

# The Experience of Un-or Underemployment and Home Foreclosure for Mature Adults: A Phenomenological Approach

Amanda Guinot Talbot · Erica Tobe ·  
Barbara D. Ames

Published online: 21 August 2014  
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**Abstract** Mature workers, identified as 40 years of age or older, have been significantly affected by recent increases in unemployment. The purpose of this study was to give voice to the experience of mature workers facing job loss and foreclosure and identify the policy, employment, and economic implications. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with five participants and two key informants. The sample was drawn from a lower-Michigan non-profit organization where participants were seeking foreclosure prevention assistance. Psychological phenomenology focused on the participants' description and shared meaning of their experience. Creswell's (2007) integrated approach was also utilized. A codebook, audit trail, and reflexive statements ensured intercoder reliability and trustworthiness. Participants voiced the importance of sharing their story. Five themes were identified: changing norms, experience of mature workers, age as a barrier, technology as a barrier, and housing. Implications for policy, research, and education are discussed.

**Keywords** Home foreclosure · Unemployment/underemployment · Mature workers · Community and families · Lifespan development · Qualitative research

## Introduction

Recent changes in the economy have led to many individuals and families struggling financially, mentally, emotionally, and physically (Howe et al. 2004; Stack and Wasserman 2007). The financial stress and strain includes losing income, assets, and social standing, being forced to tap savings and retirement funds, declaring bankruptcy, and going into foreclosure. Although the US has experienced recessionary periods previously, the number of jobs lost and the prolonged nature of the loss were historically high and specifically devastating financially for families during the latest recession (Mattingly and Smith 2010). This was especially significant for mature workers aged 40 years and older. In 2011, 54.9 % of older workers were categorized as “long-term unemployed” (27 weeks and above), and a large proportion were considered “discouraged workers,” defined as those who want and are available for work but are not looking because they believe there are no jobs for which they qualify (Rix 2011). A lack of available work, employer concerns related to age, or a lack of education/training were cited reasons for a worker to assume the discouraged worker status (Bureau of Labor Statistics n.d.-a). According to Rix (2013), in April 2013, the average length of unemployment for workers ages 55 and over was 50.2 weeks, which was significantly higher than 36.9 weeks for younger workers.

The purpose of this research was to examine the experience of un- or underemployed mature workers who were facing job loss or demotion and foreclosure by giving voice to these mature adults and identifying the implications of this phenomenon. The research questions were: (a) What is the overall *experience* of job loss for un- or underemployed mature workers? (b) What *phenomena* occur as a result of prolonged un- or underemployment for mature workers who also are facing foreclosure of their homes?

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A. G. Talbot (✉) · E. Tobe · B. D. Ames  
Human Development and Family Studies, College of Social  
Science, Michigan State University, 552 W. Circle Drive,  
7 Human Ecology, East Lansing, MI 48824, USA  
e-mail: guinotam@msu.edu

E. Tobe  
e-mail: tobee@msu.edu

B. D. Ames  
e-mail: ames@msu.edu

Life course theory was the primary theoretical framework used in this research. Family life course theory identifies the systems and patterns of change that families experience as they move through different stages and changes in their lives and how events that occur influence later life outcomes (Aldous 1990). According to Lerner (2002), life course theory shows how human lives are socially embedded in specific historical times and places that shape their content, patterns, and direction. Historical changes that occur throughout life are experienced differently based on one's age, status in life, and stage of individual or familial development. Time and history are major components of this theoretical model.

The life course perspective links three primary aspects of time: individual lifetime, social (family) time, and historical time. The first, individual lifetime, addresses the age of the individual and the expectations associated with being that particular age (Aldous 1990). Age is important because it creates the starting point for life course theory. An individual's age also can produce upper and lower limits to personal capabilities, skills, social status and standing, and some general life possibilities (Settersten 2009). The next time structure, social (family) time, focuses on how time is related to life-stage development within a family unit (Aldous 1990). The third time perspective, historical time, can be best illustrated as a historical event that occurs and influences the life course of an individual and/or family unit. Sometimes, these situational events can be "off-time." Un- or underemployment, especially in the later years of life, is an example of an "off-time" event. Further, the occurrence of an off-time event affects multiple members of a family system (Mendenhall et al. 2008). When looking at how unemployment can affect a family system, the concept of "linked lives" and intergenerational linkages becomes increasingly important. When job loss occurs in a family system, family members who are most closely affected are "linked" to the individual(s) experiencing the unemployment and may experience the social and emotional effects that job loss and potential home foreclosure can bring.

## Review of Literature

### Unemployment and Underemployment

Many individuals currently are experiencing unemployment for the first time in their lives due to economic restructuring in the nation and in their local community. Michigan has witnessed alarmingly high unemployment rates. Over the official course of the Great Recession, Michigan's unemployment rate ranged from 7.2 to 13.9 %. The rate of unemployed mature workers was lower than

that of emerging adult workers (18–24), however, the duration of unemployment was longer for mature workers than any other age group, 1 year on average (PBS 2013). Elevated unemployment rates were present in the state prior to the onset of the Great Recession. From January of 2004 through 2008, the unemployment rate in Michigan hovered consistently around 7 %. This was heavily influenced by the auto industry, which had been suffering. In 2011, the auto industry was profitable for the first time since 2004 (Isidore 2012). The prominence of the auto industry in this area must be acknowledged, as many individuals lost their jobs or were downsized due to the prevalent problems in the industry as a whole. Older workers in this category, like their colleagues in other industries, have struggled to resume work in their field, especially work with pay comparable to their previous salary.

Underemployment also poses great risk to individuals, and the inclusion of this concept in studies examining job and income loss is vital as underemployment broadens the employment-unemployment spectrum. Underemployment includes individuals working involuntarily part-time, full-time at a severely reduced rate of pay, full-time workers receiving poverty-level wages, and those working in a field that is different from their area of interest, training, or education (Slack and Jensen 2008). Fleck (2011) discussed the rise of underemployment, and its influence: "...laid off managers now work as cashiers. Unemployed teachers are delivering pizzas. Engineers are fixing computers" (p. 16). In the current economy, both un- and underemployment place individuals and families at risk. "...[B]eing over-qualified, underpaid, or working part time will likely have long-term consequences on a worker's marketability, self confidence and future earnings" (Fleck 2011, p. 17). This is particularly a problem for older workers who are more likely to have their level of qualifications present a real barrier to employment.

### Influence of Home Foreclosure

Homeownership is the cornerstone of the American dream, however, with the changing economy, homeownership may represent financial stress and strain; a dream turned to a nightmare (Firman et al. 2009). In 2012, 21 % of all US residential home sales were categorized as foreclosure-related. Mortgage default, home foreclosure, and bankruptcy have been found to be highly related to factors such as unemployment and the decrease in market home values (Edmonds et al. 2011). Market sales in short sales (22 %), combined with foreclosure-related sales (21 %) totaled 43 % of residential sales as distressed properties. Distressed properties include bank-owned properties, pre-foreclosure, foreclosure, and short sales (properties not in

foreclosure-properties selling short of the outstanding loan amount) (RealtyTrac 2013). Further, Edmonds et al. (2011) found that the severe drop in home values caused many individuals and families to file bankruptcy as a form of protection or last resort. Consistent with previous research from Jefferson et al. (2012), Tobe (2014) found that the majority of families facing foreclosure during the recent recession sought housing counseling services due to income reduction. Since 2007, 1.5 million older Americans (55+) lost their homes through foreclosure. In addition, 3.5 million others were at significant risk of losing their places of residence (Fleck 2012). These figures related to home foreclosure have important financial, physical, mental, and emotional implications for mature workers.

A home represents more than a financial asset. As Gillen and Kim (2014) stated in their review, older homeowners predominately see their homes as a dwelling, not a financial commodity. Kantor and Lehr (1975) described the element of space as regulating physical, mental, and emotional distance within a family. Outside a family, this element serves to order external relationships. The mechanism of space functions on multiple levels, regulating physical and emotional aspects of life. Space functions both in a physical, tangible manner, as well as in an operational sense. This is important as the physical space in which we operate and live within (i.e., our homes) creates and facilitates important moments in time. The physical area and distance present between family members also reflects on the nature of their relationships. Family connections, events, and memories can be linked with the homes, or spaces, we occupy. Thus, significant emotions are linked to physical spaces. The prolonged nature and multiple stages of foreclosure can create high levels of stress related to questions of physical provision, estrangement, displacement, and isolation from support networks and resources (McLaughlin et al. 2012). With the financial, mental, and emotional implications of unemployment and home foreclosure, future research must examine these stressors holistically.

### Influence on Mature Adults

There is great economic and social cost to older workers when faced with un- or underemployment (Slack and Jensen 2008). For older workers these changes occur in an off time manner, which has vast implications for their overall recovery. After suffering these losses, mature workers, when compared to their younger counterparts, generally do not have the benefit of time to make a career change, to pursue new training, and to rebuild their financial foundation. There are fewer years for mature workers to start over (Leppel and Clain 1995; Geewax 2009). Hershey and Jacobs-Lawson (2012) found that the individuals in their study generally were not prepared for retirement. Further,

there was a discrepancy between what they believed they needed for retirement and what they perceived they would actually have. Many un- or underemployed mature workers have experienced loss of employment and income just prior to the years of retirement (Leppel and Clain 1995). Geewax (2009) reported that 75 % of retirement aged individuals have cited losses in their retirement savings (e.g., 401(k), IRA) as the reason they were postponing retirement. Rising health care costs and fear associated with lack of coverage, losses in investment portfolios, and declining home values were other reasons cited.

To begin to understand the effects of un- or underemployment on mature workers, it is imperative to understand the needs of this unique group of workers. Lee et al. (2008) studied older adults (51–76 years of age) who were unemployed and asked them to assess the barriers and obstacles for returning to work. Participants reported experiencing age discrimination, concern for health related issues, transportation concerns, and a lack of technology skills as obstacles to re-employment. Noonan (2005), in her examination of older adults' current employment experiences, found that many participants stated extreme age discrimination during their job search as an obstacle. Additionally, the economic crisis, health concerns, wanting to work part-time, and an interest in participating in a meaningful life activity were all factors that influenced re-employment. Older workers reported hearing during their job search that they were either under- or overqualified. This disparity in qualifications is a major hurdle, forcing these workers to settle for involuntary part-time work (Noonan 2005). These studies in tandem begin to address the social and economic issues and real and perceived barriers mature workers face during periods of un- or underemployment.

The following study describes the experience of mature workers who resided in the same heavily affected community and were facing a common set of financial stressors—un- or underemployment and home foreclosure. Previous research fails to identify the connections between this pile-up of stressors and this particular population. It also does not identify the influence of these stressors within the mature adult cohort. Research that includes the influence of home foreclosure for un- or underemployed families provides a more holistic view of financial stress and strain for this population, and the stories voiced by the participants provide insight into this timely issue.

### Methodology

#### Sample

This phenomenological study included five participants experiencing un- or underemployment and some part of the

pre-foreclosure/foreclosure process, and two key community informants. Both informants worked within the targeted community in foreclosure assistance and prevention programs. Participants' ages ranged from 50 to 67 years, with three males and two females. Two participants reported being single, two were married, and one was divorced. All participants had some college education or a bachelor's degree. Two participants reported their current income falling within the range of 0–25 % of what they previously earned during full time employment, one reported a range of 25–50 %, and two reported a range of 51–75 %. The key informants were professionals working with the county extension office. The university extension system focuses on family and consumer science and community development. One key informant had worked in extension for 3 years, and the other had a tenure of 21 years.

A purposive sampling design was utilized in keeping with Patton (1990) to purposely select and investigate intense, detailed, information laden cases of long-term un- or underemployment in combination with home foreclosure. Participant recruitment was conducted through the county extension office that had a program focus on foreclosure prevention and intervention. Inclusion criteria were: (a) un- or underemployed and currently seeking full-time employment, and (b) going through the process (at various stages) of home foreclosure. In addition, interview participants, who were un-or underemployed, and defined as a mature worker (40 years of age and older), were preliminarily screened for their workforce status using the US Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) definition of un-or underemployment. According to the BLS definition, "persons are classified as unemployed if they do not have a job, have actively looked for work in the prior 4 weeks, and are currently available for work" (Bureau of Labor Statistics n.d.-b, para 21). Sample size was determined based on common experience of the phenomenon in question (job loss or demotion and home foreclosure) as well as the participants' age and community residence. These criteria contributed to the limited sample size that was drawn. The population in question is difficult to reach, as the specific inclusion criteria and the emotional nature of this experience make viable participants (a) hard to identify and (b) reluctant to tell their story. Further, Starks and Trinidad (2007) reported that phenomenological studies should not exceed 10 participants. Given the breadth of the data generated, the research team established that saturation was reached with the five participants.

### Research Design

Psychological phenomenology, also referred to as empirical or transcendental phenomenology, primarily focuses on

the description of participants' lived experiences (Creswell 2007; Marshall and Rossman 2011). Phenomenology has its roots in the discipline of philosophy. One of the founding fathers of phenomenology, Husserl, believed that the only true form of knowing came through experience (Patton 1990). Phenomenology is descriptive by nature; the goal is to describe the essence of the common experience in question (Starks and Trinidad 2007). The first step in conducting a phenomenological study is to focus on an issue of concern that is common to all individuals under investigation (Creswell 2007). The phenomenon could range from a common emotion (e.g., depression, loneliness) to a cultural experience or movement. The importance is that there is a commonly shared essence to the experience (Patton 1990). This method of inquiry was chosen due to the shared meaning of the experience of job loss coupled with the process of home foreclosure among participants in the same age range in one lower-Michigan community. The focus of this research was on the language used by the participants to describe and ascribe meaning to their everyday experiences and their experience of the phenomenon in question (Daly 2007). Participants' experiences are described, commonalities are highlighted, and participants' interpretations of their world are stated. Generally, this study's process, similar to the process Creswell (2007) outlines, included identifying a timely issue to investigate, bracketing researchers' roles, conducting in-depth semi-structured interviews with participants experiencing the phenomenon in question, and analyzing the data for significant statements and common themes. All study aims, scopes, and protocol were submitted to and approved by the university's Institutional Review Board.

### Data Collection and Analysis

In-depth semi-structured interviews with a diverse group of individuals having experienced the phenomenon of interest were conducted (Daly 2007). The goal of the interviews was to "elicit the participant's story" (Starks and Trinidad 2007, p. 1375). Participants were given informed consent forms and asked to complete a brief demographic questionnaire prior to the interview process. Interviews were digitally recorded with the participants informed and written consent. Interview questions were developed based on themes pre-identified by the research team, as a part of a pilot study that focused on the social and economic needs of mature workers and their needs related to financial education opportunities. Sample questions included: (a) Take me through a day in your life; (b) What does a typical day for you look like? (c) Can you tell a story that best illustrates your current employment experience? Interviews were transcribed verbatim by the researchers

and coded using Creswell's (2007) phenomenological integrated approach.

To begin analysis, each research team member independently reviewed the interview manuscripts to gain a clear sense of the phenomenon being described. Creswell (2007) stated that this methodological approach provides the researcher with the ability to gain an overall feeling for each interview. The team then re-read the manuscripts and used open-coding to identify significant statements. These included key phrases, quotes, or shared meanings/feelings for the particular phenomenon being expressed. At face-to-face meetings, each researcher communicated the significant statements that emerged from her individual coding session. Lists of formulated meanings were clustered into topical areas, and after review and further discussion a codebook was created. The codebook then guided the remainder of the coding process. This overall process applied intercoder reliability, ensuring similar coding procedures by each member of the research team. Team members also kept an audit trail and documented reflexive statements. Reflexive statements or bracketing is important in qualitative research. This process allows researchers the opportunity to take a reflexive look at their innate biases and describe their unique positionality (Creswell 2007). A reflexive statement also allows researchers the ability to state and track their a priori thoughts, perspective, beliefs, and hypotheses (Starks and Trinidad 2007). Trustworthiness was established through the documentation and reflection of the study's members, documentation of the study's process and coordination of work flow, piloting of the interview questions, utilizing multiple interviewers, and peer debriefing throughout data analysis. After data collection and analysis, it was determined that saturation was reached.

## Results

Throughout the analysis of the transcripts, the focus was on the experience of un- or underemployment and the stages of home foreclosure. Participants in concert with one another stated that their story needed to be documented and heard: "I did want to share how difficult things are for people like me. Someone to listen, and if somebody else listens...you know, I guess that's it." The experience of all participants came through in five main coded themes: changing norms, the experience of mature workers, age as a barrier, technology as a barrier, and housing. Each coded theme with participant quotes will be discussed in detail. Ages and demographic details are listed. Each participant was given a pseudonym prior to the coding process, which has been included in this manuscript.

## Changing Norms

Participants spoke of adjustments and changing expectations for work, the future, daily routines, and life stressors and concerns due to the economic and societal restructuring that has taken place. With these drastic changes, feelings of fear and uncertainty were expressed. Paulina, a 62-year-old single woman revealed:

...I get up in the morning and for a brief second I think everything is normal. And then I realize it's not. I don't have any place to go, I want to go to work but I can't go there (Paulina).

Changes to work force culture and work force requirements represented significant transitions for the mature workers. Many spoke of being raised in a "work culture" that required knowledge and dedication to one craft, one precise form of technology, one company, for the entirety of one's working life. As they tried to re-enter the labor force, they were confronted by a high-tech corridor of work opportunities where one must have technological expertise and multiple skill areas. These drastic changes lead many to a state of disillusion. Lucy spoke of what she heard frequently among clients: "I've worked my whole life you know, I, never saw this coming...I didn't expect this." This type of sentiment was common as the mature workers were trying to reconcile the fact that they have never known a life without work—they had always worked: They "put their time in," they "did things right" and in turn, they were still barely making ends meet. Justice was a reoccurring topic, as respondents struggled to adjust to the "unfair" changes to their lives.

In addition to the "cultural" changes, job stability and tenure at a particular job became shorter and more volatile. The possibility of movement laterally as well as upward and downward was always present. Job and income security are not fixtures of the labor force as they once were. When asked what one of the top issues facing the unemployed mature worker community, Tamara, a key informant, remarked, "...being able to find a job again at the income level that they had prior to losing...their employment." Many of her clients were hit hard by the collapse of the auto industry, and she stated, "because of the auto industry they were always paid quite well. And those days are gone." Many mature workers have been forced to return to work with a reduced salary, or have been unable to find work in their field, forcing them to "re-tool" their skills. Otis, a 63-year-old man, described the lack of stability in the work force and his inability to find wages to maintain his standard of living:

It's really hard to find a really good stable job—every job is under the limit of 7 to 10 dollars an hour and



half my jobs I've been working at 20 to 25 dollars an hour so that really has been a real big issue...(Otis).

Tamara went on to talk about the multitude of financial adjustments that were necessary for her clients in order to properly cope with, "the lower salaries that they're bringing in." For many mature workers the adjustment to living with less can be drastic, a mental and emotional struggle to make the financial sacrifices.

Peter, a 63-year-old married man, spoke of how he felt this restructuring had affected employers' desires and his personal job search, "Life experience is not enough in this day and age." Others stated that there was a new normal; the world, and especially the working world, had changed, and it was hard to adapt. Mark, a 50-year old husband and father, spoke of the effects of losing work and financial security: "It was devastating...everything just crumbled around me...my life was just gone." Multiple individuals reiterated this statement and others like it. They did what they were taught, worked hard at their craft, and now they were forced to look for new work and reinvent themselves.

Mark elaborated on the pressure he felt. "I don't know what to do...it's like [I'm] in between a rock [and a hard place]...you just take things as they come and you hope for the best...that's the best you can do in life." This pressure extended to participants having to change their "normal" routine, including parents having to cope with not being able to support their struggling children, being unable to go out with friends and socialize, provide gifts to loved ones, take vacations, or purchase "wants" due to monetary constraint. Even beyond giving up these "luxuries," Peter talked about having to make choices among necessities:

It's a struggle to get outta bed. It's a struggle to say, ok, I've got \$30 till the next payday, next Marvin day [name for Michigan unemployment benefits]. Do we buy gas or do we buy food? Forget the medicines...(Peter).

These changes also brought fear for the future. One of the biggest fears expressed was altered retirement plans. Multiple individuals spoke of the need to rely on retirement funds to survive their present circumstances. Mark asked, "where is this [unemployment and home foreclosure] gonna take us, or take me, my family, or I?" This statement points to the uncertainty and stress surrounding the future and its influence on the linked lives in a family system.

#### Experience of the Mature Worker

The experience of the un-or underemployed mature worker is unique. The needs, feelings, desires, and talents of mature workers differ from other labor force cohorts. Paulina spoke of today's "typical" older workers and the struggles they face:

...I'm just the typical older worker that is at the retirement age that's having a lot of problems because things that you thought were going to be part of your retirement are gone and its harder to get work when you are older. So, I'm in a bind right now (Paulina).

Participants described the struggles for older workers, and the difficulty of the journey when income is limited or non-existent, when savings and retirement funds must be used to make ends meet, and other necessities such as health insurance and housing are in jeopardy. Tamara spoke of the stress of unemployment and the mature adults' position in the life course as increasing financial strain, "When they get older, I think that's even more of a struggle, because they're in a fixed income situation. They are much more vulnerable..." Mature workers are nearing retirement; however, savings and retirement accounts have been drained in order to survive. Factors such as age, lack of financial stability, and the inability to rejoin the workforce compound and create mental, emotional, and physical struggles for mature workers. Sally, a 67-year-old, remarked:

...There's a whole bunch of us out there over 55 that want to work, that have to work...and there aren't jobs and our houses are under water and we are using up our savings to exist and its...a real problem...people that were at retirement age have the hardest time right now. Everything they banked on...their pensions are gone, some of their investments are gone, they lost in the stock market, and there's the housing situation...its just a lot of things happening at once (Sally).

These high, sustained levels of stress preclude normal functioning. Lucy, a key informant, reflected on the loss of work and uncertainty in the housing status, leaving many mature workers unsure of what to do: "people in crisis tend to wanna put their head in the sand." One respondent commented on stress affecting his processing of the situation around him: "When you are under stress you don't think as well as you are supposed to be thinking."

#### Age as a Barrier

A heightened consciousness about age and employers' perception was reflected in the interviews. Paulina remarked, "I started to feel like being over 60 you are considered a sub-citizen, you're not worth anything anymore." Also, Peter stated, "I believe there is a thing called age discrimination, ageism...I know it's not supposed to exist, but I know that it does..." Mark referred to the "unhidden thing of discrimination of age" as having the

proper qualifications, but being limited by age. There was a perception that physical characteristics of age, such as hair color, weight, and wrinkles were factors being used to judge the quality and ability of workers. Participants felt out of place. Paulina noted, “There’s no place for us [mature workers/baby boomers], there isn’t any place for us because they [employers] can...hire young people and actually pay them less. Because they feel they have to pay you more because you’re old.” Although there were no specific questions in the interview protocol addressing age, or age as a barrier, age issues emerged as a theme.

Sally noted that she was contending with the younger demographic and the perceived “benefits” they offered to employers. “Benefits” or stereotypes related to younger workers that were referenced included being less expensive, more creative, having more technological savvy, and having more longevity. “I’m an older worker...I am competing with younger people even though I apply and I have a degree...” The younger competition also has the benefit of time to recover from any setback in career or finances. Mature workers’ position in the life course (age) has important implications for how the Great Recession (historical changes) and their prolonged un-or underemployment (personal financial changes) influenced their lives. Otis elaborated on this struggle:

...The mind boggles to have you generating and think of thoughts of why me, or why you know this time of life...the world is plentiful, why is there such a struggle for either the little man or uh the bottom man (Otis).

Feeling that their qualifications and experience were not validated, and hearing that they were either under-or over qualified was common among the participants. Tamara stated that age and qualifications were concerns voiced by many of her clients, “...this age group has been told that they are overqualified...so a lot of people won’t look at them because of...that.” She went on to say that this was a difficult issue to overcome, “I really don’t have the answer to that.” The mature workers’ level of qualifications presented a barrier to re-entry to the labor force. Lucy commented that her clients typically said “they don’t wanna give me a chance because they know I’m overqualified...and I need a job, you know, I need to pay my mortgage payment.” This left many mature workers feeling embarrassed, dejected, and discouraged in their job search: “...you almost know the answer before you ask it” (Otis).

#### Technology as a Barrier

Technology combined with issues of age to form real and perceived barriers. Issues of technology were widely discussed, often in conjunction with stories involving age,

education, and the struggles that surrounded the loss of work. Mature workers remarked that technology was not a part of their early lives. Sally stated, “It wasn’t part [technology] of my education at all, it wasn’t even invented.” Paulina explained, “they [young people] know more than I do with computer skills and technology. I grew up with an Etch-A-Sketch.” Technology and especially its relationship to the labor force is something that has changed dramatically over time. It now represents a mandatory skill for the mature workers’ successful transition back to the labor force. Mark stated, “...you can’t make it without the computer.” Technological advances touched every corner of the labor market, and one key informant stated that “the factories are becoming more, you know, computer literate...and people don’t have those skills.” One participant told a story of a job interview where technology and her lack of skills played an important role and ultimately hindered her progress:

This computer is plunked in front of me, it’s already there but turned off...They say read the instructions and perform them. I couldn’t turn the computer on...I froze up. So they said, ‘oh well maybe this computer is not working right’ and this guy takes me into a room and there is a nice lady standing there and says, ‘I’m sorry, you didn’t pass the test, you can go home.’ It’s like out the back door (Paulina).

In this instance, technology formed a real barrier to re-employment and left this participant with the feeling of being ushered “...out the back door.”

#### Housing

One of the prominent shared experiences was the phenomenon of home foreclosure. Respondents experienced pressure to cut expenses or file for bankruptcy in order to keep their homes, and when all options failed, some went through the process of losing their homes. One individual stated: “[the] pressure of [the] mortgage and the home...you would never want to go through that...it’s really hard.” This was part of a domino effect: The experience of un-or underemployment brought a loss or reduction in income and benefits, created financial strain, which lead to participants’ inability to afford their homes. Peter shared, “It’s really desperate...we’re gonna get a foreclosure; and I’m not very pleased ‘cause I don’t know what we’re gonna do.” He went on to describe the foreclosure experience revealing, “absolutely nothing is the same...possibly losing our house, we’ve been there for 28 years.” Feeling the imminent loss of his home was very taxing. He referred to his current situation as “a huge thing breathing down my neck.”

Mark described his “original” vision for the future, while expressing the new normal in his life, “I thought I was gonna retire from my job and she was gonna retire and we were gonna save up our money and sell our house...the old school way...” The housing economy has changed. Tamara primarily worked with clients in the area of housing/foreclosure counseling, and while none of her clients wanted to lose their homes, there often was no other choice. This changed trajectory for the mature worker’s life is congruent with life course theory and the off-time nature of job loss for individuals or families, many of whom had enjoyed middle-class lifestyles prior to income reduction. During later adulthood, the middle class normative financial trajectory has been to *voluntarily* scale back working hours, pay down outstanding debt, create a plan for managing retirement funds, and enjoy a mortgage-free home. Thus, there were many financial, mental, and emotional implications with the off-time occurrence of job loss and its related financial stress and strain (Aldous 1990).

Not only did losing one’s home later in life represent a stressful off time event, it also carried with it strong mental and emotional pain. One mature worker shared her loss experience, focusing on the lost connections and major life events that occurred while in her home. She shared:

...The thought of not having a roof over your head... My home... there is so much involved...there’s that family connection... All the major events in my life occurred while I was there, good or bad... What else do you want me to give up? (Paulina).

This respondent had a sense of hopelessness and frustration, saying she has already “given up” her fair share.

## Discussion

### Experience of Loss

The first research question examines the experience of loss faced by mature un- or underemployed workers. The multidimensional and pervasive effects of job loss are well documented (e.g., AARP 2002; Isidore 2009; Mattingly and Smith 2010; Strully 2009). The coded themes viewed through the lens of life course theory revealed that the timing of events, both in general and within a historic framework, played an integral part in the loss of lifestyle, financial security, and future peace (Lerner 2002). Economic and societal restructuring lead to feelings of a forever altered way of life, and the vastly changing landscape of the state, the community, and their homes forced participants into transition.

Strain emerged in relationships as well-meaning individuals failed to relate to the mature workers and their

unique struggles. Emotional loss was reflected in the participant narratives. During this time, the financial stress and strain suffered by most of the participants directly lead to emotional stress, strain, and even loss of relationships and support. One participant commented on how friends tried to “help,” but what was offered felt more like demeaning platitudes. Friends and family liberally gave advice, but rarely listened and understood. Further, as one participant remarked, every suggestion she was offered by others had been considered. Another respondent spoke of the loss of social mobility. They had friends, but could not afford to participate in any activities with these friends. Sally stated, “friends...I think one of the things that comes up is I can’t do everything...I don’t have the money that you need to do some of the activities that they would like to do...” The loss of disposable income directly affected the time spent with friends.

Transferable occupational skills also were lost. This sample was educated, ranging from some college experience to a completed bachelors degree, all logging many hours of work experience, and cultivating not only experience, but mastery of a field. A strength of this mature worker group was the wealth of experience they had in the labor market specifically, the length and depth of knowledge in their chosen fields. These mature workers believed that would be enough—their careers would last, company loyalty would be preserved, and retirement would be on their own terms. Times changed and specialized skills were no longer as valued. Consistent with Noonan (2005), this study found that the participants did not have the “right” qualifications. They were either under- or overqualified for the given position. This particular loss is compounded by the fact that mature un- or underemployed workers do not have the luxury of time. This is seen in the life course literature—the age of the individual facing a life transition is a key factor in how that change will be processed (Aldous 1990).

### Shared Phenomena

The second research question asked what phenomena occur as a result of un- or underemployment and home foreclosure. All study participants were unemployed, actively seeking employment, and in the process of home foreclosure or prevention of home foreclosure. Feelings of worry and concern for the future, and feelings of anger and frustration for the losses suffered were consistently voiced. Participants were experiencing a pile-up of stressors, such as lack of savings, diminished retirement funds, lack of income for monthly expenses, and loss or reduction in health care assistance. Added to those financial stressors was the fear of losing their homes. Here, as in previous research, participants exhausted all available options,



including filing for bankruptcy to keep their homes (Edmonds et al. 2011).

With the impending loss of their homes, participants struggled with emotions surrounding the loss of memories and the connections with a place where both positive and negative life events unfolded as well as the loss of a physical place and the shelter it provided. Also, the home for many of the participants represented their hard work and accomplishments. It represented in many ways their life: It was the space much of their life occupied (Kantor and Lehr 1975). One respondent shared that she wondered about her worth, what value she had now that her career was gone, and the biggest witness to her past success—her home—was gone. Without these markers of self, identity, and success she worried that no one saw her, no one cared.

### Implications for Policy and Practice

Gerontologists, family scholars, educators, therapists, and policy makers must be concerned with the financial, mental, emotional, and physical health effects associated with job loss. These effects influence all un- or underemployed workers, but have a considerable effect on mature workers (Gallo et al. 2000).

Financial planning professionals and family life educators can play a key role in supporting families. Although retirement planning is critical for workers of all ages, general financial literacy information targeted toward this population is needed. These necessary educational efforts should be geared toward mature adults, take a holistic perspective, and address financial knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors. Hershey and Jacobs-Lawson (2012) stated, “After all, for workers facing uncertain financial futures, there is no substitute for true financial literacy when it comes to formulating a financial blueprint for old age” (p. 313). Educators should help families make informed financial decisions, understand and address the socio-emotional effects of the new economic realities, and identify developmentally appropriate coping strategies. Further, there is a continued need for diversity in the approaches to presenting the information, using multiple modes of dissemination such as online, print, and face-to-face. There also is need for greater coordination and unity among these programs (Firman et al. 2009).

These findings have policy implications regarding the length, breadth, and delivery methods of unemployment benefits. The recent economic downturn has forced extended duration of unemployment, especially among the mature worker population, and policy must attend to this. Expiring unemployment benefits have added pressure to prolonged unemployed mature workers, forcing many into foreclosure of their homes, draining retirement savings, and in some cases, driving them into bankruptcy (Firman

et al. 2009). Policy in this area should be of public interest, as aging baby boomers are unemployed at unprecedented rates (Slack and Jensen 2008). Consistent and thorough support through unemployment assistance has been seen as a protective factor, sustaining older individuals through their job searches and even helping them gain re-employment at a higher rates of pay compared to their previous positions (Fitzenberger and Wilke 2010). Extending unemployment benefits would help alleviate some of the hardship surrounding mature workers’ prolonged unemployment and benefit the economy and society in the long run. In addition, unemployment benefits could be delivered in such a way as to purposely correlate the benefit amount to the age and previous level of income netted from an individual’s previous place of employment. This would allow for age and stage appropriate support. This “age and stage consideration” could also help mature workers, as they are unemployed longer, have a harder time re-entering the labor force, and have less time to recover financial loss when compared to young workers.

Foreclosure prevention is a particularly salient service for many un- or underemployed mature workers. Foreclosure rates within this group are high, providing an impetus for legislation to establish programs that allow older workers to receive foreclosure prevention counseling, as well as support to re-finance their existing home loans (Firman et al. 2009). Federal policies, such as the Home Affordable Modification Program (HAMP), allow families to receive loan modifications and retain possession of their homes (US Housing and Urban Development n.d.). Local housing counselors, funded by the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development, work collaboratively with families and serve as mediators in the acquisition of these loans. However, after counseling services stop, the connection between the housing counseling agency and the participant ends. Tobe (2014) found that situation appropriate information and support is needed to meet the diverse needs of families during this unique transition and could aid a family in sustaining itself amidst crisis.

Help is needed for mature workers before a crisis is reached. One participant stated the following as an area of greatest need: “I think help finding jobs, real help! I think some financial assistance before you have *zero money*... [emphasis added].” Many policies provide help only after a crisis occurs. In a discussion of welfare, O’Malley (2011) noted that help often comes only after one can prove devastation. Time sensitive aid and preventive strategies should be included in policy that addresses financial need.

### Limitations and Implications for Future Research

Due to this study’s phenomenological methodology and the coordination with a county extension office, the sample and

scope of the project are focused on a particular phenomenon and area of the country. Thus, the sample size was limited based on the purposive sampling used and the constraints posed by the inclusion criteria and research method chosen. Increasing the time spent with the participants, and increasing the number of interviews conducted in order to measure change over time could strengthen this approach to the phenomenon in question. In addition, this study focused on one particular area of the country during a period of time following the Great Recession. Thus, the study lacked geographic representation. The geographic area that was examined has struggled economically, prior to the Great Recession, due to decreases in manufacturing and fluctuations in the auto industry. These factors should be noted and considered when examining the results. Future research should broaden its scope, including a larger and more representative cross-section of the nation. Future studies also may integrate both qualitative and quantitative methodology when studying the effects of the recent Great Recession on individuals and families.

Future research in the area of un- or underemployment and mature workers must continue to strive to tell their “story,” giving voice to the mature workers who are struggling, informing policy making, and providing better assistance to this population. Individuals in this field also must help provide work opportunities and inform employers of the needs and benefits of the older work force. Future work could address more specific, practice-oriented questions such as: (a) How do mature workers adjust their budget in response to their loss of work? (b) What factors (e.g., social, emotional, and mental) influenced the mature workers’ financial adjustments or lack of adjustments? (c) What additional financial commitments do mature workers have (e.g., caring for children or elderly parents)? and (d) What level of personal financial management did the mature workers and their families have before their financial crisis (e.g., living within or beyond their means)? This work is intended to shed light on the unique experience of this group of mature workers. The hope is that their stories will influence subsequent policy, practice, and educational efforts.

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**Amanda Guinot Talbot** is a fourth year doctoral candidate at Michigan State University in the department of Human Development and Family Studies, College of Social Science. She has a primary research interest in family economics. Her previous research has investigated work and family issues, un-and underemployment, and financial literacy in older worker and emerging adult populations. She received her master's degree in Family Studies from Michigan State University. She is currently researching emerging adults' financial knowledge, attitudes, behaviors and overall level of financial capability.

**Erica Tobe** is an extension specialist-financial literacy and homeownership education at Michigan State University Extension. Her primary research interests are in family economics, resilience, and economic policies for families. She received her PhD from Michigan State University with her dissertation focusing on the experience and resilience of housing counseling clientele after the Great Recession.

**Barbara D. Ames** is a professor and graduate program director in the department of Human Development and Family Studies, College of Social Science, Michigan State University. Her primary research interests focus on working in low wage work, and family and work issues in older adult populations. She received her PhD from Kansas State University.

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