in the following section, this limitation could be addressed in future research.

Another limitation of this study was the limited diversity amongst participants, particularly with regards to family status and ethnocultural background. Ten of the thirteen participants whose narratives were included in the final analysis self-identified as Caucasian. Moreover, the majority of participants (10) did not have children and of the remaining three, two had only one child and the third was pregnant with her first child. This demographic result, for example, suggests the possibility that potential participants, specifically individuals with more than one child, self-selected out of the study due to time, scheduling, or child-care constraints. Such participants may encounter even more external barriers when it comes to career change (e.g., concern around moving children to a different school, increased impact of work-life conflict on decision-making) that were not captured in this study and were therefore not included in the emergent model.

A third limitation arose out of the need to create apriori language around the experience of career paralysis in order to advertise the study. Such language, used to recruit participants through flyers, may have coloured their perception or have unintentionally led them to certain reflections or ways of understanding their experience.

A fourth limitation of the study was the necessarily subjective nature of the qualitative design and data analysis. The data were coded by the researcher and although the analysis and codes were discussed with and reviewed by her supervisor, there was not a second coder involved in the data analysis. As such, there was no opportunity to
confirm inter-rater reliability for initial coding or emergent themes. The researcher did her best to mitigate the risks inherent with these procedures through examining and acknowledging her biases at the beginning of the research project, by maintaining a journal of her reactions and process throughout the study, and by discussing the findings with her supervisor.

**Directions for Future Research**

The limitations of this study suggest possible avenues for future research. For example, future research could reproduce the current study with a more focused lens of exploration, thus fleshing out details of the emergent model. While this study was necessarily exploratory, a more focused examination of identified barriers to change could increase the sophistication and depth of the model. In further elucidating barriers to change, future studies could explore the nature of the relationship, for example, between uncertainty around other possible career paths and low self-efficacy when it comes to making a career change. A possible research question for such a study is, “Are these barriers to change really separate from each other as was found in the present study, or are they contiguous steps in a natural process towards change?” In other words, is the barrier of low self-efficacy confronted after having worked through an earlier barrier of uncertainty around possible career paths, or are they truly unrelated with different individuals facing different primary barriers to career change? Another possible relationship between barriers to explore is whether low self-efficacy may cause an individual to prematurely foreclose on a career option that they would have found deeply satisfying and meaningful—foreclosing on a good option may then contribute to uncertainty around other possible career paths.
Future qualitative studies to refine the model could also make a concerted effort to interview participants with more children and from a broader range of professional and ethnoculture backgrounds. These studies could test the fit of the new Emergent Model of Career Paralysis with individuals of differing demographics and qualities. Such additional research would be particularly useful for professional helpers in Canada who are likely to work with individuals from many diverse backgrounds.

Another avenue for future research is investigating the process of coming through career paralysis by interviewing individuals who have done just that. Over-laying findings from such a study onto the findings of the current study and the Emergent Model of Career Paralysis could pinpoint particular strengths and strategies to harness for intervention, connecting them to identified barriers. There was some limited suggestion in participant narratives from this study, for example, of a gradual progression of career paralysis and an *opening up* at later stages evidenced by a shift in thinking, a maturing of reflections, and a gradually increasing readiness for change. While participants in the current study all felt stuck, there was some indication that some were slightly less stuck now than earlier in their lives and slightly less stuck than some others in the study. If some individuals come through career paralysis eventually on their own, a future study could explore this process to capitalize on factors that eventually contribute to change. An ideal outcome of such a study would be a model that included the process of moving through career paralysis, whether with self- or professional- helping, in addition to modelling just of the moment of stuckness.

Now that the Emergent Model of Career Paralysis has identified important barriers to change, future research could also explore factors that make one likely to
experience such barriers, and thus make one vulnerable to career paralysis. For example, it seems likely that individuals with higher levels of certain personality traits, such as neuroticism, may be more likely to struggle with uncertainty around possible career paths. There could also be a role for unintentional school or career decision-making (e.g., studying biology because your father is a biologist, pursuing your MA degree because you don’t know what else to do) in later developing career paralysis. For example, perhaps individuals who never fully resolved or who foreclosed prematurely on Super’s Exploration phase of career development are at risk for career paralysis later in life.

A final suggested avenue for future research is a quantitative study collecting concrete data on the prevalence of career paralysis. Now that a preliminary model has been developed from which to develop possible questions, survey methods could be employed with various populations to gain data on both how many people currently identify as experiencing career paralysis, and on how many people identify as having now resolved an earlier experience of career paralysis. In addition, and as mentioned earlier, survey methods could also be employed to gather data from a wider variety of participants (for example, from individuals who may be confronting several external barriers). This would facilitate exploration of some emerging questions such as the reliability of this study’s findings of greater weight being given to internal versus external barriers in the experience of career paralysis.

**Conclusion**

Career paralysis appears to be an increasingly common phenomenon that is little understood. The current study explored the phenomenon from the inside out, allowing for necessary theory building to begin from within the experience itself. The findings from
the current study connected to existing research and helped to expand and refine existing theories and models relevant to the experience. In addition, it has provided the field with the new Emergent Model of Career Paralysis and has thus provided a preliminary structure on which to anchor and grow our understanding of an increasingly common and important phenomenon. It is believed that the findings of this study, in combination with the development of this model, contribute relevant and valuable information for theory and practice in the rapidly evolving world of career development. In conclusion, the present study serves as an essential preliminary step towards understanding the experience of career paralysis—in doing so it hopes to have validated the experience of those currently struggling with the phenomenon alongside having fostered interest in additional research and reflection on this important topic.
References


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http://www.slideshare.net/robarcher/career-paralysis-pt-1-five-reasons-why-our-brains-get-stuck-making-career-decisions-

http://www.thecareerpsychologist.com


Appendix A: Recruitment Advertisement

(On OISE/UT Letterhead)

Do you feel stuck in career? Have you been meaning to make a change for some time but can’t quite seem to make it happen?

Research participants wanted for a study of CAREER PARALYSIS

I am a PhD student in Clinical & Counselling Psychology at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto (OISE/UT). I am interested in exploring the experience of career paralysis. Career paralysis is a new term adopted by the researcher to denote an experience of:

• Feeling stuck, bored, unhappy, or unfulfilled at work and in career,

• Looking to make a career change toward something more meaningful, engaging, personal, BUT,

• For any of several reasons, cannot seem to make a decision regarding career change or take action toward career change

• Feeling stuck or paralyzed when it comes to career

I am interviewing adults who are willing to talk about their experience of career paralysis.

If you:

• Are presently experiencing career paralysis as described above
• Are between 25 and 40 years of age
• Have, at minimum, an undergraduate degree from a recognized college or university
• Are presently employed and have been with your current employer for a minimum of 1 year
• Must not be currently dealing with a significant chronic or acute physical health ailment
• Are willing to talk about your experience of career paralysis and how it affects you
• Are willing to spend approximately 1-2 hours of your time participating in a one-to-one audio-recorded interview
• Would like more information on this study

Please contact:
Taylor McInnes, M.A.
Email: careerparalysis@gmail.com or Tel: 647-338-8051

Research Supervisor
Dr. Charles Chen
APHD Department at OISE/UT
Email: cp.chen@utoronto.ca

Telephone screenings will be scheduled with each participant prior to participation to review the process and to answer any questions.

Scheduling of interviews can be flexible to accommodate busy schedules.

Interviews will take place at OISE/UT - 252 Bloor Street West, Toronto. The nearest intersection is Bloor Street West and Bedford Road. The nearest TTC subway station is St. George Station.
Appendix B:

Telephone Screening Interview Form

Hello, my name is Taylor McInnes. You [left a message/emailed me] indicating that you might be interested in taking part in a research project I am conducting that focuses on peoples’ experiences of career paralysis.

Would it be okay to take a few minutes now to speak with you?

**Introduce Researcher and Purpose of the Study:**
I am a graduate student at the Ontario Institute for the Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. I am currently completing my doctoral degree in Clinical & Counselling Psychology. As part of my degree, I am conducting a research project that will explore between 10 and 20 peoples’ experiences of career paralysis. For the purposes of this project, career paralysis is defined as:

- Feeling stuck, bored, unhappy, or fulfilled at work and in career,
- Looking to make a career change toward something more meaningful, engaging, personal, BUT,
- For any of several reasons, cannot seem to make a decision regarding career change or take action toward career change
- Feeling stuck or paralyzed when it comes to career

**Limits of Confidentiality:**
In talking with me, it is important that you understand the limits of confidentiality: Any conversation that we have is confidential. However, there are several exceptions to this, including: if you indicate that you are a danger to yourself or to others; if you disclose details about apparent, suspected or potential current child abuse; or if you report that you were, or are being, sexually abused by a registered health care professional. If any of these exceptions arise, I would be required both legally and ethically to contact the appropriate authority whether that be emergency services, or children’s services. Do you have any questions about this?

**Address any questions.**

**Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria:**
I want to ensure that you noticed the criteria on the poster advertisement that may exclude some people from participating in this study. These criteria include:

1) Must have, at minimum, an undergraduate degree from a recognized college or university

2) Be between 25 and 40 years of age
3) Be presently employed and have been with your current employer for a minimum of 1 year

4) Must not be currently dealing with a significant chronic or acute physical health ailment

5) Are currently experiencing career paralysis.

**Nature and Procedure of Study:**
Now I would like to tell you about the nature of the study and what would be involved in your participation to help you decide whether you are interested in being involved.

If you were to take part in this research it would involve your participation in one 1-2 hour interview, depending on the time you require.

The interview sessions would be audio recorded and these recordings will be transcribed. All information that you would provide during the interviews is kept strictly confidential. However, some excerpts from the interview transcripts may be used in the publication and presentation of the research findings with your name and any other identifying information changed to ensure your confidentiality.

**Benefits and Potential Harm:**
You will be asked in the interview to explore your experience of career paralysis. Talking about your experience may be an enlightening experience for you. However, there is the chance that speaking about your experience may elicit some discomfort as a result of painful or upsetting experiences. I would not be available to provide you with psychotherapy services because this is strictly a research project, however, should the need arise I would assist you with connecting to an appropriate mental health professional or services.

**Compensation:**
To thank you for your participation in the study you will be provided with a $10 gift card to a coffee shop.

**Address Questions:**
Do you have any questions about the study or any information I have presented?

*Address any questions.*

After hearing about the research project do you think you might be interested in taking part?

*If the individual demonstrates interest in participating:*
Thank you. I’m very pleased that you’re interested in participating in the study. Would this be a good time to arrange a meeting time for the interview.

*Arrange interview and follow-up to confirm details.*

*If the individual is not interested in participating:*
Thank you for taking the time to speak with me.
Appendix C:
Consent Form

(On OISE/UT Letterhead)

CAREER PARALYSIS STUDY: INFORMATION/INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Dear Participant,

My name is Taylor McInnes. I am a graduate student, working with Dr. Charles Chen, in the Department of Applied Psychology and Human Development at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto (OISE/UT). I am currently completing my doctoral degree in Clinical & Counselling Psychology. As part of my degree, I am conducting a research project that will explore peoples’ experiences of career paralysis. For the purposes of this project, career paralysis is defined as:

. Feeling stuck, bored, unhappy, or unfulfilled at work and in career,

. Looking to make a career change toward something more meaningful, engaging, personal, BUT,

. For any of several reasons, cannot seem to make a decision regarding career change or take action toward career change

. Feeling stuck or paralyzed when it comes to career

I will be speaking to 10-20 adult individuals who are currently experiencing career paralysis. My interest is in understanding how people experience and define career paralysis, how they make sense of the experience, and the impact of career paralysis on their lives.

Please read the following information carefully and inform me if you have any questions or concerns before signing your consent.

Participating in the Research
As a volunteer participant, you will be asked to take part in an interview lasting 1-2 hours, depending on how much time you need. The interview will begin with you being asked to fill out a very brief form of demographic information. Following this, I will be speaking to you about your experience of career paralysis. Throughout the interview, you will be asked to speak candidly and openly about your experience. I will ask you about any further thoughts and views on this topic and will strive to ensure that I fully understood your experiences. I will be using a digital mp3 recorder to audio tape all the interviews. When I have completed analyzing the interviews, I will be glad to share with
you the results of the research.

Confidentiality
Confidentiality will be respected and your identity will be protected unless required by law. Any conversation that we have is confidential. However, there are several exceptions to this, including: if you indicate that you are a danger to yourself or to others; if you disclose details about apparent, suspected or potential current child abuse; or if you report that you were, or are being, sexually abused by a registered health care professional. If any of these exceptions arise, I would be required both legally and ethically to contact the appropriate authority whether that be emergency services, or children’s services.

As mentioned above, the interview will be tape recorded using a digital mp3 recorder and the recording will later be transcribed. The audio recording will be erased once it is transcribed. Your name or any other information that may identify you will not be used on the questionnaire, transcripts or final written materials; instead, codes will be used to mark information and pseudonyms will be used in the final write-up. All materials will be kept secure in a locked filing cabinet that only the principal investigator and the research supervisor will have access to; digital materials will be kept in a password protected and encrypted computer file. Materials will be kept for 5 years after the completion of this study and will then be destroyed. A copy of your interview transcript will be provided to you should you wish it. It is possible that information from this study will be used in future publications and presentations but confidentiality will be maintained. No names or identifying information will appear on any such materials.

Potential Benefits
Participating in this study is unlikely to provide any direct benefits to you. However, people often express an interest in having the opportunity to talk about their experiences. Some people have found that participating in interviews allows them a space and opportunity to talk freely and openly in a non-judgmental atmosphere about their experiences and in doing so are able to appreciate and understand their own experiences in a different light. Furthermore, as career paralysis is as of yet little understood, a greater understanding of the experience will be invaluable in guiding future research in the area, developing models of the experience, and in offering a first roadmap to counsellors, psychologists, therapists, and other professionals working with clients struggling with career paralysis.

Potential Harms, Discomforts or Inconveniences
There are no known harms associated with participation in this study. The only potential risk I have identified is that you may feel some discomfort when talking about your experiences. For example, it is possible that talking about your experience may bring up unexpected or unwanted emotions. Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Should you wish not to discuss a topic raised in the interview, you are free to decline to speak about it. You may refuse to answer any question on the questionnaire or in the interview. If you decide at any time during the interview that you do not wish to continue to participate, you are free to terminate the interview and/or withdraw your information. If you choose to withdraw, audio recordings of your interviews will be deleted, and
transcripts of your interview will be destroyed.

Throughout the interview, I will check in with you with regards to how you are feeling. Please let me know at any time should you feel any discomfort. Following the interview, if you continue to experience discomfort, please contact me so that we can discuss ways in which I can support you in connecting with a mental health professional. Should you decide to withdraw your permission to participate in the study, please let me know about your decision by telephoning me at the number below.

Should you wish to participate in this study, you are requested to sign 2 copies of this form. You will keep one copy of the signed form.

If you have any further questions or comments, please contact either myself, Dr. Charles Chen, or the Ethics Review Office.

Sincerely,

Taylor McInnes, M.A., OISE/UT
careerparalysis@gmail.com
647-338-8051

Dr. Charles Chen, Ph.D., OISE/UT
Email: cp.chen@utoronto.ca
Tel: 416-978-0718

Ethics Review Office
Email: ethics.review@utoronto.ca
Tel: 416-946-3273

Consent to Participate  I have read and understand this consent form and what is required of my participation in this research study. I understand that I have the right to withdraw from this study at any time without consequence, and that I may choose to skip any questions I feel uncomfortable answering.

I consent to my participation in this research study, and to being audio taped during the interview.

Name (printed): _________________________

Signature: ______________________________

Date: __________________________________
Appendix D:
Demographic Questionnaire

(On OISE/UT Letterhead)

Demographic Questionnaire:

Age: _______
Gender: M  F
Relationship Status: _____________________
Do you have any children? Y N
If yes, how many and what are their ages and gender?
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
What are your current living arrangements (e.g., alone, with family, with roommate(s))
____________________________________________________________________
What is your ethnocultural background?
____________________________________________________________________
Please list all degrees/diplomas completed, with year of completion.
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
What is your current employment and how long have you been in this position?
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
How long have you been working in this field?
____________________________________________________________________
Have you ever made a career change(s)? Y N
If yes, can you please list the year(s) and type(s) of career change?

_________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________

For approximately how long would you say you have presently been experiencing career paralysis?

_________________________________________________________

Do you have any disabilities/challenges?

_________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________

What is your current/past health status?

_________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________
Appendix E:
Interview Protocol

After introducing the study, why we are doing it, and thanking the participant for
joining the project, the following questions will be asked:

Demographic Questionnaire:

- Participant will be asked to complete the demographic questionnaire; researcher
  will review responses with participant

Participants’ Interest in Taking Part in the Study:

- We appreciate your interest in participating in this study. What made you
  interested in this study?

Interview Questions:

- Can you tell me about your experience of career paralysis?
  - How long have you been experiencing career paralysis? When/how did
    you recognize this?
  - How would you define “where you are stuck”?
  - Before hearing the term “career paralysis”, how did you label or describe
    your experience to other people?
  - Are there other words you might use to describe or label your experience
    instead of, or in addition to, “career paralysis”?
- How do you understand where your career paralysis came from? (Causes?)
• What factors do you think maintain your sense of paralysis?
  o What gets in the way of/makes it difficult to make a change? (Probe personal and situational factors - e.g., fear of failure, societal expectations, cultural issues, indecisiveness, not knowing what else they’d like to be doing, financial concerns, other stakeholders, need for additional education, etc...)
  o What do you like/dislike about your current job/career?
  o Do you know what kind of work/career you’d rather be doing?
  o Are other people (e.g., partners, friends, colleagues) aware of your experience of career paralysis? If yes, what have been their reactions so far?
• How has your experience of career paralysis affected your general well-being?
  o Your psychological well-being? (e.g., mood, sense of life satisfaction, sense of self?)
  o Your physical well-being? (e.g., sleep, weight, activity-level, muscle-tension?)
• In what ways has your experience of career paralysis impacted other area’s of your life (e.g., family, relationships, leisure)?
• What have you tried so far to help move through career paralysis (e.g., job search, networking, personal reading, personal therapy, etc...) and what has been the result?
• What do you think might help you to move through career paralysis?
  o How hopeful are you that you will come through career paralysis in the
near future?

- What are your personal views on the importance of work?
  - Is it important to you that your work/career be meaningful?
  - How would you define meaningful work?

Closing:

Thank you for your valuable information. Is there anything else that we have not talked about today that you would like to share?

What was it like for you to participate in this interview?