Work Transitions as Biographical Learning
Exploring the Dynamics of Job Loss

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In the Faculty of Arts and Sciences at Linköping University, research and doctoral training is carried out within broad problem areas. Research is organized in interdisciplinary research environments, and doctoral studies done mainly in research institutes. Together they publish the Linköping Studies in Arts and Science series. This thesis comes from the Division of Education and Sociology at the Department of Behavioural Sciences and Learning.

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For my parents,
Anna-Maria and Erik Hansson,

my wife Petra Hallqvist
and my children
Hannes, Elsa and Elis
This garment was seamless, woven in one piece (John 19:23)
Acknowledgements

In imagining an individual's biography, the metaphor of a woven cloth can be suggestive. Composed of thousands of knotted and intertwined yarns and warp threads, a handmade fabric bears witness to patient, careful craftsmanship. Besides showing life as art, it proclaims that life is an entirety, with different projects and relationships interwoven. The image of a patchwork quilt is slightly different, indicating borders between parts, implying that even though life is all of a piece, it is possible to differentiate between separate phases, making discontinuities discernable.

The thesis-writing phase of my life will surely be represented in different ways at different times and in different contexts. Although I would like to, including it in the image of one piece of woven cloth is not yet possible. Perhaps I could say it is one part of a patchwork quilt. However, mostly I have told people that the thesis is a small piece of knitting that I am continuously unravelling. Probably, as most PhD students know, the major payoff of one’s doing, undoing, and re-doing is the privilege that is earned – the right to do research autonomously. But regardless of what is gained, and regardless of the position of the thesis-writing phase in my overall life story, I have really enjoyed being involved in post-graduate studies and in the creative and inspiring craftwork called social science research.

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Linköping, the 11th of April 2012

Anders Hallqvist
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I. Introduction

Over the last few decades, life discontinuities and life transitions have become a topic of considerable interest among social science researchers. This is not surprising, since contemporary life courses are complex and no longer standardized, changes in people’s life paths regular, and individual careers thus more difficult to predict. The young and middle-aged face major disruptions and changes to their lives to a greater extent than their parents did. Geographically we move, migrate or work abroad for shorter or longer periods. We divorce, remarry and change sexual orientation. And as employees we face restructuring, job loss and career changes. In some cases people make such changes voluntarily; in others they are forced to change. Without ignoring the exceptions – many people still live their lives following a linear path with only minor adjustments – the tendency is clear: major life transitions occur more frequently today than a generation ago. This is of course related to social transformations such as individualization, globalization and the pluralization of life styles. In this thesis, however, I do not attempt to address the question of how the trend should be understood or explained; rather I wish to add to our knowledge regarding how people engage with their transitions. Moreover, I am concerned with transitions of a specific kind: work transitions in midlife, following redundancy and job loss, supported by outplacement services. In drawing the boundaries of the research object by introducing these additional concepts, it is necessary to make some further clarifications.

Though related, unemployment, job loss and redundancy are distinct phenomena. Unemployment has been defined as a state or condition and job loss as an event, differentiated by the notion of duration (McKee-Ryan & Kinicki, 2002). Further, redundancy is a specific kind of job loss: being made redundant means losing one’s job due to restructuring. However, restructuring is not uniform either. It takes different characters depending on the employer’s actions, the specific organizational arrangements, and the current political, legal, economic, social and cultural conditions. Recognizing this variety, as well as the variety of individual strategies, redundancies unfold in different ways.

Sometimes restructuring and job loss are backed up by an intervention. As the nomenclature is not yet fixed, ‘outplacement services’ and ‘outplacement counselling’ will be used here to denote arrangements set up to support individuals and assist companies in carrying out the process of restructuring in a responsible manner. The support offered embraces giving advice, counselling and training in job seeking (Kieselbach,
Bagnara, Witte, Lemkow, & Schaufeli, 2009); however, there is sometimes an emphasis on continuous education, including opportunities to take long-term courses. Researchers that advocate this kind of arrangement argue that individuals should not be left alone to deal with the effects of restructuring and job loss, rather companies should be held responsible to a greater degree. Thus, work transitions should be ‘framed by company-based or labour administration interventions’ (Kieselbach, et al., 2009, p. 10).

In Europe, the use of outplacement services is expanding. A comparative investigation (covering Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands, Italy and Spain) shows ‘considerable agreement’ as to what outplacement should be, but ‘discriminations within and across countries’ and a lack of equality, in that outplacement counselling ‘is not offered to all kinds of employees and in all areas and branches’ (Kieselbach, et al., 2009, p. 73).

In Sweden, with a tradition of mutual understanding and cooperation between companies and unions, outplacement is often incorporated and handled within the framework of collective agreements (Bergström & Diedrich, 2008, Sebardt, 2006). Most developed is the arrangement enrolling private and public sector white-collar workers. In the early 1970s, the private and public sector white-collar unions, together with employer’s organizations, developed and signed agreements on transitions that gave workers access to outplacement services. These agreements form the legal basis of the so-called security councils, TRR Trygghetsrådet and Trygghetsstiftelsen. They are run jointly by the social partners and considered a neutral party in times of restructuring. The particular agreements guarantee relatively generous support, both economically and regarding the educational and counselling arrangements offered. Being probably the most ambitious attempts in the Swedish context to deal with the challenge of job loss, these outplacement arrangements provide the background to the present investigation.

To sum up, in this thesis I examine how people engage with a particular kind of life discontinuities: the process of work transitions following restructuring and job loss among midlife white-collar workers, supported by extensive outplacement services. The thesis offers an examination of a process that in some cases leads to long-term unemployment but in others to reestablishment on labour market.

In the four articles on which this thesis is based, ‘work transitions’ and ‘occupational transitions’ are used interchangeably, signifying the process extending from notice of redundancy to finding new employment. However, over time I recognized a difference in connotation (obvious to any native English speaker) that ‘occupational transitions’ sug-
gests a change of occupation rather than solely one of employer. In the thesis, I have preferred the more inclusive term ‘work transitions’ in order to cover a broader spectrum of approaches to the challenge of job loss.

A changing labour market

Before delving further into the subject matter, I will discuss the main rationale for taking up the investigation. This is in the changing labour market – experienced today by workers, employers and politicians. In Europe, company restructuring is at the top of the agenda, considered to be a continuous process (Bruggeman & Gazier, 2008). Globalization is often referred to as the major force behind restructuring, though in the Swedish context this widespread idea has been questioned (2008). Whatever the reasons might be, the frequency of restructuring naturally affects labour market dynamics and constitutes a challenge to employees, companies and policy makers.

Part of the latter’s strategy to deal with this is the concept of employability. In recent decades, this term has not only entered the discourse on labour market functioning but has also become a focus of attention in policy (Jacobsson, 2004; Nilsson, 2010). Its influence and rhetorical power is recognized (Fejes, 2010; Garsten & Jacobsson, 2004b): the shift from ‘lack of employment’ to ‘lack of employability’ emphasizes the individual’s responsibility (Garsten & Jacobsson, 2004a). Further, the change in rhetoric is regarded as part of the overall trend of individualization (Allvin, 2004). Considered as the third phase in a ‘series of revolutions in industrial relations’, individualization means that the individual is ‘expected to initiate, plan, control and take responsibility for her own labour’ (p. 24). As a strategy to deal with the challenge of company restructuring and redundancies, the rhetoric of employability is accompanied by ‘lifelong learning’ (cf. EU, 2000; Rubenson, 2004; Svensson, 2003), supporting the same discourse: to be employable you need to learn, continuously, throughout your working life (Garsten & Jacobsson, 2004a). Related to this are notions as flexibility (Furäker, Karlsson, & Håkanson, 2007) and labour mobility (Benner, 2002; Bienkowska, 2007; Diamond, 1981; Lundmark, 2010).

The changes in the labour market are also revealed when we look at career research, finding that career choice is no longer talked about in the singular. Instead, career is now considered a ‘series of choices or forced transitions that individuals make over a life span’ (2007, p. 544). Similarly, biographical research has identified a change in people’s biographical patterns, as ‘more and more status passages are coming into
being’ (Alheit, 1994, p. 284). Probably, to state that careers are ‘boundaryless’ (Arthur, 1994; Rousseau & Arthur, 1996) would be too strong (Sullivan, 1999), but perhaps ‘protean’ (Hall, 1996, 2004) is a reasonable way to conceptualize careers today. We need to be cautious, however (Kirpal, 2004), and sensitive to variation related to for example socioeconomic group, culture, context, gender, age and occupational domain. In any case, the change in labour market dynamics, observed in the frequency of company restructuring processes, labour market policy and the emerging ‘protean’ career patterns, provide the rationale for taking on this research project on work transitions.

A capability approach

Many voices are critical of the recent developments in working life. Sennett’s (1998) view of the current state of affairs is widely recognized, stating that it makes people lose their capacity for trust, loyalty and long-term relations, which is why their character is supposed to be subject to ‘corrosion’ (Sennett, 1998). Many other researchers also highlight the social problems, the social exclusion and attenuation of public solidarity that may result when the ideal of employee mobility is emphasized in labour market policy (Field, 2006; Nielsen, 2000). Frequently, the rise of temporary agency work is referred to as a major challenge (Kalleberg, Reskin, & Hudson, 2000).

How one evaluates and judges politically the current emphasis on employee mobility depends on the basic assumptions one makes, of course, as well as on the empirical evidence. When Sennett makes his evaluation, pointing to the effect on people’s ‘character’, he is apparently resting on an ethos of virtue (Moore, 2002). This unfolds in diverging evaluative statements, compared to the utilitarian point of view that characterizes the measurement and statistics that inform politicians and policy makers.

As an alternative to Sennett’s point of departure, in this thesis an appeal to pragmatism will be made. More specifically, the point of departure will be taken in a general but distinct view of action as problem solving present in this tradition. Probably the study’s most basic assumption is that people act and that this holds true even when they are faced with such a disruptive and damaging event as a job loss. Since job loss is an event that individuals do not plan but is effected by one’s em-

1 Here I will not be able to discuss this tradition per se and its different versions (cf. Kloppenberg, 1996); rather I will rely on the interpretations provided by Joas (1996) and Biesta (2004; 2009; 2003).
ployer (people are literally made redundant), it can be considered a challenge, a provocation or a strike upon the individual as agent. In spite of this, or rather for that very reason, people act. The strategies that people use when coping with the disruption vary considerably, as does the intensity of their engagement. Nevertheless, in some shape or form, individuals take action.

Transitions as learning
Since the middle of the 1990s, the concept of lifelong learning has been high on the adult education agenda, 'endorsed by a wide range of inter-governmental policy actors' (Field, 2010a, p. 89) and, as a prerequisite for employability, an important part of labour market policy and research (Garsten & Jacobsson, 2004a). During the same period, career research and theory have shifted from considering a career 'as a choice made early in life to viewing career as a series of choices or forced transitions that individuals make over a life span' (2007, p. 544). Accordingly, ‘learning processes within transition’ (Alheit, 1994, p. 289) have become an important research area (cf. Ecclestone, Biesta, & Hughes, 2010; Field, 2009; Field, Gallacher, & Ingram, 2009). In Europe, these trends are accompanied by the growth of outplacement as a means of dealing with redundancies (Kieselbach et al., 2006).

Merging these recent trends suggests that enforced work transitions, supported by outplacement services, can be viewed not as a straightforward path or uncomplicated transfer entailing only smooth adjustments, but as a learning process (Ecclestone, et al., 2010; Field, 2009; Ingram, Field, & Gallacher, 2009). Thus, if people’s careers are changing and if continuing education is becoming ever more important for employability, then labour market research needs to recognize learning when examining work transitions. The particularity of the present study resides partly in its attempt to simultaneously address the issues of job loss, work transition and learning.

In this view, informal learning (Ellström, 2011) is salient, suggesting that we should recognize not only explicit knowledge but also ‘emotional, embodied, pre-reflexive and non-cognitive (...) learning processes’ (Tedder & Biesta, 2009b, p. 34). Therefore, outplacement services will be viewed not as providing educational arrangements primarily, but as a temporal, social and local ‘site’ of informal learning.

Biographical disruption
Job loss and work transitions that occur to midlife people ‘settled’ in the labour market can be regarded as a challenge with both financial and
existential implications. The security provided by everyday routine and one’s social network is challenged: job loss results in a loss of one’s workplace, one’s workmates, one’s social recognition, and one’s organizational and sometimes occupational identity. Moreover, work transitions today occur in a culture where identity is being transformed from a ‘given’ to a ‘task’ (Bauman, 2000, p. 31), where biography and self are shaped reflexively (Giddens, 1991), and where ‘risk management’ is a necessary and frequent undertaking (Beck, 1992). These cultural conditions give the disruption a certain character and draw attention to the existential aspects of work transitions.

As a consequence, the problem to be solved is in reality not solely the job loss. As a disruptive event, it affects people’s biographies, which is why the challenge also concerns how to cope with a biographical disruption (Becker, 1997). And the solution, accordingly, concerns not only ‘getting a job’ but, concurrently, autobiographical considerations, autobiographical constructions and the production of autobiographical narratives, which in turn can bring about intersubjective recognition. Engaging with a work transition, then, should not be considered in terms of securing one’s ‘professional competence’ or ‘employability’, but as including autobiographical sensemaking, career decision-making and identity work.

The challenge of a life disruption does not necessary mean distress, however; sometimes, disruptive experiences are ‘productive’ in the sense that they present an opportunity for reflection, creativity and action. In this thesis, in understanding the transition in terms of learning, the productive dynamics of the biographical disruption are acknowledged. Further, there is a certain focus on ‘radical’ work transitions, that is, transitions that involve novel career decisions after a job loss.

As an alternative to Sennett’s ‘flexible’ individual, Kristensson Uggla (2008) offers, with reference to Ricœur (2005), the notion of homo capax, the ‘capable individual’, and a concept of reflexivity that includes not only adaptability but also accountability and memory. In doing so, he presumes a human being who does not cut all links with the past but relates to the past in a responsible way. In a similar way, the concept of biographical learning is said to advocate a ‘certain trust in the everyday competence of individuals to “organize” their biographies independently, despite the threats posed by progressive modernisation’. Further, it recognizes that ‘biographical discontinuities, and identity threats (…) provoke biographical opportunities, in addition to the considerable risks involved’ (Alheit, 1994, pp. 283, 292). Presuming such a ‘capable’ individual, this study examines people’s engagement in work transitions in terms of biographical learning.
Biographical learning

Experiencing life discontinuities, individuals are faced with the question of their future life and are expected to engage with career decision-making. The previous outlook is no longer valid. If the future was relatively foreseeable before the job loss, for the individual in transition it is now considerably more uncertain. Sometimes reorientation after a major life disruption includes grief or sorrow (Cullberg, 2003), but in due course people will engage with future life. Different scenarios will then be opened up, some fear-provoking or disturbing, others agreeable, encouraging or whatever emotion is attributed to them. Stories of possible futures will be produced, perhaps both tragedies and stories of success (Ezzy, 2001). Sometimes people set up a great variety of different scenarios, sometimes only a single one, or the future may be conceived as a black box.

Neither the future nor the past will be the same after a life disruption; the individual in transition also engages with history. It will be viewed in a new light, evaluated, reinterpreted or reconstructed. Nostalgia is one approach to the past. Another is criticism or rejection. Yet another attempts to reconcile divergent parts of the life course and establish links between the past and the future, by acting and sensemaking. According to Becker (1997), continuity is a human need and striving for it a universal tendency; however, it takes a specific linear and hierarchical shape in Western societies. In different ways, therefore, people experiencing disruption and diversity try to create meaning in their life narratives. Perhaps the Western standard career is being transformed these days (Hall, 1996); in any case, the individual who experiences a biographical disruption in one way or another is reinterpreting his or her own life history. At a time when people’s careers are becoming more ‘complicated, more individual, less “normal”, but at the same time more colourful, autonomous and self-willed’, such reflexive efforts are becoming all the more important to understand and explain (Alheit, 1994, p. 285).

In this thesis, peoples’ responses to a biographical disruption will be theoretically described and understood in terms of biographical learning. This concept will be considered in the context of pragmatism, and for this reason a concept of action will provide its overcoat. This is because pragmatism ‘deals with questions of knowledge and the acquisition of knowledge within the framework of a philosophy of action, in fact, a philosophy that takes action as its most basic category’ (Biesta & Burbules, 2003, p. 9). As a consequence, biographical learning involves not only organizing one’s biography by reflexivity and storytelling, but
also action as concrete operations. Biographical continuity, then, can be attained using concrete operations (as e.g. applying for a course or position) as well as by exercising the practice of reflexivity or storytelling. Such a view is congruent with Dewey’s theory of experiential learning, believing that people learn in the process of continuous engagement with and readjustment to their environment (Biesta & Burbules, 2003, p. 37f).

I should note that this means that the term ‘action’ is used in different ways in this thesis. On the one hand, it is used in a narrow sense referring to a specific act or operation; on the other hand, it is used in a broader sense, referring to a problem-solving practice, i.e. sequences of efforts that include thinking, knowing, decision-making and concrete operations. Thirdly, in a few instances I will talk about ‘patterns’ of actions, meaning recurrent and routine-based actions.

Aims and research questions

Ever since Jahoda’s (1971) seminal studies, research has convincingly demonstrated the far-reaching social, existential and financial dimensions of unemployment. We are not, however, supplied as well when it comes to research on the process of transition, extending from the notice of redundancy to reemployment. What is more, as the use of outplacement counselling is growing, research needs to examine the process within this particular setting.

Moving the focus from unemployment to job loss and the subsequent process of transition, in this thesis enforced work transitions in midlife, will be examined and understood as a biographical learning process. I will also attempt to contribute to the development of the concept of biographical learning per se by challenging its uniform character, conjecturing that perhaps people learn biographically in different ways. Thus, the variety in people’s ways of dealing with the challenge of job loss will be recognized. Because biographical learning is dependent on communication and interaction with others (Alheit & Dausien, 2002), the social conditions of biographical learning processes will also be explored.

The overall purpose of the thesis is to understand from a biographical perspective how people deal with major life discontinuities. More specifically, the aim is to theoretically describe and understand enforced work transitions in midlife, in terms of biographical learning. I will thereby make a contribution to research on such transitions as well as to the development of the biographical learning concept.
The thesis builds on four empirical studies, each with its own aims and research questions. I formulate below four questions that attempt to integrate the separate studies. The first research question asks for a reconsideration of the concept of biographical learning in the context of the present study. It also looks for diversity within the concept:

- **How can the concept of biographical learning be expanded, reconfigured and used in the study of enforced work transitions?**

This question is dealt with in the first study, ‘The many faces of biographical learning’. To further understand the variety in individuals’ ways of handling transitions, an exploration of the process’ inner structure, which theoretically describes how it unfolds over time, is required. Therefore the second question centres on work transition as a problem-solving practice:

- **How can the process of work transition be theoretically described and understood as a problem-solving practice, in a way that recognizes individuals’ variety of engagement?**

This question clearly follows from the pragmatist point of departure. I deal with this question in the paper entitled ‘Learning in occupational transitions – a study of the process following job loss’.

Both the first and the second study showed that reflexivity is important to work transitions and to biographical learning. It would therefore be important to explore people’s reflexive efforts in more detail. The third question takes as its point of departure the learning potential in autobiographical storytelling. Using narrative theory, the crucial role of evaluations in promoting reflexivity is suggested:

- **How can individuals’ variety of reflexive efforts be theoretically described and understood using narrative theory?**

This question is dealt with in the ‘Work transition as told: a narrative approach to biographical learning’ study. As storytelling is a relational practice, by looking for a narrative approach to biographical learning, the study points out that work transitions and biographical learning are relational.

This suggests that the final research question should further explore work transitions as a relational process. Therefore, the fourth question asks explicitly for an investigation of the social network of individuals facing redundancy in order to determine the significance of social relations for biographical learning:
• What kinds of social relations matter to individuals in work transitions and what consequences follow from them in terms of enabling and/or constraining people’s engagement in work transitions as biographical learning?

This final question is addressed in the ‘Occupational transitions as a relational project’ paper.

It is evident that biographical learning and work transitions serve as the two major themes of this thesis. They will be brought together within the overall framework of pragmatism.
2. Previous research: Problems and concepts

This chapter reviews previous research on work transitions. Additionally, it includes two sections introducing the study’s central concepts: creative action and biographical learning. The aim of this particular arrangement is to enable a presentation and discussion of the study’s central concepts as emerging organically from considerations regarding previous research.

Educational research on transitions has focused mainly on younger people’s transitions from educational settings to work (Evans, Behrens, & Kaluza, 2000; Lundahl, 2011; Nilsson, 2007; Nyström, 2009); today, however, adults make several transitions during their working life (Fouad, 2007). Although the field of career research examines work transitions within and between companies, the focus is often on transitions that individuals make autonomously and under optimal circumstances (Fouad & Bynner, 2008). I begin the review by highlighting such ‘voluntary’ work transitions. However, since the thesis centres on enforced work transitions, I will not discuss this in any detail, rather continue by focusing specifically on enforced transitions following job loss, introducing the notion of ‘coping’.

Since coping is about what people do to resolve a stressful situation, considerations regarding how to think about acting will follow from this. A concept of creative action will be introduced, which views disruptive events as fundamental to creativity. Viewing job loss as a biographical disruption, I then examine how the question of such disruptions has been addressed in other research areas. This will highlight the process of sensemaking and the significance of narratives. I then point to a number of articles that focus on the specific question of how people understand their job loss or work transition through storytelling.

Moving from storytelling to learning, proposing the idea of transitions as a learning process, I will review a number of contributions from the field of adult education. This will lead to additional theoretical considerations, this time centring on the idea of biographical learning in order to understand work transitions.

Voluntary career transitions

Since the middle of the 1990s, ideas of a ‘boundaryless’ (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994) or ‘protean’ (Hall, 1996) career have been widely discussed and are viewed as having an important impact on career theory and research (Sullivan & Baruch, 2009). The latter term means ‘changeable’, alluding to the god Proteus in the Greek pantheon with the talent
of shifting shape. Both concepts point to a decline in job stability and an emphasis on labour mobility, not only as enforced or company initiated but also strategic and voluntary (Hollister, 2011). Meaning to rethink one’s career radically, researchers described workers as continuous learners, adaptable and as ‘seeking intrinsic rewards’ (Sullivan & Baruch, 2009).

Looking specifically at radical career transitions, i.e. transitions that include novel career decisions and ‘horizontal’ career moves, research has mainly tried to predict career change, referring to individual or social characteristics (Breeden, 1993; Carless & Bernath, 2007; Cherniss, 1991; Collin, 1990; Donohue, 2006, 2007; Feldman & Ng, 2007; Higgins, 2001; Oleski & Subich, 1996; Sullivan, 1999). Though important, these do not help when trying to understand the process of transition. More useful is research on ‘experiences’ of career change. Writing in this tradition, Teixeira and Gomez (2000) argue that career change is closely related to ‘a series of changes in personal identity and in the relation of the subjects to their work’, pointing to the role of reflexivity – dissatisfaction makes people ‘ask questions of themselves and what they do’ (pp. 90-91), evaluating their professional career in relation to other spheres of life. Arguing that people ‘cope’ with discontinuities or the ‘fragmentary’ nature of work life by searching for continuity and consistency, Wise and Millward (2005) underline sensemaking processes related to the protean career. From these contributions, I will take the notion of reflexivity and the significance of identity issues to radical work transitions.

Coping with unemployment
Research on job loss and unemployment has focused mainly on effects – socioeconomic, psychosocial and/or health for example (as Eliasson, 2005; cf. reviews in Ezzy, 2001; and Hanisch, 1999). Other contributions centre on interventions such as outplacement, including counseling and psychological assessment and their effects (e.g. Borgen & Maglio, 2007; Westaby, 2004). Among those are the European studies mentioned above (Kieselbach, 2006; Kieselbach, et al., 2009). Though important, none of these examine engagement and action strategies in people participating in outplacement.

Job search behaviour
While there does not seem to be a great deal of research on people’s engagement or participation in outplacement services, a number of studies do look at people’s behaviour in job search processes generally, its ante-
cedents and effects, the methods used in job searching and the effect of macro-level factors on people's job-seeking behaviour (e.g. McFadyen & Thomas, 1997; Van Hooft, Born, Taris, & van der Flier, 2005). Generally, job search behaviour is shown to be dependent not only on psychological variables such as extroversion, conscientiousness, self-esteem and/or job search self-efficacy but also on human capital factors such as education (Kanfer, Wanberg, & Kantrowitz, 2001). Research on job search behaviour has also examined the 'intensity' of people's search efforts (Lambert, Eby, & Reeves, 2006; Wanberg, Kanfer, & Banas, 2000), showing that their willingness to learn new things and their propensity to set up goals, plan their behaviour, and manage their moods predict job-seeking intensity (Prussia, Fugate, & Kinicki, 2001).

Coping with job loss
A particular genre that claims explicitly to study the process in which people respond to the event of job loss is studies using the concept of coping (e.g. Brown & Konrad, 2001; cf. Lazarus, 1966; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Coping is often defined in terms of what people do to resolve a stressful situation (McKee-Ryan & Kinicki, 2002). Using various instruments developed to measure coping strategies, their outcomes and antecedents, researchers have tried to explore the variation in people's ways of dealing with job loss or unemployment. Some evidence supports the common (though questioned, cf. Skinner, Edge, Altman, & Sherwood, 2003) distinction between control/problem-focused coping and escape/emotion-focused coping (e.g. Latack, Kinicki, & Prussia, 1995). Control or problem-focused coping includes dimensions such as proactive job searching, positive self-assessment, retraining efforts and seeking geographical relocation. Escape or emotion-focused coping includes dimensions such as job devaluation, distancing from the job loss, or symptom-treating behaviours associated with seeking financial support.

Relating to the use of measures such as 'job search intensity', researchers have pointed to the significance of individuals' 'coping goals' ('an individual's desired end result that he or she seeks to accomplish in response to a perceived harm/loss or threat', Kinicki & Latack, 1996; Leana & Feldman, 1990), arguing that the intensity of people’s reemployment coping goal predicts their job search efforts, which in turn predicts reemployment. Further, 'human capital' (e.g. education), 'employment commitment' (how people value 'gainful' employment), and 'internal coping resources' (personality items, e.g. self-esteem) predict people’s use of reemployment as a coping goal, which in turn predicts their job search effort, which predicts reemployment (Creed, King,
Hood, & McKenzie, 2009). For example, people with low education, low employment commitment and low self-esteem scored lower on the intensity scale and were less likely to state that reemployment was their coping goal.

Limitations

Others have shown, however, that job-seeking intensity does not mediate the relationship between human capital, goal orientation, self-regulation variables and reemployment outcomes, while ‘self-regulation’ is found to mediate between ‘learning goal orientation’ and job-seeking intensity (Prussia, et al., 2001). Others again argue that not only coping objectives but also job search objectives are important as determinants in the process following job loss, finding that they are significantly related to job search methods (Creed, et al., 2009).

Evaluating what has been achieved in this area, researchers point to major deficiencies when it comes to questions about which antecedents predict a certain coping strategy and what the respective outcomes are (McKee-Ryan & Kinicki, 2002). Moreover, the two fundamental strategies may be complementary rather than mutually exclusive (Creed, et al., 2009).

Most importantly, however, even though research using ‘intensity and effort measures of job search’ provide some important knowledge about people’s engagement in enforced work transitions, such measures do not ‘provide sufficient information for analysis of the directional or dynamic nature of the self-regulatory process’ (Kanfer, et al., 2001, p. 851):

The more difficult issue facing the field pertains to elucidating the person-situation factors, processes, and pathways by which individual differences in job search behaviour affect employment outcomes (Kanfer, et al., 2001, p. 851).

Thus, in narrowly focusing on goal setting and job search intensity, previous research does not recognize variation within individuals’ coping strategies, nor does it acknowledge creativity and chance. Instead, we should attempt to describe the variety in individuals’ action strategies when dealing with job loss and looking for new employment. To gain such situation-sensitive knowledge about processes and pathways in order to understand the ‘self-regulatory process’ following a job loss (Kanfer, et al., 2001, p. 851), we will probably need other methods and, possibly, other concepts.
Pragmatism as a point of departure

As coping theory has to do with how people act, attention should be paid to the question of how to think about acting in researching how people cope with challenges in life. Informed by cognitivism, it can be argued that coping theory presupposes a rational actor and a linear relation between reflection and the implementation of action plans. Here, I will introduce pragmatism as an alternative point of departure.

Rational action vs creative action

Rational action theory remains influential in both research and practice, even though it has been widely questioned (Archer & Tritter, 2000; Kaplan, 2005; Klein, Orasanu, Calderwood, & Zsambok, 1993). In various research areas it continues as a silent assumption underlying other theories and research approaches. Not only coping theory but equally coaching theory, which is frequently used in career intervention research and practice, drawing on cognitivism, often presuppose a rational actor who consciously sets up explicit goals and acts to realize those goals, using coaching to follow-up and evaluate the efforts made. Moreover, it influences policy makers in the area of labour market policy, since most macroeconomic analysis rests on the idea of the rational and profit-maximizing individual. Clearly, there are problems with rational action in those instances. For example, it does not recognize that people create and recreate goals in the course of the act or that individuals do not have one stable goal but often operate with a variety of possible outcomes. Nor does it take into account the fact that people’s social relations are part of the process of decision-making and do not only constitute conditions and means to be utilized by an autonomous subject. Finally, the idea of rational action ignores the role of serendipity in people’s career decision-making. Drawing on resources present in the tradition of pragmatism, Joas (1996) attempts to overcome weaknesses in the prevailing theories of rational action, replacing the concept of rationality with one of creativity.

A theory of situated creativity

Generally, pragmatism argues that human agents rest in habits and routine-based strategies of action but that these are now and then ‘shattered’ by challenges, to which those habitual strategies do not bring a solution. According to this view, actions are not continuous but structured, following ‘periodically recurring phases’ (Joas, 1996, p. 128). Doubt, problem solving and creativity characterize the process following an interruption. This brings about reorientation, a changed percep-
tion and a reconstruction of the situation. Moreover, a shattering in the
pragmatist view is not something purely intellectual but may also have
existential dimensions, since our values are affected too. These are sub-
ject to ‘creative concretization’ in the course of our acting (Joas, 1996,
p. 163). Viewing creativity in this framework of action, it is not theo-
rized in expressionist terms or considered as if people produce ideas ex
nihilo, but as working within a specific situation and by people engag-
ing with concrete problems. Because of this, pragmatism is considered a
theory of ‘situated creativity’ (Joas, 1996, p. 133).

The idea of rational action is not renounced altogether, but Joas asks
for a revision of its implicit presuppositions. Those are as follows: a
human being is capable of purposive action, exercises control over his
or her body, and is autonomous in relation to other persons and con-
texts. In making this revision, Dewey’s concept of ‘end in view’ consti-
tutes one of the essential resources used. Central is the human ability to,
imaginarily, view the probable end of different actions – in order to se-
lect the most appropriate or ‘intelligent’ act. Thinking, then, is consid-
ered a phase in the overall concept of action. Important also is the re-
ciprocity of means and goals. In a highly flexible way, they interplay with
and define each other in the course of the act. Any external and defini-
tive goal or moral position is problematic in the individual process of
deliberation. Joas points out that this way of conceiving human action is
at odds with ‘teleological’ conceptions. The difference concerns the rela-
tion between cognition and action. In the ‘teleological’ way of thinking
they are separated; in the pragmatic they are united. The various ‘teleo-
logical’ interpretations, Joas argues, rest on the philosophy of con-
sciousness established by Descartes: ‘There are several variations on (…)
teleological interpretation (…) all of them (…) repeat the Cartesian dis-
tinctions between self and world, between mind and body’ (Joas, 1996,
p. 157).

Defending a fundamentally different view of human intentionality,
Joas suggests a ‘self-reflective’ rather than ‘teleological’ conception (p.
163). Human corporality is decisive here because the non-reflexive rela-
tion between body and environment is seen as preceding and guiding all
conscious and rational procedures. Thus, the human mind is not sep-
parated from the body; rather mind and body form a functional whole.
Rather than producing goals ex nihilo, consciousness operates on the
existing, as yet unthematized aspirations and tendencies ‘which are at
work without our being actively aware of them’:
It is the body's capabilities, habits and ways of relating to the environment which form the background to all conscious goal-setting, in other words, to our intentionality (Joas, 1996, p. 158).

In this sense, action is characterized by both a ‘passive’ and a ‘self-reflective’ intentionality. Examining the matter of goal setting further, Joas points to the critical location of human imagination between unproductive, rigid, too down-to-earth efforts and wild and crazy efforts lacking any connections with reality whatsoever. At this point, Joas refers to Winnicott as advocating the idea of a ‘transitional object’ that ensures a close relation between play and reality (p. 164).

**Implications**

I am reviewing Joas' arguments in some detail because of their implications for the way of understanding and treating the problem addressed in this thesis, generally by guarding against an over-rationalized view of human action and intentionality. More specifically, being made redundant can be considered a shattering and disruptive event that, in the pragmatist's sense, launches a creative problem-solving practice. Following this line of thought, a process of work transition would not be continuous but sequentially organized, interrupted by recurrent phases of orienting efforts, the production of ends-in-view, choices and new actions that in turn reshape the situation and result in new definitions of it. The notion of a ‘shattering’ event indicates existential dimensions as being part of the process, since people sometimes question their own opinions and values when reflecting on the disruption and how to move on.

Following Joas' suggestions, the role of prerreflective intentions and tendencies in guiding people's actions should be acknowledged. Conscious plans arise when the actor reflects on those intentions, using interpretive resources available in common language. Acknowledging the non-conscious basis of action, suggesting a ‘passive intentionality’ (Joas, 1996, p. 169), would be an important safeguard against a too ardent or ‘activist’ approach to problem solving, which research using the agent perspective may be otherwise be accused of supporting. Further, expressions such as ‘career planning’ will be understood rather differently if plans and motives are not the actual cause of action but secondary in relation to prerreflective intentions. I should add that, methodologically, Joas' arguments call for a research procedure that respects the processual character of action, including an analytical approach that allows the examination of intraindividual variability as well as the interplay between action and reflection.
Voluntarism?

Before closing these considerations concerning acting, we must guard ourselves against voluntarism by recognizing the 'primary sociality of the human capacity for action' (Joas, 1996, p. 190) for individuals dealing with challenges in life. The point is rather uncontroversial, and support for it can be found in different traditions, for example theories of social capital or social networks (Coleman, 1988; Granovetter, 1973; Putnam, 1995). However, there is an emphasis I would like to make that perhaps gives the particular view some distinctiveness.

Looking at the social world of people in work transitions, Granovetter’s idea of ‘the strength of weak ties’ has been very influential (1973, 1983; cf. Lin, 1999; Mouv, 2006; Yakubovich, 2005). According to this, ‘weak ties’, i.e. acquaintances, are more important than close friends or relatives to job seekers. The explanation is that ‘our acquaintances (weak ties) are less likely to be socially involved with one another’ (Granovetter, 1983, p. 201). As an information provider, such a low-density network is more effective than a high-density network. In Granovetter’s framework, ‘personal contacts’ are contrasted with the use of ‘formal means’, i.e. intermediary organizations or advertisements (Granovetter, 1974). In contrast, while Granovetter emphasizes informal relations, Benner (2002) and others have underlined the significance of formal ties, such as labour market intermediaries.

In educational research as well, the significance of social relations is often emphasized. Conceptualized as ‘social capital’, social relations facilitate the development of ‘human capital’ (Coleman, 1988). Equally, biographical learning is not an individual undertaking but takes place in social space, which is why interaction and communication with others are central parts of the learning process (Alheit & Dausien, 2002, p. 16). While social networks generally are ‘learning resources’, sometimes they exert conservative power, restraining the individual (2005, pp. 28, 140).

It has been suggested (Biesta, 2009) that the tradition of pragmatism offers a particular contribution in conceptualizing the context of learning. This is to be found in the ‘transactional’ view of the relation between the individual and the context, stating that individuals are always ‘actively connected with their environment’ (p. 70). Thus, views that make ‘boundaries between subject and environment’ are questioned (Joas, 1996, p. 195); rather, communication with others is considered a ‘condition’ of consciousness itself (Biesta, 2009, p. 69). As a consequence, in this thesis social relations are configured not as if people act ‘inside’ their web of relations, rather ‘with’ and ‘against’ other people
and institutions they are connected to. Action is considered as relational, and social context is believed to exist through 'social practices' (Biesta, 2009, p. 70). Taking this position, I am looking for a theoretical space between determinism and voluntarism. The view is based on the pragmatist idea of a non-reflexive and 'transactional' relation between body and its environment presented above. If consciousness operates on the existing, as yet unthematized aspirations and tendencies that precede conscious action, this also holds true when considering the individual’s relations to other people and social institutions.

With such a view informing the object of research addressed in this thesis, attention needs to be directed to social relations that affect the process of transition. If social context exists through social practices, it is important to examine people’s communicative efforts. The event of job loss and the subsequent actions will certainly be talked about when people meet others. Recognizing that talk is part of the sensemaking process, I will examine the significance of autobiographical storytelling as a sensemaking communicative praxis, affecting the process of transition.

Life disruptions in other empirical fields

Of course, life discontinuity has been examined in studies with other points of departure than unemployment and career research. Studying migrants’ experiences, Bron (2000) has developed the category of 'floating' to understand the experience of being ‘in between’ different positions or cultural identities. More generally, Becker (1997) discusses the illusion of continuity in life and how people cope with radical change when such changes occur. The author relies mostly on empirical material concerning infertility or chronic disability but proposes that the same kind of sensemaking may occur in different circumstances. Fifteen years before Becker, Bury (1982) coined the term ‘biographical disruption’, proposing that critical incidents such as diagnosis of chronic illness may imply such a disruption. Bury draws attention not only to modes of thought or explanation, but also to the significance of available material and relational resources. Also with an interest in chronic illness and how people explain the reasons behind their illness, Williams (1984) considers such explanations as elements in the individual’s on-going dealings with the world. Williams argues that causal explanations should be understood as parts in a narrative reconstruction.
Transitions as told

Concluding their research review on coping with job loss, McKee-Ryan and Kinicki (2002) recommend that to attain a deeper understanding of the subject, research should include ‘a role for individuals’ personal meanings’ (p. 14). This recommendation suggests that a work transition is dependent on how people define their situation when facing redundancy. It also indicates that sensemaking is part of the process following job loss. Actually, in a further step, this also points to learning, on condition that personal meanings are considered not as definite or absolute but as created and open to revision.

Narrating transitions

Looking specifically at sensemaking efforts related to job loss, Ezzy (2000; 2001) examines stories people tell about the event. Arguing that people narrate their job loss by making ‘selective use of accounts of social forces and pressures (...) to explain their actions’ (2000, p. 121), Ezzy finds two major ways of narrating job loss – ‘romantic’ and ‘tragic’. While the romantic ones consider their job loss a turning point that led to something better, tragic accounts portray the job loss as leading to a situation that is evaluated negatively. Further, Ezzy points to variation within each genre, referring to on the one hand a distinction between ‘strong romances’ and ‘weak romances’, and on the other four different kinds of tragedies: traumatic, ironic, moderated and sustained. In romantic accounts, Ezzy notes that people were able to portray themselves as ‘in control’ while at the same time denying other people’s influence on their decision-making, representing an ‘individualistic and autonomous view of the self’.

The discovery of one’s ‘real self’ is described as a deeply personal and individualistic experience that is explained in terms that emphasise the person’s control over their own life (2001, p. 57). This is explained by considering the ability to make autonomous choices a condition for self-respect. Generally, the overall narrative is shaped by ‘a number of factors, including (...) historical experience, the rhetorical intention (...) and the structuring effects of social location’ (Ezzy, 2000, p. 121).

Other researchers (Rosenwald & Wiersma, 1983), studying women’s talk about their midlife career change, have found a widespread ‘makeover’ tendency, which is rather similar to Ezzy’s suggestions regarding ‘romantic’ job loss narratives. The authors state that individuals initially (the authors call people’s accounts a ‘press release’) tend to portray their life prior to their new career in dark hues, drawing a contrast between
their former situation and their new position in life and ‘reborn’ self. It is argued that such a rhetoric makes people blind to the social context in which the transition occurred. Portraying the self as an autonomous entity tends to suppress the particularities, i.e. concrete challenges and social relations. Thus, in contributing to a ‘critical understanding of the social conditions of personal fulfilment’ (p. 215), Rosenwald et al. point to the risks related to a romantic ‘makeover’ rhetoric, while Ezzy acknowledges both positive and negative consequences. The authors all agree, however, that such stories tend to portray the self in a slightly idealistic way as autonomous and rather loosely coupled to institutions and social relations.

The constraining and enabling dynamics of storytelling
Discussing ‘tragic’ job loss narratives, Ezzy (2001) finds that people position themselves by stressing the power of social forces beyond their control, portraying themselves as ‘pushed around by fate and unable to control their lives’ (p. 56), making a story according to which society and upbringing is accountable for the current state of affairs. Through this ‘victimization’, individuals reject failure by focusing on the impact of external forces while upholding their good intentions and ideals. People are thereby able to maintain their integrity and self-esteem while renouncing their responsibility. Referring to research on refugees, Ezzy argues that people are inclined to portray themselves as victims since the victim discourse remains central to the justification of policies. In this way stories are tied up with rhetorical and political objectives. Conversely, as the ‘romantic’ narrative suggests, it is also possible that people understand their transition as partially voluntary even though they have no control. The seemingly self-evident distinction between voluntary and enforced job exit is then questioned.

Referring to Bruner and Ricœur, Ezzy proposes that people’s stories have the power to determine future actions. Not only is the interpretation influenced but also ‘events of life (...) are influenced by the form of the narrative told about them’: adventures happen to people ‘who know how to tell them’ (p. 130). Pointing to the potentiality of telling stories, both Ezzy and Rosenwald et al. identify various patterns in work transitions as told. However, they do not inquire into the speaker’s own reflexive relation to what is said. Therefore, they do not engage with the question of learning or the relation between storytelling and learning.
The concept of biographical learning

There are, however, research efforts and concepts that engage with this particular question regarding the relation between autobiographical storytelling and learning. I am referring to biographical approaches in adult education research, in particular the notion of biographical learning. The main argument for engaging with this concept in the thesis has already been presented above: job loss affects not only a person’s finances and social network but also their biographies. Below I will provide a more detailed introduction to the concept of biographical learning.

Biography as a field of learning

The notion of biographical learning was launched in the early 1990s by the German sociologist Peter Alheit as an alternative configuration of lifelong learning. It is closely related to a methodological ‘approach’ that endorses the use of autobiographical narratives in adult education research (Alheit, Bron-Wojciechowska, Brugger, & Dominicé, 1995; Antikainen & Komonen, 2003) and which has been called the ‘biographical turn’ in the social sciences (Chamberlayne, Bornat, & Wengraf, 2000). Intending to increase knowledge about ‘the relation between individual biographies and institutions of adult education’, the ‘biographical approach’ is said to provide a ‘new horizon’ for adult education research (Lischka, 1995, p. 9). Further, it is related to a particular educational practice that harnesses autobiographical storytelling (e.g. Dominicé, 2000), believing that adult education in particular needs to take people’s life experiences as a point of departure.

Even though many researchers have written on biographical learning (Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Biesta & Tedder, 2008; Bron, 2001; Christensen, 2007; Dominicé, 2000; Glastra, Hake, & Schedler, 2004; Herzberg, 2006; Smilde, 2008; Stroobants, Jans, & Wilde, 2001; Tedder & Biesta, 2009a; Tedder & Biesta, 2009b), in the discussion here I will to a large extent build on Alheit (1992; 1994; 1999, 2005, 2009; 1995) and Alheit and Dausien (2000, 2002). Nevertheless, or for that very reason, it is probably important to state that I do not intend to reveal any ‘original’ meaning of this concept, nor do I intend to understand the concept and its parts within its original (German) context. Instead, I view it within an international discussion on career transitions, using a pragmatist’s viewpoint, with the intention of considering what might appear ‘in front of’ the writings on the subject.
Said to provide a ‘theoretical provocation’ and a ‘different way of learning’, (Alheit, 1994, p. 285) one fundamental claim of biographical learning is that biography has become ‘a field of learning’:

‘Living a life’ thus appears to be a more problematic undertaking than in the past. Traditional biographical designs are looking less appropriate. Biography itself has become a field of learning in which transitions have to be anticipated and coped with, and where personal identity is liable to be the result of long and protracted learning processes (Alheit, 1994, p. 285).

A main point in this quotation is that autobiographical reconsiderations are becoming more important in our time; the concept is thus related to the spread of ‘protean’ biographical patterns. As biographical learning processes are explicitly labelled ‘learning processes within transitions’ (Alheit, 1994, p. 285), the concept could be helpful in investigating work transitions. However, as a concept it is not settled really; for this reason further investigations are called for (Alheit & Dausien, 2002).

**Adult learners as capable of remaking their biographies**

The concept of biographical learning suggests a departure from the policy-focused view in which lifelong learning is framed by political and economic precepts. Instead, biographical learning is concerned with ‘the individual side of lifelong learning’, focusing on ‘the learning processes of individual social actors’ and taking as a starting point ‘the life history perspective of the actual learner’ (Alheit & Dausien, 2002, pp. 5, 11). It presupposes that we place some confidence in the emancipative power of learning as well as the capability of the learning individual. Empirical findings from research on ‘social groups exposed to risk’, for example unemployed and divorced persons, show that people do not inevitably panic when their environment is lost (Alheit, 1999, p. 75). Instead, using various strategies of action, people act to change their own life and biography as well as the social world in which they live, thus ‘rebuilding’ their action environments. As life-changes or life-transitions occur frequently in late modern society, sometimes people seem rather capable of dealing with them (cf. Joas, 2004). It would be of significant interest if research could help us better understand why this is so.

One answer is provided by Alheit (1994) when referring to a certain ability or competence (labelled ‘biographicity’), stating that we can ‘re-design again and again, from scratch, the contours of our life within the specific contexts in which we (have to) spend it, and that we experience these contexts as “shapeable” and designable’ (1994, p. 290). Further, adapting a concept used by Niklas Luhmann (originally developed by
Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela), Alheit argues that this process of autobiographical reconsiderations is governed by ‘autopoiesis’ (Alheit, 1994; Alheit, 2005; Alheit & Dausien, 2002), a concept that indicates that the process is characterized by self-regulation. Probably, it is best understood as a reference to productive non-reflexive dynamics that precede conscious and rational procedures.

‘Organizing’ experiences

Biographical learning has been understood as ‘learning about one’s life and learning from one’s life’ (Biesta & Tedder, 2007, p. 139). However, according to the most cited definition, it is

A self-willed, ‘autopoietic’ accomplishment on the part of active subjects, in which they reflexively ‘organise’ their experience in such a way that they also generate personal coherence, identity, a meaning to their life history and a communicable, socially viable lifeworld perspective for guiding their actions (Alheit & Dausien, 2002, p. 17).

The question put forward above, concerning people succeeding in dealing with life transitions, is answered by acknowledging the potentiality of autobiographical reconsiderations: ‘organizing’ one’s life history is considered to be productive in the sense that it helps people to attain ‘coherence, identity, a meaning to their life history’ (Alheit & Dausien, 2002, p. 17). This is probably why autobiographical storytelling and storywriting is harnessed in adult education practice (e.g. Dominič, 2000). One could perhaps state that, by using life story telling for educational purposes, the challenge of change and transitions is coped with by autobiographical identity work.

Following Alheit, in our biography there are latent opportunities, vague intentions or ideas about one’s life that have not been put into practice (Alheit, 1994). Our biography carries a ‘surplus’ of meanings, which is why the life constructions produced are legion:

Within the framework of a restricted modification potential, we have more opportunities than we will ever put into practice. Our biography therefore contains a sizeable potential of ‘unlived life’ (p. 288).

Talking about ‘biographical knowledge’, Alheit does not primarily refer to conscious, explicit knowledge, but to prereflective, unmathematized configurations of our life, a view that corresponds well with the assumption presented above that a non-reflexive relation between body and environment precedes and guides conscious and rational procedures. Using Joas’ (1996) terminology, biographical learning presupposes a passive and a self-reflective intentionality rather than a teleological one. Further, the emancipatory power of biographical learning is emphasized:
‘unlived lives’ possess ‘socially explosive force’ and the potential to change social structures (1994, p. 289). The main issue in this learning process is to ‘identify’ (p. 289) or ‘decipher’ (p. 290) the surplus meanings of our biographical knowledge and to ‘appropriate them’ (p. 289). This is to ‘perceive the potentiality of our unlived lives’ (p. 290).

*The productivity of autobiographical storytelling*

The definition referred to above highlights the role of reflexivity in organizing one’s life history, but it additionally, though implicitly, indicates the role of narrative. Alheit’s arguments suggest a connection to Giddens, in that ‘biographical learning’ resembles both a particular view of late modern culture and ideas of how ‘self-identity’ is maintained:

A person’s identity is not to be found in behaviour, nor (...) in the reactions of others, but in the capacity to keep a particular narrative going. The individual’s biography (...) cannot be wholly fictive. It must continually integrate events which occur in the external world, and sort them into the ongoing ‘story’ about the self (Giddens, 1991, p. 54).

In the field of narrative psychology, the idea of connecting self or identity with narrative and storytelling emerged in the 1980s (Bruner, 1986, 1990; Mishler, 1999; Sarbin, 1986). As the quotations from Giddens indicate, however, it has become a central issue not only in psychology but in the social sciences generally, addressed by social philosophers such as Ricœur (Ricœur, 1992), Taylor (1989) and Honneth (1995a). The latter, proposing a reconstructed and ‘weakened’ concept of subjectivity, suggests that the notion of biographical continuity or consistence should be replaced by the idea of ‘narrative coherence of life’ (p. 268):

The notion of a reflective subordination of one’s own life to a single relation of meaning is untenable; its place has to be taken by the idea of being able to present one’s life as a coherent context in such a way that its disparate parts appear as an expression of the position reflectively taken by one and the same person (Honneth, 1995a, p. 270).

While Alheit builds on empirical observations, Honneth addresses the theoretical challenges raised by the double ‘decentring’ movements of psychoanalytic theory and language philosophy. In the quotation, the main point is that subjectivity and autonomy are not about a strong ego but the author suggests a ‘weakened’ mode of autonomy and subjectivity, and this is achieved by narration.

Biographical learning, too, rejects the idea of a strong ego, not by mainly referring to the idea of narrative identity, but in recognizing that as learning individuals we ‘take a different attitude towards ourselves’ (Alheit, 1994, p. 289). The new knowledge that is produced through bi-
ographical learning concerns not the individuals *per se*, but the individuals in relation to the social world in which they live: people’s ‘self and world referentiality’ is changed. In this context, a reference to Peirce and the notion of abduction makes sense: biographical learning is about networking something that ‘we would never previously have dreamed could be combined’ (Alheit, 1994, p. 290). Thus people’s ways of approaching their social world is affected. This change in ‘self and world referentiality’ is productive: for people who succeed in making the modification, it becomes possible to ‘associate oneself afresh’ (Alheit, 1992, p. 206).

In sum, by ‘organizing experiences’ reflexively and by making stories about one’s life, through biographical learning people learn new ways of viewing their lives. In doing so, people utilize the surplus of meanings about their life, present in their biographical stock of knowledge. And this learning process is not altogether conscious but dependent on the prereflexive relation between individuals and their environment.

**Assessing biographical learning**

Viewing biographies not only as a result of living but also as a product of sensemaking and narrative is clearly not the point made by the mentioned authors; this is obvious to any writer of biographical accounts. The point is rather the recognition of autobiographical reflection and storytelling as salient to the individual’s own life and sense of self. The contribution made in developing the concept of biographical learning is perhaps that the figure of thought is presented within the framework of adult education policy, underscoring the ‘productivity’ of autobiographical storytelling and reflecting – organizing one’s biography makes people prepared for decision-making and acting. Taking up the practice of autobiographical identity work, people prove to be capable of handling the challenges of a late modernity characterized by frequent processes of change and recurrent transitions. Again, in this sense the biographical learning concept imagines a ‘capable’ individual who relates to the past creatively (2008).

The concept of biographical learning is attractive, partly because of its ‘holistic’ character, including both formal and informal learning processes, binding emotional, existential and cognitive aspects, and uniting preconscious and conscious dimensions. Still, when trying to grasp the concept, some parts remain puzzling. Though suggestive, the concepts ‘autopoiesis’, ‘biographicity’ and ‘unlived lives’ call for further clarification, I believe. Although biographicity is described as the ability to ‘attach modern stocks of knowledge to biographical resources of meaning and, with this knowledge, to associate oneself afresh’ (Alheit, 1992, p. 206),...
the concept is given different definitions. In other contexts it denotes an ‘inner potential’ (Alheit & Dausien, 2000, p. 414), an ‘accomplishment’ (Alheit & Dausien, 2002), a ‘competence’ (Alheit, 1992) and a ‘key qualification’ (Alheit, 1994). And saying that we can ‘redesign again and again, from scratch, the contours of our life’, biographicity appears more like an assumption or a statement. Moreover, it seems to me that further questions are raised because of it. How do people for example get hold of this ability or competence?

The central position of ‘autopoiesis’ seems to presuppose that the biographical learning process is uncomplicated or straightforward. But perhaps there are variations in the ways life experience is organized? This point concerns the uniform character of the concept, making one wonder whether people always learn from life and about life in the same way, or whether there are perhaps different approaches to developing this kind of knowledge. The concept of autopoiesis also raises a question regarding how the reflexive and prerereflective are related in the process of biographical learning. Although ‘autopoiesis’ probably tries to understand biographical learning as guided by the prerereflective processes, reflexivity is at the same time central to the concept.

On the basis of empirical observations, the notion of ‘unlived lives’ wants to add something compared to the other research traditions mentioned that connect storytelling and identity. This general learning process that I above termed autobiographical identity work is supplemented by stating that one part in this work is the recognition of ‘hidden’ ideas, opportunities or conceptions about one’s life that have not been ‘implemented’ (Alheit, 1994, p. 289).

The relation between biographical learning and action deserves further attention. Biographical learning is said to put people in a position to act (Alheit & Dausien, 2002). The learning process is described in terms of making conscious what has been preconscious: learning makes people ‘aware’ of their ‘unquestioned certainties functioning in the background to which social individuals relate intuitively when they act’ (Alheit, 1994, p. 289). Well aware of such ‘prescripts’, people can change their lives and the social world in which they live. There are two features in this description that I want to highlight. First, a change in people’s acting is considered to be preceded by a change in consciousness. Possibly this is due to a psychodynamic heritage in Alheit and Dausien’s way of describing biographical learning. However, this view is not self-evident and is rejected by pragmatism, recognizing that people sometimes act without reflection and with a minimum of awareness, applying a ‘passive intentionality’ (Joas, 1996, p. 169). Second, learning is described as an insight or revelation: the meaning people make is
‘hidden’, but using ‘intuition’ people grasp it. Thereby, possibilities are ‘brought to the surface’ (Alheit, 1994, p. 293). Learning, then, is understood as the unveiling of latent knowledge. This is rather different compared to the traditions of pragmatism, in which learning is understood in terms of scientific experimentation and problem solving. Probably, then, integrating the concept of biographical learning within the framework of pragmatism, if possible, would add something and would perhaps call for a reconsideration of the concept. In the next section I will try to make such a move, suggesting an integration of a view of action present in the broad and widespread tradition of pragmatism (in a particular interpretation) and the considerably less familiar concept of biographical learning.

Biographical learning in the framework of pragmatism

While biographical learning and work transition are the two main concepts of this thesis, they are considered and interrelated in the framework of a pragmatist view of action. As stated above, when proposing a ‘capability approach’, the most basic assumption of the thesis is that people act. Thus, rather than understanding people’s coping with major disruptions and transitions by referring to a ‘competence’, in this thesis I prefer to talk about ‘efforts’. This, certainly, is due to the action-theoretical framework.

Going one step further, in this chapter I have referred to the fundamental creativity of action and the dynamics and internal logic of a general process of problem solving, suggesting that a job loss could be viewed as a shattering event that triggers a creative problem-solving practice. In this, actions are interleaved with orienting efforts, production of ends-in-view, deliberations, decisions, and the emergence of new definitions of the situation.

This view of a life transition is not incommensurable with the notion of biographical learning; on the contrary, it could further our understanding of it. Since the shattering event is a biographical disruption (Becker, 1997, Bury, 1982), it provokes people to engage with their life history: organize it and revise it. The process includes a definition of the situation, orienting efforts, reflexivity, serendipity, choices and actions, which in turn change both the situation and people’s biographies, and for this reason the process continues.

This view means that the primacy of reflection and reflexivity in biographical learning is rejected in the sense that reflection does not necessarily precede concrete operations when people engage with something. Sometimes the order of priority is reversed. Moreover, the relation be-
between action and reflection is considered as rather loose, which means that people sometimes act with no reflection (or contrary to their reflections) and sometimes reflect and make decisions with no concrete operation.

This view of biographical learning probably raises questions regarding the relation between thinking and acting. However, considering that, in the tradition of pragmatism, thinking is viewed as a phase in the process of acting could perhaps provide an answer. According to Dewey, when people are faced with a disruptive event, in some cases it is sufficient merely to adjust one’s behaviour by trying various lines of actions experimentally. However, in other cases, people ‘experiment with different lines of action in imagination instead of through overt action’ (Biesta & Burbules, 2003, p. 39), i.e. they make use of the praxis of thinking. Turning to thinking can be understood in terms of ‘economizing’, since this strategy is more flexible and allows for a greater number of experiments. By trying particular actions imaginarily and anticipating their outcomes (‘ends-in-view’), people can find the most appropriate or ‘intelligent’ act. In Dewey’s terms this is called deliberation. Through such efforts it becomes possible for people to move from ‘habitual’ action to ‘intelligent’ action (Biesta & Burbules, 2003, p. 38). Thus, when talking about action in this broad sense, thinking is included.

Another question that could be raised concerns the relation between this view of biographical learning and the overall concept of learning. Trying to address this question, I suggest a very general view of learning, defined as a process in which individuals’ patterns of action are changed relative to previous action patterns. These changes may be the result of a number of different processes, for instance adaption (non-reflective change) or situational reflection (analysing a problem then making an effort to change). Changes may also vary in degree: some could be seen as evolution of existing patterns, while others may create new ones. Finally, all learning takes place in a person’s life and is hence part of biography. In some cases, learning (new action patterns) may result from an individual reflecting on his or her previous ways (biographies) of dealing with certain situations; in other cases adaptations are simply added to an ongoing biography without much reflection. This implies that biographical learning is as diverse as learning.

* * *

One intention in this review was to draw together research from different areas in order to open up a possible space for further research. Ca-
Research was presented alongside studies on coping with job loss and adult learning, suggesting that we could examine enforced work transition as a learning process. A further intention in this section was to address conceptual or theoretical issues arising from the review of previous research. In doing so, I hope the theoretical approach used will not appear as if falling from the sky, so to speak, but as emerging from considerations on what hitherto has been written on the subject in research. Two conceptual issues have been addressed: acting has been presented in terms of a creative process of problem solving, and the concept of biographical learning has been presented and discussed. In the final section, an attempt was made to integrate the latter into the former, suggesting that biographical learning can be viewed within the framework of pragmatism.
3. The study
This research project is part of an ongoing cooperation with two outplacement agencies, TRR Trygghetsrådet and Trygghetsstiftelsen. Representing a Swedish way of restructuring and outplacement (Bergström & Diedrich, 2008, Sebardt, 2006), these agencies provide the background of the investigation.

Context and setting
Through the above-mentioned organizations, individuals have access to outplacement services covering financial support, courses, counselling, and other learning opportunities. The support offered is individually tailored, but generally it includes a variety of educational activities, career counselling, courses in job seeking and other arrangements that facilitate career decision-making and enhance people’s job-search abilities and opportunities. As soon as they know they are going to be made redundant, people are offered the services of a personal counsellor or coach. The counsellor (or coach) assists in exploring the individual’s background, qualifications, skills and interests and in determining whether any additional training or retraining is needed. If someone intends to start a business, there are courses in entrepreneurship and business advisors. There are individual and local differences in the specific courses as well as the specific counselling/coaching approaches. Besides this consultative, emotional and educational support, people receive financial support to cover some of their loss of income during a period of unemployment and transition, as a supplement to the general unemployment benefit fund. In some cases people who start a business project and/or attend courses for skills development gain additional financial support from the agencies. People have access to the support system for two years (private sector, TRR Trygghetsrådet) or seven years (state employed, Trygghetsstiftelsen) after a job loss. The employer and trade union representatives are also offered instruction, support, training and advice on how to deal with the process of redundancy. The outplacement agencies use early intervention strategy in the sense that they visit the company to give information as soon as the employees know about the restructuring.

A biographical approach
To examine people’s engagement in the process of a work transition, assuming that actions are not continuous but sequentially organized,
and with a focus on autobiographical reconsiderations and autobiographical storytelling, research procedures are required that allow for a close examination of demarcated sections of individual biographical accounts. Moreover, as people’s biographies are characterized by discontinuity and intra-individual variability (Mishler, 1999) one needs to perform single-case analysis as well as comparative cross-case analysis. All in all this suggests that the methods should allow for the production of biographical narratives. It also suggests a use of analytical strategies that centre on peoples’ biographies and the way they are changed during the transition. Finally, the research methods need to recognize the significance of biography as well as the learning potential of autobiographical storytelling.

In the field of adult education, the 90s saw a new interest in biographical research approaches (Bron & West, 2000; West, Alheit, Andersen, & Merrill, 2007). An important arena in Europe for accommodating this has been the Network on Life History and Biographical Research, a part of the European Society for Research on the Education of Adults (ESREA). The revival (Dominicé, 2000) of biographical approaches is ‘part of a broader trend across the social sciences’ and a ‘reaction against forms of research (…) which tended to marginalize the perspectives and subjective experiences of learners themselves or reduced subjective processes, including learning, to overly abstract entities’ (West, et al., 2007, p. 12). Still, the main interest is not in ‘experiences’ per se but the ‘central problematic (…) deals with the relationship between the individual and the collective’ (Antikainen & Komonen, 2003, p. 150). Furthermore, there is an important connection between biographical research approaches and educational practice in that adult education practice makes use of autobiographical narratives and what has been called ‘educational biographies’ (Dominicé, 2000). Thus moving from biographical research to developing a concept of learning does not seem to require many steps.

With respect to methodology, biographical approaches in adult education research is said to reach back to the Chicago School of the 1920s (West, 2010, p. 25). Connections to the life history methodology and the works of Thomas and Znaniecke (1918) are often referred to (cf. Dominicé, 2000). However, the past decades have witnessed a considerable expansion in biographical research (Chamberlayne, et al., 2000) and even more in the closely related area of narrative research (Horsdal, 2012; Hydén, 2008; Mishler, 1995). In the latter, works written by Bruner (1986, 1990) and Sarbin (1986) are often referred to as canonical and as turning points, suggesting the crucial role of narratives in human meaning-making, considered as a ‘basic property of the human
mind’ (Hiles & Cermák, 2008, p. 149). Narrative is a ‘mode of thought’ that is fundamental to the creation of meaning.

The ‘narrative turn’ (Hiles & Cermák, 2008) in psychology, in the middle of the 80s, had methodological implications concerning research interviewing (Mishler, 1991). The behavioural view, according to which the researcher’s questions stimulate certain responses from the interviewee, was rejected. Instead the research interview was considered to be a discursive collaborate accomplishment:

The standardized protocol (where question order is invariant) gives way to conversation where interviewees can develop narrative accounts; speaker and listener/questioner render events and experiences meaningful – collaboratively (Riessman, 2008, p. 23).

The critique of the ‘mainstream’ approach to interviewing centred on the insight that, while meaning is contextually grounded (Mishler, 1979), often the answers that the interviewee provides are treated as if they had no relation to the situation in which they were once uttered, as mainstream interviewing ‘decontextualizes the meaning of responses’ (p. 27). Mishler concludes that research needs to take in to account that language is ‘inherently indexical’ (p. 64).

As composed by speech activities, the interview is understood to be regulated by certain expectations and norms. Thus, the analysis of interviews should be sensitive to the various forms and functions of communication. Using language we can do a lot of things; we can argue, comfort, describe or explain, to name a few functions that the use of language serves.

Narrative analysis takes as its point of departure that narratives are a particular form of speech, which is why they should be treated as narratives and not as some other mode of speech. Proponents of narrative analysis argue that, given their omnipresence (Hydén, 2008) and their crucial role in meaning-making (Bruner, 1986, 1990), narratives comprise an important material for social science researchers to engage with.

Today, the uses of various biographical and narrative approaches are difficult to map. Even so, Mishler (1995) makes an attempt to bring some order into the field of narrative analysis, suggesting distinctions to be made between different models. According to Mishler, one set of analytical strategies engages with ‘reference as a problem of representation’ (1995, p. 90). This category includes versions that try to ‘reconstruct the told from the telling’. Because people often do not tell the story in a temporal order, researchers who are interested in the sequence of events and actions need to ‘reassemble selected episodes from interviews
and other sources into a chronically ordered series’ (p. 95), i.e. make a new narrative, to be analysed in a next step. A second set of analytical approaches focuses on ‘textual coherence and structure’ (Mishler, 1995, p. 102). The main question here is how the story is built and what narrative strategies are used to make a story of the events. For example, as Hydén notes, a common strategy is to build the story around a turning point, making a marked contrast between parts of the narrative. In Mishler’s typology, this second set includes a model in which researchers focus on the spoken word rather than the text, ‘in ways of talking rather than the literary genres’, examining the ‘functions of various features of speech’ (Mishler, 1995, p. 105).

In this research project I have attempted a variety of analytical strategies, within the overall biographical approach. After describing the interview subjects, the sampling, and the character of the interview, I will provide a more detailed description of the analytical strategies used.

Subjects
The interview subjects were selected and interviewed consecutively over a period of almost one year. As learning probably is more pronounced and apparent among people whose participation in outplacement counselling has been going on for some time, compared to those who quickly find a new position, we decided in the research group to select people who had been participating in outplacement for more than eight months. Furthermore, we selected ‘mid-life’ workers, defined as individuals 35 to 55 years old. They had to have at least eight years experience in their sector, organization or occupation. These demarcations were made because the challenges connected with work transition would be different for younger people and individuals not yet settled in the labour market, than it is for workers close to retirement. Through the aid of TRR Trygghetsrådet or Trygghetsstiftelsen, contact was established with 23 individuals (Table 1). All the interview subjects were enrolled in the two organizations. They were privately- or state-employed white-collar workers, as the kinds of outplacement services provided by those organisations are restricted to such groups.

In a first step the counsellors at two local TRR Trygghetsrådet offices were asked to report to the research group individuals who, besides meeting the above-mentioned criteria, participated in training to broaden their professional competence. Fictitious names were used. Consecutively, as the individual counsellors reported those names, individuals whose training clearly differed from their previous work were selected.
Table 1: The interviewees. Names have been changed for confidentiality.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Marital status</th>
<th>Educational level</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Years since notice</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Years in org/occ/sector</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ann</td>
<td>F Partner</td>
<td>Senior high school</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Business administrator</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Britt</td>
<td>F Partner</td>
<td>Senior high school</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Postal worker</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carl</td>
<td>M Partner</td>
<td>Senior high school</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Key account manager</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diana</td>
<td>F Single</td>
<td>Senior high school</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Assistant nurse/Industrial worker</td>
<td>15/4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erik</td>
<td>M Partner</td>
<td>University (incomplete)</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Key account sales-person</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felicia</td>
<td>F Partner</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Engineer</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gabriel</td>
<td>M Partner</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>Agricultural manager</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hanna</td>
<td>F Partner</td>
<td>Senior high school</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>Administrator</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isaac</td>
<td>M Partner</td>
<td>Senior high school</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>Communication specialist</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessica</td>
<td>F Partner</td>
<td>Senior high school</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>Executive official</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katrine</td>
<td>F Partner</td>
<td>Senior high school</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Executive official</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louise</td>
<td>F Partner</td>
<td>Senior high school</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>Purchaser</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madlene</td>
<td>F Partner</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Sales manager</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Niklas</td>
<td>M Single</td>
<td>University (incomplete)</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Postal worker</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olivia</td>
<td>F Single</td>
<td>University (incomplete)</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>Assistant bookkeeper</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paula</td>
<td>F Partner</td>
<td>Secondary school</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>Restaurant manager</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert</td>
<td>M Partner</td>
<td>Secondary school</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Logistician</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sara</td>
<td>F Partner</td>
<td>Senior high school</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Assistant nurse</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Therese</td>
<td>F Partner</td>
<td>Senior high school</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Marketing manager</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ulrika</td>
<td>M Partner</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Engineer</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vendela</td>
<td>F Single</td>
<td>Senior high school</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Receptionist</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ylva</td>
<td>F Partner</td>
<td>Senior high school</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Engineer</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zlatan</td>
<td>M Single</td>
<td>Senior high school</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>IT consultant</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Through the outplacement agency, contact was established with those individuals, and the interviews were conducted. In a second step, the counsellors at the same two local TRR Trygghetsrådet offices were also asked to report people who, besides meeting the criteria above, did not participate in training to broaden their professional competence. In this way we ensured a variation among individuals, covering both ends of a continuum. Consecutively, as the individual counsellors reported new names, the research group selected people who had clearly not made any extensive efforts to broaden their professional competence. Due to the state of the labour market at that particular time, the number of participants in outplacement was limited, so the process continued.

To gain additional interviewees, two more steps were taken. In a third step, the counsellors were asked to include people who had recently been deregistered from the outplacement bureau, and in a fourth step, another outplacement agency, Trygghetsstiftelsen, was also asked to provide participants, using the same criteria as TRR Trygghetsrådet. As mentioned before, TRR Trygghetsrådet enrols privately employed white-collar people while Trygghetsstiftelsen enrols state-employed white-collar people. There are differences between the two organizations, and the collective agreements on which their activities are built also differ. However, looking at the collective agreements, the privately and state-employed white collar workers’ conditions stand out as being considerably more generous in terms of financial support and learning opportunities, compared to those of other groups.

Narrative interviewing
The subjects were each interviewed once, with the average length of an interview being approximately 70 minutes. The first interview was conducted in March 2008 and the last in January 2009. The interviews were held at the outplacement bureaus, except for two that were conducted at the interviewee’s home.

Though narratives show up everywhere, in the context of a research interview it is not unusual that they are suppressed (Mishler, 1991). This could happen because of an overly rigid interview guide. There are different ideas on how to do the interview (Horsdal, 2012), but generally, to allow for the production of narratives, the interviewer needs to be attentive and patient; ‘stories require an atmosphere which is to a certain degree friendly, confidential and indeed intimate’ (1982).

The interview guide that was used during these interviews was developed and designed to promote narration by encouraging people to talk about the sequence of events, experiences and actions from the no-
tice of redundancy to the present. Initially the interviewees were asked to tell about the job loss and the subsequent events and actions; ‘I have learned from the counsellor that you lost your job. Would you please tell me about this?’ To help people recall and develop their narratives, probing questions were asked, such as ‘And what happened then?’ Later on, the interview involved some specific themes, including the interviewees’ reactions to the job loss, how they were affected by the event, any difficulties, their job search efforts and what kind of jobs they have searched for, events in the past that may have any significance, their social networks and their views of the future. Follow-up questions were also asked to allow the interviewee to determine the accuracy of the researcher’s understanding.

A variety of analytical strategies
I conducted the interviews and made the transcriptions myself. This required and ensured intense and close involvement with the material. The material obtained from the interviews allows for analysis using a variety of analytical strategies (Table 2). Doing the analysis, it was possible to identify events and concrete actions, sense-making efforts such as narrative and evaluative strategies, as well as social relations affecting the process of transition. The same material was used in the four studies included in this thesis, however with distinct analytical strategies. While the author of this thesis conducted the analysis, the findings were discussed in a small research group of three people. A few transcripts were read and discussed in the research group and in research seminars.

The following description of the analytical strategies does not really capture the logic of discovery but rather the logic of justification. Obviously, a piece of research is a narrative too, with different parts organized into a sequence, in order to convince the reader. However, anyone engaged in inquiry-guided research (Mishler, 1990) knows that the road travelled from initial analysis to presenting the findings is not this straightforward. It is not possible to describe with any reliability the process of discovery in detail, including all detours, blind alleys, red herrings, and wanderings off the track far from both motorway and highway. But I want to make a few comments that perhaps make the descriptions of the research procedure appear less artificial. Thereby some parts of my prior understanding also become explicit to the reader. Of
course these comments are another rhetorical strategy used to convince that reader. First, though neither theory nor method was decided on beforehand, methodological collectivism was renounced early on in the research process. This decision was not explicit, but later on I saw that my intention to understand how people deal with work transitions actually implied this fundamental methodological choice. Second, early on I intended to use narrative interviews. However, I did not really know the various approaches available, so the particular strategies described below emerged over time in relation to the empirical work and as my knowledge of research methods increased. A third comment is that before the project started I was familiar with the concept of biographical learning but I had no explicit intention to ‘use’ it. Actually I considered it difficult and elusive. However, I suspected that a concept of identity formation could perhaps throw some light on the process of work tran-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Key analytical concepts</th>
<th>Material</th>
<th>Analytical approach</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>The many faces of biographical learning.</td>
<td>Biographical learning, reflexive identity work, creative action.</td>
<td>Four of the interviews.</td>
<td>Combined</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II</td>
<td>Learning in occupational transitions – a study of the process following job loss.</td>
<td>Problem solving, situation definitions, actions, orientations, choice junctures.</td>
<td>The 23 interviews.</td>
<td>Reconstructing the told from the telling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III</td>
<td>Work transitions as told: a narrative approach to biographical learning.</td>
<td>Biographical learning, evaluation, reflexivity.</td>
<td>Excerpts from four of the interviews.</td>
<td>Analysis of spoken discourse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV</td>
<td>Occupational transitions as a relational project.</td>
<td>Biographical learning strong ties, weak ties, formal ties.</td>
<td>The 23 interviews.</td>
<td>Combined</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
sitions. Fourth, the ordering of the studies (Table 2) is a reconstruction made with the intention to fit with the thesis overall aims and structure. Historically they appeared in the following order: II, IV, I and III. Actually, I wrote Papers I and IV simultaneously, however Paper IV was submitted before Paper I. ‘Biographical learning’ entered the research process when I was about to finish Paper II and it became increasingly important when I wrote Papers I and III.

I will now describe the different analytical strategies used in the separate papers. In Study I, the empirical section was preceded and regulated by conceptual considerations. Engaging with the concept of biographical learning per se, we suggested distinctions to be drawn between different kinds of biographical learning depending on the relative weights and character of creativity and reflexive identity work. We used a continuum stemming from strong to weak modes of reflexive identity work and creative action, respectively. Thus, the framework proposed that there are different approaches to biographical learning. A few illustrative examples were then selected and analysed to identify patterns of strong/weak reflexive identity work and strong/weak creative action, in order to exemplify and explore the conceptual differentiation made. The examples used were selected both for their clarity in illustrating the suggested conceptual relations, and to contribute to further development.

The analysis involved both narrative strategies and action strategies. Following Mishler’s typology, it thus combines an analysis that tries to ‘reconstruct the told from the telling’ with one that focuses on ‘textual coherence and structure’ (1995, p. 90). According to the latter, the basic assumption is that in making narratives, people arrange actions and events in order to give them meaning, or (from the teller’s point of view) reveal their meaning. Furthermore, we assumed that certain narrative strategies indicated reflexive identity work. The degree to which people were engaged in reflexive identity work was determined (1) by examining the elaborateness of the parts of the interview in which the interviewee commented on his or her relation to the events, believing that more elaborate accounts indicated a strong mode of reflexive identity work. It was also determined (2) by characterizing the account as continuous or more disruptive. When a marked contrast was established between his or her situation before redundancy and the present situation, indicating disruption, a person was identified as being engaged in a strong mode of reflexive identity work. Conversely, when the transition was talked about in terms of continuity between the situation prior to redundancy and the present, a person’s engagement with reflexive identity work was considered weak. Looking at action strategies, the analysis seeks to capture creativity by describing people’s actions, assessing
whether people have departed from routine-based action in favour of novel strategies of action.

In Study II, the interview transcripts, were each analysed separately by identifying salient events that constituted the process of transition. Charts were produced in which those events were marked out on a time line, reassembling 'selected episodes from interviews (...) into a chronically ordered series' (p. 95). The intention, then, was to 'reconstruct the told from the telling' (1995, p. 90). In a sense, the charts were new narratives that in turn were analysed in the next step. By 'salient events' we mean events that the interviewee reported and defined as salient. Besides the events, situation definitions, orienting efforts and actions that occurred in relation to those events were identified and described. Then we identified possible action options, i.e. choices that were oriented toward future actions. Finally, the individual cases were compared with each other. Similarities and differences were looked at in order to identify recurrent event patterns. Proceeding in this way we were able to understand the transition as a process with particular choice junctures as influencing people’s learning.

In Study III the intention was to capture the variety of peoples’ reflexive efforts by examining their use of evaluations when telling the story of the work transition. The analysis used ‘the spoken word’ as uttered in the interview situation rather than the text and the literary genres (Mishler, 1995, p. 105). According to Labov (1972) evaluation is central to narratives and storytelling, as the core of a narrative consists of sentences that refer to events and their progression. When evaluating certain events, the storyteller looks back on the events and relates to them by making evaluative comments. Examining people’s use of evaluation, we recognized that evaluations can be accomplished in many different ways (cf. Polanyi, 1989) using for example different temporal and social positions. Doing the analysis, sections of the interviews that could be characterized as evaluative were identified. Generally, those are bounded in the discourse, marked by for instance a change of tense or the introduction of ‘I’ as an evaluator. Those sections were found either at the end of a narration of specific events, as a reflexive revisiting of the events, or as more general comments on several sets of narrative events. Most of the evaluations occurred in relation to choice junctures, i.e. crossroads with adherent career decisions. To give an account of the variety of rhetorical strategies used, we selected six excerpts from four interviews. The analysis then proceeded in four further steps: (1) recurrent patterns in the evaluations were identified, (2) those patterns were viewed in relation to the composition of the overall narrative with respect to the ordering of events, (3) patterns in the interviewee’s way of
narrating were examined, i.e. if further strategies were used and, finally, (4) the different patterns were related to the overall question of biographical learning. To give an account of the variety of rhetorical strategies used, we selected six excerpts from four interviews.

In Study IV the analytical strategy was similar to that of the first, in that narrative strategies as well as actions were included. Additionally, the analysis focused on social relations. In order to capture people’s relationships and the impact of relations on the learning process, significant relations were identified and characterized as strong, weak or formal. The latter were defined as relations to professionals and organizations, for example labour market intermediaries and the previous employer. Strong ties were ‘long-term, intimate and reciprocal’ relations and weak ties were ‘short-term and non-intimate’, informal relations. Also, the functions of those relationships were identified. Processes of biographical learning were also identified, understood as ‘the efforts by which people organize their life history and revise their life course’. The way people described the changes in their life courses were examined, as well as how they viewed the transition in relation to their overall life courses. Self-reflective and elaborated passages in which people accentuated the contrasts between their present situations and the situations prior to redundancy were considered to indicate biographical learning. Furthermore, departures from routine actions in favour of novel strategies of actions were also considered to be indicating biographical learning. The relationship between the interviewee and the other was then described as enabling or constraining engagement in biographical learning. Finally, in the same way as in the first study, all the cases were compared to each other by comparative cross-case analysis, to identify recurrent patterns.

Quality of the study
In the end, the authority to judge or assess the quality of what has been done and written is not given to the researcher but to the reader, to colleagues and to the scientific community. Even so, in this part of a thesis, the researcher is supposed to make statements regarding the quality of his or her own work and provide arguments as to why the reader should take the story seriously. At the same time self-criticism (Whittemore, Chase, & Mandle, 2001), reflexivity (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 1994) or at least perspective awareness (Larsson, 1993) is recommended. Furthermore, in this section it is not enough to be oriented in one particular field of research; suddenly questions are raised that engage researchers
from all disciplines and all fields of research. It is no wonder that the researcher is somewhat hesitant to embark on this task.

Validation as an argumentative practice
Though validity is considered to be an ‘essential indicator’ of research quality (Miller, 2008) it is not self-evident how to deal with this criterion. The question of how to assess the validity of the findings is sometimes described as a watershed, dividing the research community into two camps (Polkinghorne, 2007). Because correspondence is ‘classic in thinking on validity’ (Larsson, 1995, p. 23), researchers who in the Kantian sense believe a priori knowledge to be salient to empirical experience sometimes consider the concept somewhat troubling. If there is no unmediated experience of the world, the idea of validity becomes difficult to uphold (cf. Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). This is why some researchers are doubtful whether one should use it at all (Smith, 1984), replace it with other concepts (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and/or revise the philosophical points of departure (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007).

Following Mishler (1990) I consider validation to be a practice in which a community of researchers evaluates the trustworthiness of the study. Similarly to the Habermasan discourse ethics, in this view researchers place confidence in the process of exchanging arguments. ‘Validating knowledge claims is not a mechanical process but … an argumentative practice’ (Polkinghorne, 2007, p. 476). It seems, then, as if we are leaving Plato’s view of truth in favour of the Sophists’ and the significance of rhetoric and the testing of arguments. This view is close to the medieval use of dialectics in disputations (Larsson, 1995). It is also close to a pragmatist view of knowledge as always provisional and as located within the realm of action (Biesta & Burbules, 2003). Actually, this last sentence enhances the validity of this thesis, on the condition that coherence is a valid criterion (Larsson, 1995; Steinke, 2004). Showing up now and then, leaving its mark on the different parts of the thesis, pragmatism seems to be the glue that holds the parts together.

Transparency
To enable the community of researchers to evaluate this work, the researcher, carrying the ‘burden of authorship’ (Geertz, 1988), needs to be careful in describing the research process and the methodological points of departure. Otherwise there will be nothing to dispute. This is sometimes discussed in terms of transparency, ‘the disclosure of the procedure and the process of interpretation’ (Matt, 2004, p. 329). Furthermore, the researcher should indicate how the method relates to the re-
search problem, and present the empirical material as well as the research context in a satisfying way (Steinke, 2004). Thus, by describing the context of the study, the theoretical points of departure and the analytical procedures used, the intention here has been to attain transparency and to make it possible for other researchers to critically assess the findings. I must leave it up to the reader to decide if the research procedures are described carefully enough.

Empirical anchoring
However, the process that must be carefully described must also be carefully lived. What requirements should then be emphasised in the empirical work of this particular research project? To be able to recognize the complexity in people’s ways of dealing with a life disruption, the researcher needs to come close to the object of research. This is the main rationale for taking up qualitative research approaches generally. In this project I have tried to come close to peoples’ actions and the way they understand their situations, through the use of narrative interviews. Bruner’s (1986) concept of a narrative mode of thought, referred to above, is a strong argument here; if people think narratively, then researchers would come closer to people’s understandings if they let people tell stories. Further, empirical anchoring is achieved through close, intense engagement with the recorded and transcribed interviews. As stated above, the author conducted all the interviews and made all the transcriptions. This does not guarantee that validity (understood as correspondence) will be achieved but it makes the prospects better for the analysis to be carefully done and more sensitive to nuances and details.

Communicative validity
The fact that I did the interviews, transcriptions and large parts of the analysis myself calls for inter-subjective assessment of the findings. Sometimes this quality criterion is discussed in terms of a communicative validity (Kvale, 1995), meaning that the process should be collaborative. Actually, the present research project is characterized by intersubjectivity in several respects. Follow-up questions were asked during the interviews, in order to let the interviewee determine the accuracy of the researcher’s initial understanding (‘member checking’). In analysing the material, the coding was established in the research group as we looked at interviews together. Furthermore, the findings have been presented and discussed in different contexts. Aside from the small research group of three researchers, some interviews have been discussed in seminars, drafts of the papers have been discussed in seminars and conferences, and the main findings have been discussed with professional
counsellors at several occasions. Papers I, II and III are written in collaboration and all papers have been subjected to peer reviewing and revised as a result of this process. Additionally, the author has been part of a multidisciplinary research environment focusing on issues related to work and organization. Thus, many eyes and minds have been engaged in the emerging texts, hence the thesis can be considered to be a collective endeavour, and a claim of ‘negotiated consensus’ or a ‘communicative validity’ could be put forward.

**Generalizability**

In response to the question of whether the findings are local and unique or whether they hold true universally, I would say that the findings are local and unique in the sense that the knowledge produced is situated in a particular language, within a particular social, temporal and cultural setting. However, this does not exclude the possibility that similar findings could occur in another study with similar theoretical, conceptual and methodological points of departure, conducted in a similar context. This is to say that the findings could be generalized, or transferred, by means of ‘context similarity’ (Larsson, 2009). The researcher’s duty here is to ‘communicate a context’ (Larsson, 2009, p. 32), i.e. to be careful in describing the original setting, leaving to the readers to determine if/when there is a context similar enough to make transfer possible. Of course the word ‘context’ includes the kind of outplacement program that provides the basis for the study, but also the cultural setting, the socio-economic conditions, including labour market regulations and, strictly speaking, the current state of the labour market.

Of course, the participants must also have common characteristics when the findings are transferred. To achieve good quality in this respect, the research was characterized by a rather careful description of the severe sampling procedure, excluding large groups from the study. Due to this procedure and by carefully describing the specific outplacement programs that set up the particular conditions and means for the participants, the claims made in the thesis are delimited. The reader has also thereby been provided with the material necessary for assessing if transferability is possible. However, necessary does not mean sufficient; the major difficulty of ‘judging when a similarity is present’ (Larsson, 2009, p. 33) still remains.

On the other hand, to maintain good quality, efforts have been made to attain variety within the particular sample. Larsson (2009) is probably right in giving a word of caution not to understate the difficulties in predicting what differences might be important to take into account here. Even so, to cover for a variety of individual points of departure,
the sampling includes, besides men and women, both people that make efforts to broaden their professional knowledge and people that stay with their current professional expertise.

Moving beyond the idea of variation with respect to the sample, to uphold good quality, efforts have also been made to attain variety when doing the analysis. Cross-case and within-case analysis procedures have been used and both intra- and inter-individual variation have been recognized, again to avoid simplifications and to maintain a complex description of the research subject. In addition, variety is achieved by using different analytical strategies, as described in the previous section. The study does not make any statements about what action strategies are most common in the sample; instead it points to the variety in peoples’ ways of dealing with work transitions. Staying with complexity, the risk of painting an overly simplified picture is countered.

Taking the issue of generalizability one step further, following Larsson (2009), I would prefer to talk about it in the plural, as there are different kinds of findings in this study. Some are related to the specific research area (company restructuring, work transition, outplacement). There are, however, findings that are more conceptual in character. Those may be considered valid in a more general sense and applicable to other research areas. In this line of reasoning, work transitions and disruptions due to job loss are only one example of transitions and disruptions occurring in peoples’ lives. In the attempt to contribute to the development of biographical learning theory, clearly there is also a claim to make knowledge regarding biographical learning processes generally.

On research ethics
Following the principles set up by the Swedish Research Council (2011), the interviewees were informed of the aim of the study, his or her contribution to the overall project, how the material will be used, and the interviewee’s right to withdraw from the study at any time. To attain confidentiality, names and other details have been changed. The outplacement agency also used fictitious names when suggesting individuals who might be considered for participation in the study to the research group. The counsellor contacted the interviewees and asked for permission before the researcher was informed of the names. Furthermore given the potentially trying experience of both being made redundant and also telling the story about it, the researcher has attempted to be sensitive to the individual interviewee and approach him or her respectfully.
4. Summaries

Four papers make up the empirical basis of this thesis. They examine work transitions and biographical learning from different points of view and with different focuses and emphases.

**Paper I**

This paper examines biographical learning *per se* and as a tool for understanding work transitions. As an alternative approach to conceptualizing lifelong learning, biographical learning is considered valuable because its scope is wider than predominant lifelong learning policies and because its aim extends beyond instrumental skills and ‘employability’.

The paper analyses, explores and expands the notion of biographical learning, and looks for more diversity within the concept. Making a situation-conditioned differentiation between various approaches to making biographies, we propose a number of different modes of biographical learning. In order to expand the dominant conceptualizations that centre on individuals’ reflexive efforts for creating identity and meaning in their life histories, we suggest that biographical learning should also be considered as comprising creative action. Thus, faced with different challenges and transitions in their life courses, people utilize both reflexive identity work and creative action. In the concept of ‘creative’ action we follow Joas (1996), who considers creativity to be fundamental to human actions. ‘Reflexive identity work’ refers to the efforts by which individuals use and revise their life stories to sustain or elaborate changes in their identities.

Furthermore, assuming a rather loose relationship between consciousness and action, we show a variation in the relative weight and character of action and reflexive identity work in biographical learning processes. Using the labels of weak and strong to describe different approaches, we suggest four modes of biographical learning. One, the pronounced mode, includes a strong mode of reflexive identity work together with a strong mode of creative action. An idealistic, mode includes a strong mode of reflexive identity work but with comparatively little creative action. In an agentic mode of biographical learning people change their lives with a minimum of existential deliberation, but in a very active way. There is also a restricted mode, a carefree attitude by which people cope with change by acceptance and assimilation. Again, in favour of dichotomies, the article regards the variations as positions...
on two separate continua using the weak and strong labels as referring to the extent to which people engage in reflexive identity work and creative action.

In conclusion, we consider biographical learning to be an important tool for both describing and understanding the changes that have become commonplace today for many people in the Western world. These include work-related disruptions of life course and searches for new career opportunities that more often than not entail change not only of identity but also of social circumstances. As this kind of change becomes widespread, a further consequence will be that the variation in biographical learning will increase. For researchers, it is therefore important to fine-tune our conceptual tools in order to be able to capture this variation.

**Paper II**


In this article we look at how people deal with job losses through problem solving and learning. While most research in this area focuses on the effects of a job loss, this article examines the process, extending from the notice of redundancy to reemployment. Previous research has employed coping theory to answer the question of what people actually do to deal with a job loss. Coping research, however, often fails to notice that people’s action strategies vary and unfold over time, and that people create and recreate goals in the course of the act.

Instead, using narrative interviews, we examined the process of transition, expecting intra-individual variability. The interviewees either participated in training to broaden their professional competence or did not make any such expansive efforts. In this way we ensured a variation among the interviewees, covering both ends of a continuum. Following a general view of action in the tradition of pragmatism, we assumed that actions generally include orientations and definitions of a situation that create a space for further action. The analysis focused on salient events, deliberations and actions performed by individuals in their efforts to change their situations. Thus, we assumed that actions are sequentially organized and in turn transform and redefine situations, giving rise to new opportunities for future actions. The narrative interviews permitted a detailed comparative cross-case analysis of individuals’ actions and choices and how the process unfolds over time.
The findings of this study show that people treat their job losses as practical problems to be solved using various strategies. This is a natural problem-solving process. However it is not continuous but structured, partly due to the intervention. Here people pass similar crossroads defining particular challenges and opportunities, receiving a limited set of choices. Thus, there were choice junctures, i.e. events with adherent, emergent and influent choices and actions. Examining those, the study further argues that outplacement counselling not only provides consolation and information but, perhaps most importantly, enables creativity and learning, respecting inter- and intra-individual variation. Some people define the job loss as a time for a change, setting up a learning agenda right from the start. Others try to regain what is lost as soon as possible. Sometimes people make far-reaching efforts to review and assess their current situations, exploring what opportunities are available. Others make extensive self-reflective efforts to examine and figure out their own intentions. Yet others do not consider any particular research activities necessary, besides opening the newspaper and scanning the advertisements. Another juncture made people decide about possible enhancement of their current expertise. And when relating to possible employers and customers, new relationships need to be established using different strategies.

The study gives support to research pointing out job loss as an opportunity for new career choices. However, the study takes our understanding one step further by pointing out junctures and the significance of learning. Also, the ability to recognize and seize an opportunity (serendipity) was underscored. While there is a variation between and within cases (including backtracking), there was also one significant underlying pattern; at several junctures the praxis of reflexivity was shown to be significant. This indicates that learning in work transitions is not only about the acquisition of instrumental skills, but that identity work makes up a vital part of it.

Paper III

The third paper further examines and expands the concept of biographical learning, making a contribution to the development of a narrative approach. According to this, autobiographical storytelling is considered as a practice through which claims about one’s life history are performed and negotiated. The article examines job-loss narratives and fo-
cuses on strategies used in moments of evaluation. According to this view, reflexivity is considered as relational, and inversely, social relations are considered as existing through ‘social practices’ (Biesta, 2009, p. 70). Insights from narrative theory are employed, calling attention to evaluations in narratives and proposing their crucial role in promoting self-reflective thought.

Findings recognize that there are a variety of evaluative strategies, which in turn suggests that there are different kinds of reflexive efforts and a variety in biographical learning. Assuming a continuum ranging from no evaluation or weak modes of evaluation to marked or strong ones, the latter promotes a pronounced mode of biographical learning. The strategy of shifting perspective on life events is probably also productive in this respect, often accomplished by the use of different social and temporal positions and by viewing events within different frameworks. The variation is not only found between individuals but also within individuals; a person can give different narratives on different occasions. Therefore, the praxis of reflexivity would not only be related to personal characteristics but is also related to situation – time, space, audience and the position in the overall narrative.

The evaluative strategies employed have an impact on whether the individual portrays him- or herself as in charge of the process or pressured by other, often external forces such as society, market, and companies. Furthermore, certain strategies seem to be related to being undecided or hesitant, while others make people ‘close the case’ and take action. Findings point to a praxis of making implicit evaluations by which the teller disclaims a chance to form his or her own knowledge or opinion on what has happened. Finally, certain strategies seem to confirm the observation of an idealistic tendency in career-decision narratives, presenting the self as an autonomous entity. Therefore the relationship between transitions as told and transitions as lived is important to acknowledge.

The suggestions are tentative and further elaboration is necessary in order to understand the complex relation between evaluative strategies, reflexivity, learning and action.

**Paper IV**


This fourth paper draws attention to the significance of social relations to work transitions. More specifically, keeping in mind the findings of the previous articles pointing to the significance of reflexivity and identi-
ty work, I examine how people’s social relations enable and constrain a process of biographical learning in outplacement clients. Biographical learning is defined as the efforts by which people organize their life histories and revise their life courses when responding to challenges in life.

Granovetter’s (1973) ‘strength-of-weak-ties hypothesis’ states that for jobseekers, acquaintances are more important than close friends or relatives. Based on this, it is argued that as transitions supported by outplacement services do not only concern searching for and finding a job, but often also several crossroads and new career decisions, learning has to be taken into account in order to understand such transitions.

Drawing on Granovetter, distinctions were established between weak relations (short-term and non-intimate), strong relations (long-term and intimate) and formal relations (e.g. to professional counsellors). A comparative cross-case analysis revealed that strong and formal relations influenced people’s engagement in biographical learning. While weak ties have an influence on straightforward careers, strong ties are important to people’s opportunities to turn a redundancy into a change in biography and career. However, including other people in the process of decision-making can involve both risks and opportunities, as support sometimes turns into constraint.

Additionally, the study revealed different functions that social ties offer to people in work transitions, and also reveal that there is a close relationship between how people define their situations and how they understand and use their social relationships. While emotional support was shown to be important in some instances, when the situation was defined not as a ‘disgrace’ or a ‘loss’ but as an opportunity, the significance of social relations shifted from providing emotional support to providing consultation or information. Thus, social ties can serve different functions at different stages of the transition.
5. Discussion
The main findings of the study concern the productive dynamics of job loss, suggesting that (1) a job loss during particular circumstances furthers reconsiderations, novel career decisions and what has been called ‘horizontal’ career moves. This term refers to \textit{particular actions by which people broaden their outlooks during the transition, without implying that they necessarily complete an occupational transition}. The study has shown also that (2) a work transition following job loss can be thought of as a biographical learning process: considered as a biographical disruption, a job loss sometimes makes people engage with their biography through reflexive identity work and creative action. Recognizing the variety in people’s approaches to a work transition, the study has shown that (3) there is diversity in biographical learning with respect to the relative weights and characters of creative action and reflexive identity work and, (4) the variety in people’s approaches to work transitions has been further understood and theoretically described as a problem-solving practice structured by particular choice junctures. Doing this, the study has (5) pointed out the important roles of creativity, reflexivity and serendipity during the process. It has also been shown that (6) reflexivity, being a central part of biographical learning, is performed in moments of evaluation, when people tell stories about their job loss and work transition. The analysis of evaluative strategies suggested that (7) reflexivity should be discussed in the plural, as the variety of evaluations implies a variety of reflexive efforts. Going further into biographical learning as a relational process, the study has pointed to (8) the significance of social relations to people’s engagement in biographical learning, showing that strong ties and formal ties are more important than weak ties to people who consider horizontal career moves during a work transition. Altogether, this suggests that practical, existential, rhetorical as well as relational issues are involved in work transitions and biographical learning.

The study does not make any claims about outcomes in terms of employment or well-being. Furthermore, even though creativity and learning are often considered desirable, in themselves they are not good or bad. And the ways in which people handle challenges are manifold; some people cope successfully with a job loss without horizontal career moves or reflexive identity work. Nor does the study make any claims about frequency, i.e. how often different kinds of transitions occur. Instead it tries to theoretically describe and understand the inter- and intra-individual variation in people’s engagement in the process of transi-
tion. While recognizing agency, by looking at people being part of an intervention and by acknowledging the significance of social ties, the approach used has produced knowledge about individuals-in-context, having the intention to find a position between determinism and voluntarism.

In the following discussion I will address the thesis’s two major themes – biographical learning and work transitions. In the process of writing the articles, these two have been brought together. Over time they have come to terms with each other, mutually exchanging objections and observations. The empirical work on work transitions has raised certain questions concerning biographical learning and, inversely, due to the concept of biographical learning, certain dynamics in work transitions have been made visible.

In the first section of this chapter I will focus on the concept of biographical learning. Therefore the subject of work transitions will be set aside, in the belief that biographical learning is also relevant to other life transitions with adherent processes of identity work and decision-making. In the second section certain issues related to work transitions are discussed. The order of priority is chosen to allow for using any conceptual improvements made in the first section to discuss the more specific empirical issues in the second. Because findings in the study carry implications regarding labour market policy and the practice of outplacement counselling, I will very briefly discuss some questions related to those topics. Finally I point out some issues that could be important to address in further research projects. Continuously, as the story goes on, I will consolidate parts of the conceptual framework that up till now and in the articles have been kept tentative.

Contributing to the development of the biographical learning concept

When engaging in concept development, the intention is certainly not to bring about ‘a systematically elaborated theory’ (Alheit & Dausien, 2002, p. 18). Nor is it to uncover any ‘original’ meaning of the concept. Tracing its intellectual history falls outside the present investigation too, no matter how interesting such a project might be. Instead the intention has been to figure out what might appear when approaching the concept from the pragmatist’s point of view, in relation to the particular research area of work transitions. Thereby I try to make a limited contribution to its further development.
Moving from policy to the concrete lives of individual learning subjects

Looking at previous research, the concept of biographical learning is seen in articles in the field of adult education, addressing issues related to policy making (eg. Alheit & Dausien, 2002; Glastra, et al., 2004). Using as a starting point ‘the life history perspective of the actual learner’, and focusing on ‘the learning processes of individual social actors’ (Alheit & Dausien, 2002, pp. 5, 11) it probably could be seen in the context of Giddens’ (1991) call for ‘life politics’:

Life politics concerns political issues which flow from processes of self-actualisation in post-traditional contexts, where globalising influences intrude deeply into the reflexive project of the self, and conversely where processes of self-realisation influence global strategies (p. 214).

Recognizing the weakening of the traditions’ power of influence, Giddens places the individual’s lifestyle and decision-making at the centre of policy. In a similar manner, the notion of biographical learning attempts to make education policy recognize the potentiality of people’s autobiographical reflections and storytelling.

Even though Alheit does not stay with macro-sociological reasoning but turns to micro- and meso-levels of analysis, I would say that the concept of biographical learning is developed and to a great extent used as an instrument for discussing policy. Therefore, to make the concept appropriate for exploring the biographical learning process in the lives of individual learners, paying attention to a variety of approaches used, the cheque needs to be cashed, so to speak. The contribution that I have tried to make in this thesis can be considered to be such an exchange, as it concerns a differentiation of the concept at the micro-level of analysis.

Doing this, the separate studies have pointed out diversity within biographical learning. While Alheit has identified three current ‘biographical coping patterns’ (‘patchworking’, ‘networking’ and ‘designing’; Alheit, 1999, p. 75), these studies made possible a more complex description of what biographical learning is. Two of the studies included in this thesis deal explicitly with the question of how to encompass a wider spectrum of approaches, suggesting different ways of conceptualizing variety, focusing on continuous vs. disruptive versions (Study I) and narrative strategies (Study III). Furthermore, the study that theoretically describes work transitions as structured by choice junctures (Study II) provides another way of conceptualizing diversity.
Diversity in terms of choice junctures

By using the concept of biographical learning for examining work transitions, it appears that biographical learning, for the purpose of micro-level analysis, could be considered as a practice. This corresponds with the view of learning as being about ‘the ways in which individuals respond to events in their lives’ (Goodson, Biesta, Tedder, & Adair, 2010, p. 5). As acting is not continuous but structured, following periodically recurring phases, this conceptualization highlights significant junctures occurring in the learning process. Thus, biographical learning is understood not as an altogether self-regulated process but as including choices. Therefore it becomes possible to understand intra-individual variation in biographical learning by theoretically describing the variety in an individual’s choosing, acting and thinking.

Moreover, such a view leaves room for unexpected events and serendipity as important to the emergence of unlived lives. This point should not be underestimated; chance and serendipity are often foreseen when research tries to understand biographical patterns, and are frequently referred to when people talk about their lives. All this underscores that biographical learning follows the educational logic of a laboratory rather than following a given schedule or curriculum:

Biographical education and training processes operate in self-willed ways, they permit unexpected experiences and surprising transformations that in many cases are not foreseen by the ‘learner’ himself, or are not ‘understood’ until after the event (…) Terms such as ‘seeking movement’ or ‘diffuse directedness’ are more appropriate here than cybernetic models involving some well-targeted ‘self-management’ (Alheit & Dausien, 2002, p. 16)

Following such a logic, ‘unlived lives’, in the pragmatist’s framework, is not seen as resident within individuals but constructed continuously anew. Moreover, as this term might lead our thoughts to visions in the past, it is also important to demarcate against nostalgia. The label of ‘not-yet-lived-lives’ might more clearly indicate that biographical learning is not about realizing old visions but about ‘abductively’ producing new ones in the intersection between one’s biographical resources and the current social opportunities. Furthermore, the emergence of unlived lives is not understood in terms of a ‘revelation’ or ‘insight’ as if something hidden is brought to light, nor as something that we ‘put into practice’ or ‘implement’. Instead the emergence comes ‘as we work’ (Weick, 1996) or ‘as we act’, i.e. alongside our continuing living, acting and choosing.
Diversity with respect to creativity and reflexivity

The first paper deals explicitly with diversity in biographical learning. In this study, two continua were developed. The first one concerned the relative creativity of the actions performed, stemming from a ‘strong’ to a ‘weak’ mode of creative action. The second one was about ‘reflexive identity work’, again stemming from a ‘weak’ to a ‘strong’ mode. By using ‘creative action’ and ‘reflexive identity work’ as two separate axes, four kinds of biographical learning were presented, in ‘pronounced’, ‘idealistic’, ‘restricted’ and ‘agentic’ modes of biographical learning. The intention was not thereby to classify or categorize individuals but – again – to display a variety among approaches. Accordingly, one individual can use different approaches in different instances. Related to this, creative action and reflexive identity work do not always occur together and, accordingly, reflection does not always precede action. The relationship between them is loose, dynamic and reciprocal.

To qualify the definition provided in the second chapter, if learning in this thesis is defined as a process in which individuals’ patterns of action are changed as compared to previous action patterns, then this learning process is not uniform but varies in at least the two dimensions of ‘reflexive identity work’ and ‘creative action’. Both of the two continua point to variety concerning the ‘radicalness’ of biographical learning. A change in one’s biography can be continuous and more disruptive.

Regarding the notion of ‘creative action’, creativity is considered not as something extraordinary but as something essential to action (Joas, 1996). It was defined as the efforts by which individuals act on their current life conditions in order to change or sustain their life courses. Operationally, the relative creativity of a person’s action was defined as the degree to which a person departs from routine-based action in favour of new strategies of action. A more elaborate conceptualization of the relationship between creativity and learning is presented by Ellström (2001), suggesting four different ‘levels’ of learning at work (p. 423). In a certain type of learning, the learner has to ‘engage in a more active process of knowledge-based problem solving through experimentation’. To bring about creative learning, individuals need to ‘act to transform’ their conditions. To ‘question’ objectives and definitions of problems is crucial to bringing about creative learning. This corresponds well to the learning process described as a problem-solving practice. Drawing a line between different levels of learning and reserving the term creative for the ‘highest’ level, it becomes difficult to recognize creativity as a generally fundamental feature in action, however.
In the thesis, ‘reflexivity’ is understood broadly as efforts by which people reflect on their own acting and thinking. In some instances, however, people’s accounts include reflexive comments on identity and meaning related to their biographies. Such reflexive efforts have been termed ‘reflexive identity work’ and are defined as efforts by which individuals use and revise their life stories to sustain or elaborate a change in their identity. Sometimes a disruptive event promotes this and sometimes a major career decision accentuates this ‘existential’ dimension of a life transition. Clearly ‘identity work’ with no further adjunct is a broader term, referring to a wide range of efforts in which people engage in order to understand themselves and present themselves in the social space. In considering reflexivity as part of biographical learning I stay close to the definition of biographical learning provided by Alheit & Dausien (Alheit & Dausien, 2002, p. 17). There is novelty, however, in the suggestion that people may be reflexive to different extents and in different ways, and that sometimes ‘reflexive identity work’ is not a necessary condition for making a change in one’s biography.

Diversity in evaluative strategies

Being omnipresent in human interaction, (autobiographical) narratives have a major influence on sense making and how people understand life events. Recognizing that people do not only think narratively but also make narratives, in Study III the strategies used in storytelling were considered to be part of the biographical learning process. The practice of storytelling is not innocent and harmless but has an impact, not only on the listener but on the storyteller too. Thus, research has drawn attention to the risk (or possibility) of being ‘caught’ in a story (Goodson, et al., 2010; Tedder & Biesta, 2009a). A part of the practice of storytelling is the making of evaluations (Labov, 1972). In the third study it was suggested that this practice of making evaluations is salient to reflexivity and therefore should also be considered part of the process of biographical learning. Looking at the research interview as a speech event in which people make use of different strategies, the particular moment of evaluating was examined. Exploring the variety in evaluative strategies, it was shown that sometimes people make explicit and marked evaluations, while on other occasions people tell stories with almost no evaluations at all. In addition, people make the evaluation from different social and temporal positions; they use direct or indirect speech, and use different frameworks (such as political, existential, and juridical ones). Considering evaluation as reflexivity-in-practice, it has been proposed that different modes of evaluating are related to biographical learning in different ways.
More generally, a narrative approach to biographical learning can be regarded as recognizing the social and cultural ‘situatedness’ of biographical learning, because storytelling is practiced with other people in relation to culturally established values. The narrator and the audience compose the story jointly, and whether a story will ‘count’ depends on its micro- and macro-sociocultural conditions. In this way, the storyteller’s strong and weak ties have an impact on the story told, and on how it is told. Thus, recognizing that autobiographical storytelling is a narrative practice, social context is accentuated and considered to exist through ‘social practices’ (Biesta, 2009, p. 70). In the next step, the rhetorical strategies used, as well as the composition of the story, will affect the learning process. For example, the social conditions in which a story is told will influence whether an evaluation will be a marked and explicit one or if the account will have the character of an ‘objective’, ‘neutral’, report instead.

Due to these considerations, a biographical learning theory gains further components. First, as people need to present a reasonable account, the production of ‘unlived lives’ will be fuelled by our sociality and constructed jointly. Secondly, the internal logic of a narrative promotes different ways of evaluating, which in turn furthers biographical learning through different reflexive efforts. Thirdly, however, because autobiographical narratives are validated in the praxis of communication, those ‘micro-level’ efforts are related to meso- and macro-level conditions; narratives are shaped by a number of factors, including both ‘the rhetorical intention (...) and the structuring effects of social location’ (2000, p. 121). Social ties as well as broader cultural patterns will have an effect on the rhetorical strategies used. In turn, they will affect the biographical learning process.

Work transitions as biographical learning

While previous research has demonstrated the far-reaching socioeconomic, psychosocial and health effects of unemployment and job loss, this investigation has pointed out a different research object – the process of transition from redundancy to finding a new employment. By this shift in focus from effect to process, an opportunity is provided for investigating the strategies of action used when people deal with a work transition.

In this thesis I have examined the process of transition using a concept of biographical learning. It is time to ask what is gained by setting up this particular arrangement. In short, what does the former gain from involving the latter? To provide a brief answer I would say, first,
that the concept allows for an examination of work transitions that recognizes individuals as social actors. This is admittedly not only due to the concept of biographical learning, but it follows from the study’s methodological point of departure. I will return to this question in a moment. However, the concept of biographical learning also points to the role of learning for agency, suggesting that agency should be conceived not as something that is possessed, but as something that emerges or is achieved (Biesta & Tedder, 2007). Second, the concept of biographical learning, it can be argued, has made visible productive dynamics of job loss; a troubling experience need not be depressive but instead can sometimes bring about growth and learning. Of course, this unintended consequence of an enforced life disruption is not always possible to foresee. And, to make the picture more complicated, even though learning is often considered to be something desirable, this is not patently the case. To evaluate the process of a work transition is not easy. Thus, when talking about ‘productive’ dynamics, I do not intend to make an evaluative statement. Third, the concept has revealed that work transitions do not only involve efforts made to develop specific instrumental skills but also existential consideration. What is learned, then, does not consist mainly of job-search abilities, CV writing or computer skills; identity work and career decision-making are also important. This corresponds to Edwards (2002) saying that lifelong learning is not so much about the development of skills and qualifications, as it is about the development of reflexive capacities. Fourth, in different respects the concept of biographical learning has something to say about career decision-making. To learn from and about one’s own life can be important as a basis for decision-making and action. Inversely, career decisions affect people’s biographies. Furthermore, and this is a fifth payback, the concept has pointed out the significance of storytelling in work transitions, suggesting that the narrative strategies used affect the process of transition. Career decision-making includes the communicative process in which career decisions are made socially valid, which is often gained by telling the story about it and presenting it as a part of one’s (occupational) life history.

In different ways then, educational research and the concept of biographical learning lends a hand in labour market and career research.

The individual being made redundant as exposed and capable

Obviously this thesis does not deal with the question of work transitions as a policy concept or as a political problem. Even so, in a very concrete sense, it provides insight into the consequences of working in what Sennett (1998) labels the new capitalism as configured in northern Europe.
today. How to evaluate and politically judge the current emphasis on employee mobility is not evident, however. As compared to Sennett’s and other critical contributions, the present investigation instead has pointed out opportunities related to work transitions. This, of course, is partly because of its particular point of departure. Work life transitions are talked about in terms of actions, choices, reflexivity and decision-making on the parts of active subjects. To investigate the subject using an approach prompted by methodological collectivism would make other aspects and dynamics visible.

A possible objection when looking at this study concerns whether the researcher, in taking the point of departure in a pragmatist view, gives further support to the discourse on mobility and lifelong learning and thereby reinforces a morality of adaption and performativity. Certainly there are questions to be raised concerning pragmatism, and its different versions. For example the tendency to be preoccupied with consequences and utility is not unproblematic. Moreover, I suspect that some of its interpretations promote a slightly ‘activist’ account of human conduct – which may counteract the creative moves that a pragmatist view actually suggests.

However, as there is no such thing as an innocent use of language; to portray workers as being exposed and vulnerable would be problematic too. As Ingram (2009) has observed, adult education literature ‘sometimes tends to paint transitions as difficult, troubling, even unpleasant’ (p. 4). With a similar outlook, Field (2010b) emphasizes the ‘multifaceted nature of transitions as experienced by individuals’, and recommends researchers to be ‘cautious in the face of those who wish to pathologize individuals, emphasising their vulnerability and anxiety in the face of change, and downplaying their agency and desire precisely to reassert and develop their sense of who they are and what they can do’ (p. xxii). These statements would also be valid for unemployed individuals; there is a need to make the picture more nuanced as well as more complicated. Moreover, as was pointed out in the introduction, it is crucial to keep in mind that long-term unemployment is not the same as work transitions.

A vital condition promoting creative strategies of action, in this study the work transition is supported by arrangements that are characterized as ‘generous’. The label can be used to describe the psychosocial, consultative, educational as well as the financial support (severance pay) provided. Often, the length of the notice period is generous too. The system is considered generous as compared to the support available to other groups in the labour market. Among people who have access to it, this brings about a sense of being privileged, which in turn makes possi-
ble opportunistic interpretations of the job loss. And people having access to courses, training and organized learning opportunities are in a better position to make decisions and find employment. Furthermore, such formal learning opportunities promote informal learning processes (Ellström, 2011).

What we have, then, is a combination of a shattering event and generous support arrangements, bringing good conditions for creativity and reflexivity in enforced work transitions.

**Conceptualizing individuals’ variety of strategies**

It was shown in the study’s second article that people who have lost their jobs deal with the transition using various strategies. They review and assess their intentions, capacities and opportunities. They explore career alternatives and consider educational prospects. People employ old and make new relationships with employers, customers and business partners. They seize unexpected openings and broaden their professional expertise.

This is an overall description of action strategies used; the variation in strategies still needs to be taken into account. Rather than understanding the diversity in people’s strategies in terms of individual variables (such as job search intensity), the concept of *choice junctures* was introduced. The findings showed that the transition is structured and that the individuals’ variety of approaches could be theoretically described in terms of recurrent choice junctures.

Faced by an initial juncture, some people set up a learning agenda right from the start, defining the job loss as a ‘time for a change’. Others seek to regain what is lost as soon as possible. In a second juncture, people decide to review and assess their current situation, exploring what opportunities are at hand. Others choose not to examine only the surrounding world but also, reflexively, to examine their intentions. Yet others do not consider any particular review efforts to be necessary. Somewhere during the process the question of competence is raised; people are faced with a juncture and make different choices concerning the enhancement of their professional expertise. Another juncture is about diverse strategies used when relating to possible employers and customers.

Looking at previous research in the field, Kanfer and colleagues (2001) argue that a major need is ‘elucidating the person-situation factors, processes, and pathways by which individual differences in job search behaviour affect employment outcomes’ and analysing ‘the directional or dynamic nature of the self-regulatory process’ (p. 851). By the suggested conceptualization I have tried to address this scarcity in pre-
vious research. As a contrast to most research on coping with job loss and job search behaviour, this study recognizes both inter- and intra-
individual variation. Furthermore, as the process is not straightforward but structured, the potential for variation, creativity and learning is recognized. Intentions, orientations, how the situations are defined, and how individuals view their own positions in life may be changed due to acting and reflexive efforts. Serendipitous events may also occur and change the direction.

**Creativity and reflexivity as underlying patterns**

In discussing biographical learning above, a conceptualization was provided, saying that biographical learning varies in the two dimensions of ‘reflexive identity work’ and ‘creative action’. Combining this conceptualization with the one that makes use of the notion of junctures, creativity and reflexivity could be seen as underlying patterns influencing the different choices people make. Thus, on different occasions during a work transition people engage in reflexive identity work and creative action to a different extent.

Though creativity is considered fundamental to action, it has been shown that there is a continuum ranging from ‘strong’ to ‘weak’ versions, determined by the degree to which a person departs from routine-based action in favour of new strategies of action. In the same way there is diversity in people’s reflexive efforts; a variation in evaluative strategies has been recognized that points to different kinds of reflexive efforts. In the particular effort called ‘reflexive identity work’ a variation occurs regarding the degree to which people engage with this, ranging from weak modes of reflexive identity work to strong modes of this process. Furthermore, four modes of biographical learning have been theoretically described (labelled a ‘pronounced’, an ‘idealistic’, an ‘agentic’ and a ‘restricted’ mode of biographical learning). With respect to the question of job loss and work transitions, these correspond to different modes of dealing with challenges occurring in a work transition at different junctures.

The relationship between reflection and action is not obvious. Sometimes action is deliberate, while in other instances people make career decisions with almost no reflection at all. Sometimes people actually act contrary to their previous reflections and explicit intentions, for example when someone seize an opportunity that suddenly appears. Such opportunities, and the ‘seizing’ of them, have been labelled serendipity. They occur frequently in career narratives, which further supports the suggestion that not only reflecting but also acting are important to recognize, in order to understand work transitions. On other occasions,
however, people reflect intensively about themselves and their histories without doing any concrete action.

*Learning and creativity as overlooked in research on job search behaviour*

By pointing out learning, creativity and serendipity, the study adds something to previous research on coping with job loss and job search behaviour. Interestingly, according to a well-cited meta-analysis (Skinner, et al., 2003), problem solving is one of the most widely recognized of coping strategies (‘appearing in almost every scale’, p. 241). Searching for ‘the structure of coping’, the authors attempt to attain conceptual clarity by analysing category systems for classifying ways of coping, using a hierarchical principle in organizing coping strategies. Sorting among the constructs used, problem solving is considered to be a ‘higher order’ strategy, presented as the first among five ‘core’ categories (p. 239). The label of ‘problem solving’ is used to denote a ‘family’ of coping strategies, considered to include ‘instrumental action, strategizing (...) planning, logical analysis, effort, persistence and determination’. What is perhaps lacking in the article is a notion of temporality and the possibility of coping strategies being linked sequentially and temporarily, recognizing that one strategy may be followed by another one. Actually, in the overall discussion on coping research and theory, leading proponents (Lazarus, 2000), have proposed holistic approaches that try to make accurate descriptions of ‘phenomenal wholes’. They suggest the use of a ‘recursive’ frame of reference, arguing that the research design ‘must be within-subjects to allow for ‘the identification of changes (or processes) in psychological reactions over time and diverse conditions’ (p. 668).

However, even though coping research focuses on processes, and problem solving is considered an important coping strategy, and even though support is provided favouring approaches that try to be ‘holistic’ without repressing intra-individual variation, *the notion of creativity is seemingly absent in research on coping with job loss*. Probably, to many people, creativity is associated with entrepreneurship and art, but not with job loss and work transitions. The related notion of serendipity is overlooked too, with a few exceptions (McDonald, 2010). Instead, research on coping with job loss and job search behaviour has dealt with questions about intensity and goal-setting ( Creed, et al., 2009; Prussia, et al., 2001; Van Hoye & Saks, 2008). I would say that this is an observation that deserves further investigation and discussion. It also seems that research often presupposes that people move ‘forward’ in the pro-
cess of transition. However, as has been shown, sometimes people make ‘horizontal’ career moves.

Not only creativity and serendipity are overlooked in coping research, but also the related concept reflexivity. This is even more surprising as the practice of reflexivity is considered a major characteristic and challenge of late modernity (Bauman, 2000; Beck, Giddens, & Lash, 1994; Giddens, 1991). This is due partly to nomenclature and terminology, as the term ‘self-criticism’ appears in the mentioned meta-analysis (Skinner, et al., 2003). However, while Skinner et al. place ‘self criticism’ as subordinate to ‘blame-self’, reflexivity is considered to be related to creativity and learning in this study.

**Work transitions as relational**

While the study has pointed out the significance of action and sense making, it has also been shown that people’s social relations have a large impact on the process of transition. Career decision-making and biographical learning, it has been suggested, are relational. Biographical learning processes ‘depend on communication’ (Alheit & Dausien, 2002, p. 16), and therefore the idea of autonomous and rational career decision-making is questioned.

This point is further supported by the narrative approach to biographical learning. People need to make their career decisions socially valid and this is achieved *inter alia* by telling the stories about them. As a narrative is validated in particular contexts, the story needs to make use of culturally established values. Culture and social ties will thus have an effect on the rhetorical strategies used, which in turn will affect the process of transition.

In the ‘Occupational transitions as a relational project’ article it was shown that strong ties and formal ties are rather influential when people turn a redundancy into a change in biography and career. This is a contrast to voluntary and vertical career moves, which are often supported by weak informal ties. The support provided by social ties is ‘multidimensional’, and includes information, consultation as well as financial and emotional support.

As creative action is part of biographical learning, it follows that creativity is relational too. According to Honneth (1993b) creativity requires ‘a basic confidence in the care of a loved one’ because such confidence is a necessary condition for the ‘capacity to be alone’ which is important to creativity (p. 103). This idea, saying that creativity, which is sometimes located in the individual genius, is to be considered a joint project, provides a bridge between on the one hand the notion of creative action as important to work transitions as biographical learning,
and, on the other hand, the emphasis on transitions as relational projects.

However, the consequences of social relations to work transitions as biographical learning are not unambiguous; social ties both enable and constrain people. This explains why people are sometimes ambivalent in involving a partner in career decision-making and are sometimes reticent about their career intentions. The significance of formal ties, for example professional counsellors, is partly because they are not financially or emotionally affected by the individual's career decisions and therefore in a better position to provide 'objective' consultation.

**Career change as identity-makeover**

It has been shown that identity issues are sometimes actualized by work transitions. According to the individualization thesis advocated by Giddens, Beck, Bauman and others, the power of traditions is diminishing and identity is shaped reflexively to a greater extent. This tendency probably furthers people’s desires to make a work transition into an identity-makeover project (Ezzy, 2000; Ezzy, 2001; Rosenwald & Wiersma, 1983). Though biographical learning is presented as a process having positive connotations in the sense that people’s abilities to cope with change are acknowledged, the tendency mentioned is by no means an unproblematic one. Honneth pointed out the risk that 'processes which once promised an increase of qualitative freedom are (...) altered into an ideology of de-institutionalization' furthering social pathologies, e.g. 'a number of symptoms of inner emptiness, of feeling oneself to be superfluous, and of absence of purpose' (2004, p. 463). Of course, the outcome of a work transition with attendant horizontal career moves and extensive identity work is not due to the individuals' efforts but to whether those are socially recognized. As mentioned above, career decisions need to be socially validated. However, as a 'self-realizing projects', career change is not only dependent on social recognition within the framework of our strong ties, but also requires respect from a wider societal context (Honneth, 1995b).

**Implications**

The study provides an opportunity to reflect on possible implications regarding policy-making, appropriate interventions and intermediary arrangements, responding to the current and critical challenge of frequent company restructuring. First I will make some comments related to the practice of counselling. Strictly speaking, the implications concern outplacement counselling. However, I will leave out that particular
word, believing that the discussion may be extended to the broader field of career counselling. Secondly, some cautious but critical comments will be made related to labour market dynamics in general.

Regarding career counselling

Because career counselling often includes the exploration of the individual’s background (qualifications, skills and interests), it can promote biographical learning. Counsellors can gain from recognizing the learning potential in the acts of remembering and the related praxis of autobiographical storytelling. Thus, when ‘mapping’ people’s experiences and skills by encouraging them to review their biographies and examining their life histories, the act of remembering could be seen as a sense-making activity that makes it possible for individuals to intersubjectively create meaning in their life histories as well as in their current situations in life. Recognizing a close relationship between biographical learning and career decision-making implies that the process of outplacement counselling could include the joint production and examinations of ‘unlived lives’.

From viewing a work transition as a biographical learning process it follows that identity work is central to it. Preferring ‘identity work’ to ‘identity’ suggests a certain view according to which the individual’s performances, opinions, preferences and ways of acting are domain-specific and vary over time. Therefore it would be a mistake to expect an ‘authentic’ voice when people make career-related statements. As assisting individuals in examining and exploring goals and intentions probably is central to outplacement counselling, the considerations concerning the emergence of ‘unlived lives’ could be important to recognize. They also suggest, to some extent, a suspicion of measurement practices employed to describe the individual’s personality, expertise and occupational profile. Recognizing that intentions, plans and ‘unlived lives’ emerge over time and are related to serendipitous events and the overall process of biographical learning, it should be important that such practices are used to further creativity and identity work, not to ‘freeze’ people’s goals or intentions.

There are also implications for counselling practices that make extensive use of goal-setting and action plans, to ‘motivate’ people to be engaged in the job search process. Conscious action plans should not be used without being aware of the tension between, on the one hand, goals and plans made explicit and definitive, and on the other hand the creative process of inquiry. When, as in the Swedish public employment services, executing officers serve the double function of providing control and support, the use of explicit ‘plans of action’ surely has the func-
tion of making sure that people approach their situation actively. This praxis is probably not very productive, however, in furthering problem-solving and creative action.

The epidemic spread of ‘coaching’ as a counselling practice raises certain questions concerning the particular use of goal-setting and explicit action plans as a means of career counselling. ‘Biographical coaching’ as a new strategic perspective in adult education (Alheit, 1994, p. 292) is probably something rather different. Presented as a contrast to ‘training’ and as saving individuals from becoming dependent, providing this is said to be ‘the real challenge for any emancipatory adult education’. It involves

the joint discovery by teacher and learner of biographical opportunities for shaping social, occupational and political existence more autonomously. Coaching also means exerting a particular influence on the ‘social ecology’ of learning – i.e., in practical terms, the framework of social conditions – in order that individuals’ hidden possibilities are brought to the surface and developed, and that ‘unlived’ lives can be lived instead


This suggests, among other things, autobiographical storytelling to be part of career coaching. This would, obviously, be rather different in comparison to training sessions as it is composed of repetitive CV writing and job-interview exercises.

A tricky thing, in view of the proposed conception of action and creativity, is how to consider concepts such as ‘being active’ and ‘being passive’, often considered as opposites, as there seem to be productive and repressive modes of both. To be intensively searching for a job is probably seen by most people as the appropriate behaviour. Even so, to employ creativity presupposes another approach to the job search process, as compared to strategies that refer to character, willpower, determination and strength of mind. Among approaches to the job search, being ‘busy as a bee’ has gained more interest in both research and practice than being ‘cunning as a fox’, or ‘seizing the day’, or believing that ‘opportunity makes the thief’.

Regarding labour market dynamics

The study raises major questions regarding the issue of labour market functioning generally. Policy presumes a rational, calculating, profit-maximizing individual. But conceptualizing work transitions as a biographical learning process suggests a more complex view of career decision making, drawing attention to other dynamics, including efforts to make sense of one’s biography and life course. Due to the prevalent view in policy discussions, much time is spent on factors like determin-
ing the proper level of the unemployment fee to ensure that job seekers are motivated to engage in job searching. Less attention is paid to post-materialistic concerns including deliberations regarding identity and biography. Furthermore, the dominance of matching as the major duty for the public employment service implies that both the supply and demand sides of labour market are considered to be stable. The present investigation, though, has called attention to processes in which job seekers make horizontal career moves and extensive learning efforts during a work transition. If the labour market is characterized by continuous change on the demand side, and by ‘reflexive’ job seekers on the supply side, matching is too passive to be used as the general strategy for labour market policy (cf. the evaluation of US employment service provided by Osterman, 2003). Furthermore, the present investigation has called attention to informal learning processes closely related to the individual’s career decision-making. While learning efforts often are considered as following from a career decision and are understood in terms of professional development, the concept of biographical learning suggests that the agenda should be broader and that learning and decision making is intertwined.

In saying this I immediately need point out an important reservation. This study really does not examine labour market dynamics generally, because the context is particularly ‘generous’ outplacement services. And, as has been said in the method section, the possibilities to generalize the findings are thereby restricted. Even so, the points just made are defensible for several reasons. First, the argument is based on general considerations of action, questioning the prevalent view on rational action and furthering a view that takes into account the fundamental creativity of human action. Thus the argument is valid even though intermediary arrangements recognize and support this creative dimension in human acting better than ‘lean’ versions. Secondly, previous research has called attention to a change in people’s biographical patterns, recognizing that protean career patterns have become more common. The related individualization thesis provides additional support; given the current cultural conditions, identity is transformed from a ‘given’ to a ‘task’ (Bauman, 2000, p. 31), and biography and self are shaped reflexively (Giddens, 1991). Therefore people today are inclined, to a greater extent than before, to engage in extensive learning projects and make horizontal career moves during a work transition. This is not only true for people who have lost their jobs and take part in outplacement services.
Future research
This investigation concerns work transitions in the context of extensive outplacement services. Large parts of the workforce do not have access to generous systems but are offered a considerably more limited kind of support. It would be important to examine work transitions in such ‘lean’ contexts too. This would permit making comparisons, examining how different support systems affect the process of transition. Furthermore, it could be important to look at different groups too, for example blue-collar people, youths or migrants, and to focus on the significance of gender and educational background to the process following job loss.

The study has not looked into the supporting organization providing outplacement services or into the counselling practices used. Even so, as was stated in the previous section, career counselling includes opportunities for autobiographical storytelling. In order to understand the educational arrangements’ potential for promoting biographical learning, it would be important to explore the variety of strategies used by outplacement agencies and counsellors, including both micro- and meso-levels of analysis. An international outlook would be fruitful, i.e. a cross-national study, comparing systems for outplacement services (cf. Kieselbach, et al., 2009), including in the study broader socio-cultural and political patterns.

In addition, the study indicates that there is more to do in the development of the concept biographical learning. The ‘narrative approach’ offered in the fourth article is probably rewarding and could be further elaborated on.

Finally, the study has called attention to intra-individual variation in strategies of action. As the process of transition may last for a shorter or longer period of time it would be important to take a closer look at the effect of duration on the process of transition and the strategies of action used. To examine how narratives and (narrative) strategies vary over time, a longitudinal research strategy would be appropriate.
References


