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THE UNFOLDING OF MEANING IN NARRATIVES OF UNEMPLOYED YOUNG ADULT GRADUATES

by

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DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

I, Rinet van Lill, declare that the thesis, *The unfolding of meaning in narratives of unemployed young adult graduates,* which I hereby submit for the degree Doctor Philosophiae in Psychology at the University of Pretoria, is my own work and has not previously been submitted by me for a degree at this or any other institution of higher education.

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Rinet van Lill

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ETHICS STATEMENT

The author, whose name appears on the title page of this thesis, has obtained, for the research described in this work, the applicable research ethics approval. The author declares that he/she has observed the ethical standards required in terms of the University of Pretoria's Code of ethics for researchers and the Policy guidelines for responsible research.

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study was to explore how meaning unfolded in the narratives of unemployed young adult graduates. South Africa has the highest youth unemployment rate in the world, which is affecting a growing number of university graduates. This study contributes to the existing body of knowledge about this population by combining insights on unemployment, young adulthood as a distinctive developmental period, and meaning.

A qualitative research design, incorporating an existential-humanistic paradigm, was utilised to explore the nuances of personal experiences regarding meaning. A total of 12 participants between the ages of 21 and 30 who had graduated and had been unemployed for at least six months took part in individual interviews. Rich data were gathered through narrative interviews, and a narrative analysis yielded findings that demonstrated the uniqueness of each story and common themes that emerged.

The participants had experienced a loss of meaning when expectations of employment were disappointed, which inspired efforts to seek meaning. Commitment to their original purpose through further education, connecting with supportive people, being involved in meaningful activities, and reflecting on how to obtain new coherence and growth restored their sense of meaning. The findings suggest that the ability to pursue new avenues of meaning can be cultivated as a valuable resource during unemployment. Stakeholders involved in graduates' transition to work should consider including meaning-focused interventions to prepare graduates for the labour market and to curb the deleterious effects of unemployment.

Keywords: meaning, unemployment, young adulthood, graduates, narrative research

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The current study is concerned with unemployment as experienced by South African young adult graduates. As a result of an unstable economy, the South African youth unemployment rate is 29% (Statistics South Africa (Stats SA), 2019b), and, consequently, young adults run the risk of facing a challenging advancement to the labour market. To promote their employability, many young adults choose to pursue a university degree; yet, 9.1% of graduates are still unemployed (Stats SA, 2019b). The impact of unemployment extends beyond financial constraints, and is associated with decreased psychological well-being (McKee-Ryan, Song, Wanberg, & Kinicki, 2005; Paul & Moser, 2009). Being unemployed while negotiating the developmental transitions accompanying young adulthood could culminate in detrimental psychological outcomes (McGee & Thompson, 2015).

Successful entry into the labour market is becoming more uncertain for young adults, and disillusionment is increasingly present amongst this group (International Labour Organization (ILO), 2014). In response to high youth unemployment, nationally and internationally, the intention of various policies and research endeavours has been to increase employment opportunities and the employability of young adults. However, few studies have focused on strategies that could improve psychological well-being in the face of continuing unemployment. An in-depth understanding of the personal experience of unemployment could contribute to a growing body of literature, with the aim of alleviating the psychological burden associated with unemployment. In this regard, meaning is a valuable concept that involves the values that people adhere to, the ambitions they pursue, and the way they process events (Martela & Steger, 2016). The quest for meaning has been described as a constant motivational power behind human endeavours (Frankl, 1946). Therefore, the objective of the present research is to explore how meaning themes unfold in the unemployment narratives of young adult graduates. The chapter continues with a discussion of the context and rationale that gave rise to the research question, followed by brief descriptions of the research design, anticipated contributions of the study, and the chapter layout.

1.1 Terminology

Within the scope of the current research, there are a few important terms that should be clarified. The ILO (2013) defines work as "any activity performed by persons of any sex

and age to produce goods or to provide services for use by others or for own use" (p. 2). This definition includes the production of goods or services for personal use, such as subsistence farming or childcare. Employment, on the other hand, refers to engagement in activities to provide services or goods in exchange for profit or remuneration (ILO, 2013). Since the population of focus consists of graduates who were educated to fill professional positions, work will imply employment during the rest of the thesis. The definition of unemployment suggested by Statistics South Africa (Stats SA, 2015b) will be used, which classifies people as unemployed if they are "completely without work, currently available to work, and taking active steps to find work" (p. 2). Stats SA (2019b) employs the term y*outh* to distinguish the group aged 15 to 34 years. Although I will refer to youth unemployment as it is used in national reports on unemployment, the research at hand will be conducted with cognisance of developmental theories. For the purposes of this study *young adult* is a more appropriate term, which includes people aged 18 to 30 years.

1.2 Context

Worldwide, unemployment affects an estimated 172 million people (ILO, 2019), which reflects the vastness of the problem. The current research is situated within the South African context, where overall unemployment is estimated at 29% (Stats SA, 2019b), which is significantly higher than the global average of 5% (ILO, 2019). Factors like the drought of 2015, weakened exchange rates, and rising inflation have further contributed to a negative gross domestic product (GDP) in the past (South African Reserve Bank, 2016). Although there is reason for optimism regarding recent growth in the GDP (Stats SA, 2019a), unemployment remains a significant challenge. In a public attitude survey, 71% of polled South Africans regarded unemployment as the country's most pressing problem that needs to be addressed by government initiatives (Chingwete, 2015). Within the context of various socio-economic problems, this indicates society's recognition of the damaging effects of unemployment.

Global trends show that, during economic instability, a country's unemployment rate burdens the youth more than older populations (Aassve, Cottini, & Vitali, 2013). According to the latest global estimates, youth unemployment is more than double the general average, at a rate of 11.8% (ILO, 2019). The critical state of youth unemployment has been emphasised in global calls to focus attention on assisting the youth, referred to as a "generation at risk" (ILO, 2015, p.3). Creating productive employment for the youth is also

central to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (ILO, 2017). According to estimations by the World Bank (2019), South Africa has the highest youth unemployment rate in the world. In a series on vulnerable groups in South Africa, Lehohla (2016, p. viii) referred to unemployed young adults as "a demographic time bomb," who are vulnerable to economic and social uncertainty. In addition to the unemployed rate, 1 531 000 of the South African youth are characterised as discouraged work-seekers, defined as:

> Persons who wanted to work but did not try to find work or start a business because they believed that there were no jobs available in their area or were unable to find jobs requiring their skills, or they had lost hope of finding any kind of work (Stats SA, 2015b, p. 3).

With the odds against young adults in the labour market, a possible precautionary step against unemployment is to obtain a university qualification. Globally, the transition time from education to employment is shorter for graduates (ILO, 2017). However, the macro-economic climate of a country also influences the length of this transition (Salas-Velasco, 2006). International trends suggest that young adults have to compete for fewer employment opportunities with a greater number of job seekers, while employers are being more selective when hiring new employees during challenging economic periods (Scarpetta, Sonnet, & Manfredi, 2010). In countries affiliated with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), an increase in the number of university graduates has devaluated the differentiation of being a graduate (Liu, Green, & Pensiero, 2016). Therefore, expanded access to universities in a dismal economic environment is increasing the vulnerability of graduates to initial and continuous unemployment, or unsatisfactory employment (Wu, 2011).

Identifying suitable candidates in the labour market is regarded as crucial for South Africans to overcome the inequalities inherited from apartheid (Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), 2013). A White Paper, *A Programme for Higher Education Transformation*, ensured that access to higher education became inclusive of all races after the establishment of democracy in 1994 (Department of Education (DoE), 1997). The White Paper for Post-school Education further encouraged expansion in enrolment numbers in higher education, and emphasised the importance of education and training to ensure a skilled labour force (DHET, 2013). In South Africa, universities (the focus of the current study) offer diplomas and degrees, and include universities of technology, where the focus is on career-orientated training (DHET, 2018). A racially representative student demographic in

universities is being realised, from 7.9 white graduates for every one black (including black African, Coloured, and Indian) graduate in 1968, to 1.8 black graduates for every one white graduate in 2012 (Van Broekhuizen, 2016). The objective of the latter White Paper is further expansion of university access, to an overall participation rate of 25% by 2030 (DHET, 2013).

Despite the progress made, many young adults are still not able to access a university education or complete a degree, due to contextual factors. The #FeesMustFall movement of 2015, with continuing student protests in 2016, drew attention to the multiple obstacles that students face in attempting to graduate (Chetty & Knaus, 2016). When considering that 32.7% of South African households live below the poverty line (Stats SA, 2015a), financing university costs could be unfeasible for many. In response to the #FeesMustFall movement, government subsidies to universities increased from 0.68% to 1% of the GDP, in addition to bursary allowances that would allow 84 000 new students to enter universities across the country, coupled with grants for senior students (DHET, 2018). Remarking on the movement, Msila (2016) argues that lower-income families in South Africa view university as a means for their children to be lifted from the poverty cycle. This illustrates a societal narrative (also informed by White Papers): a university qualification is the answer to escaping poverty and establishing a society characterised by equality.

Although the graduate unemployment rate of 9.1% is lower than the overall youth unemployment rate (Stats SA, 2019b), a degree does not guarantee employment and a satisfactory income. Estimations by Van Broekhuizen (2016) indicate that graduate unemployment in South Africa can vary between 1.7% and 22.7%, depending on the racial denomination and university of study. Although holding a university degree decreases the likelihood of unemployment, university graduates' unemployment rate has been the fastest-growing since 1995 (Pauw, Oosthuizen, & Van der Westhuizen, 2008). As a population that is considered to have better prospects of success in the labour market, graduates may be neglected in unemployment research.

1.3 Background to the Research Problem

The population of focus in the present study, unemployed graduates, find themselves in a unique developmental stage, which is associated with certain tasks, changes, and expectations. These developmental tasks may also evolve in response to changing eras and

societies. An important developmental shift in the lives of this population is the transition from student to active participant in the labour market. However, factors such as inexperience (Bell & Blanchflower, 2011), lack of employment history (Lomasky, 2016), insufficient skills learned at university (ILO, 2015), and limited social contacts (Bell & Blanchflower, 2015) count against young adults who are seeking employment.

There are many negative outcomes associated with unemployment, such as decreased physical well-being (Wanberg, 2012), an increased risk of a mental health problems (Thern, De Munter, Hemmingsson, & Rasmussen, 2017), and impaired self-efficacy (Mortimer, Kim, Staff, & Vuolo, 2016). Unemployment also prevents young adults from living independently, and could delay life choices such as a stable romantic partnership and procreation (Aassve et al., 2013). While young adults might be biologically and culturally ready to adopt the responsibilities of adulthood, not being able to achieve economic independence will hamper their anticipated advancement (Lomasky, 2016). The cumulative negative effect of unemployment on future earnings (Daly & Delaney, 2013) also has implications for progression later in life. Therefore, more knowledge is required on resilient responses to unemployment, especially amongst the young adult population.

Establishing an identity and consequent self-direction is viewed as central to the life stage of young adulthood (Schwartz, Côtè, & Arnett, 2005). Identity is relevant to this study, because, after students have explored different vocational identity conceptualisations, unemployment could limit their commitment to an occupation. The argument can further be made that, while young adults are exploring identity conceptualisations, they are also searching for meaning. Identity relates to what young adults consider significant while being exposed to tasks, people, and contexts that provide meaning, which contributes to their identity development. Mayseless and Keren (2013) view the search for meaning as a key developmental task in which young adults engage during the exploration of careers. The amalgamation of meaning and identity explorations can be especially relevant for a young adult population in the process of searching for a place in the labour market and life.

The concept of meaning bears further reference to unemployment, as work can be a calling that creates a sense of meaning in people's lives (Steger, Pickering, Shin, & Dik, 2010). Unemployment also forestalls people gaining the rich experiences associated with work (Reneflot & Evensen, 2014). Through their extended education, students invested in a purpose associated with employment, and unemployment can thus result in a loss of meaning.

Instead of being engaged in the work they envisioned, young adult graduates may instead be left with a sense of insignificance. When a loss of meaning is experienced, people tend to be motivated to search for new meaning (Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006), or engage in efforts to strengthen existing sources of meaning (Proulx & Heine, 2006). Having a sense of meaning offers more effective ways of adapting, as it is related to higher self-esteem, greater satisfaction with life, greater optimism, overall positive affect, and less depression (Steger et al., 2006).

In conclusion, the high youth unemployment rate in South Africa provides fertile ground for the exploration of unemployment. The focus on a young adult population is relevant, due to their vulnerability in the labour market, as well as the effect of unemployment on their developmental transitions. Paul, Vastamäki, and Moser (2016) observe that the body of knowledge on the impact of unemployment on hedonic well-being is greater than that on the effects of unemployment on eudemonic well-being. Eudemonic wellbeing is operationalised using constructs such as self-determination, psychological well-being, intrinsic motivation, partaking in fulfilling activities, purpose, openness to experiences, and vitality (Kashdan, Biswas-Diener, & King, 2008). As a related concept to eudemonic well-being, meaning can be defined as "the strength, intensity, and activity of people's desire and efforts to establish and/or augment their understanding of the meaning, significance, and purpose of their lives" (Steger, Kashdan, Sullivan, & Lorentz, 2008, p. 200). The current research contributes to existing insights by obtaining rich, subjective perspectives on the experience of meaning amongst unemployed young adult graduates.

1.4 Research Method

In this study, the attempt was to answer the following research question:

What are the meaning themes that emerge from the narratives of unemployed young adult graduates?

The study was conducted within an existential-humanistic paradigm, using a narrative approach to gather and analyse the data. The methodological steps that were taken to answer the research question are discussed in the next section.

1.4.1 Existential-humanistic paradigm

The paradigm is a reflection of the researcher's worldview, and has a bearing on the ontology, epistemology, ethics, and methodology of a study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). Many authors have illustrated the compatibility of humanistic and existential concepts (Bugental, 1978; Burston, 2003; Correia, Cooper, Berdondini, & Correia, 2016; May, 1981; Rogers, 1961; Stumm, 2008; P. T. P. Wong, 2017), and I consider this combination an appropriate paradigm to understand subjective experiences. Similarities in the focus on freedom, authenticity, holism, and subjectivity further demonstrate the suitability of merging these two paradigms (Winston, 2015). Another commonality between humanistic and existential perspectives is the desire to understand human behaviour in a manner that is unlike the approach dictated by positivistic theories. The aim of the present study is thus to conduct research that attends to the humanistic ideal of studying the subjectivity of people and their unique and complex lives, while emphasising existential concerns such as freedom, determinism, purpose, and fulfilment.

Research on unemployment often addresses topics such as tendencies, rates, and larger structural influences. Accordingly, DeRobertis (2016) concedes that people are easily homogenised as entities in a consumeristic society, while humanism emphasises the development of a person in an individualised and authentic manner. Within the existential-humanistic arena, inquiring about personal views and experiences is of paramount importance (P. T. P. Wong, 2017). The assumption made in the current study is that inquiring about personal experiences can reveal in-depth insights into the research topic. Furthermore, in accordance with existential-humanistic conceptualisations, young adult graduates are conceived as meaning-seeking and self-actualised beings. Therefore, the study aimed to investigate how meaning is affected by unemployment, and how young adult graduates might respond.

The choice of a narrative approach to gather and analyse data has implications for the research conceptualisation (Caine, Estefan, & Clandinin, 2013). Narrative conceptualisations are well-aligned with the existential-humanistic paradigm, illustrated by a need to enhance understanding, instead of the objective to control and predict (Josselson & Lieblich, 2015). The narrative connection of experiences is also compatible with the idea of people being in a constant process of becoming and actualising their potential (Polkinghorne, 2015). There is thus an opportunity for self-authorship, which allows for the sharing of unique and personal

insights. People have an affinity for stories (Squire, 2008), and, therefore, narratives can provide the narrator with means for self-expression, and may evoke empathy from the listener.

1.4.2 Research design

The explorative nature of the research and the desire to obtain a rich understanding necessitates the implementation of a qualitative methodology. Individual interviews are thus a fitting data-gathering method, as detailed interviewing and observation provide close proximity to the participant's perspective (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). A convenience sampling technique was used to select 12 participants for individual interviews. The sampling criteria were: young adults between the ages of 21 and 30, who possess a university qualification, and have been unemployed for at least six months.

The data gathering was performed by the researcher eliciting narratives regarding the participants' career journeys, with the starting point being when they made a career choice and continued on this path until the time of the interview. By sharing their narratives, the participants were granted the opportunity to make sense of a series of events in a storied form, thereby providing details regarding their experiences of meaning. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner, guided by questions contained in an interview schedule. As recommended by Phoenix, Smith, and Sparkes (2010), the focus of the inquiry was not limited to current experiences; instead, past, present, and future plots were elicited, to create a holistic view of the participants' experiences.

According to De Fina and Georgakopoulou (2011), there is no single narrative method of analysis, and researchers often follow an eclectic approach by combining different techniques. While conducting the analysis in the present study, specific attention was paid to narrative elements such as the positioning of the main character, other characters, the story plot, and backdrop. To preserve the individuality of each participant, I composed a synoptic meaning narrative of every participant's career journey. In order to bring a sense of unity to the different stories, a narrative structure was identified, to demonstrate common themes between the narratives.

1.5 Contributions of the Study

The findings of this study could inform practical approaches and expand on theoretical knowledge concerning the relevance of meaning amongst unemployed young adult graduates. Findings from this study could also inform the practices of various role players in efforts to prepare graduates for the labour market and manage the distress associated with unemployment. The findings may expand the body of knowledge on the intersection of unemployment, young adulthood, and meaning insights, within the South African context.

1.5.1 Practical contributions

Given the volatile South African labour market, young adults need to respond to the challenge of unemployment by building and expanding psychological resources that will enhance their adaption. Although job-search skills are important, Creed, King, Hood, and McKenzie (2009) suggest expanding self-regulation strategies. Enhancing their sense of meaning could serve a protective factor, decreasing the risk of mental health challenges during unemployment. Understanding how unemployed young adult graduates deal with meaning could offer new insights into possible ways to respond to the psychological distress associated with unemployment and could protect them from becoming discouraged work-seekers.

While there are various government and non-government initiatives in South Africa aimed at addressing youth unemployment (Burnett, 2014), findings from the current study could encourage organisations to also address the psychological impact of unemployment as part of their practices. Universities also have a responsibility to ensure that graduates are prepared for the labour market. In any such endeavours, psychologists should be co-opted to assist individuals with the distress that may accompany transition to the labour market, as well as possible unemployment. These stakeholders and potential support structures could facilitate interventions aimed at addressing meaning concerns, in order to expand young adult graduates' repertoire of resources in dealing with unemployment.

1.5.2 Theoretical contributions

Due to the pervasive and detrimental impact of unemployment on individuals and greater society, a social sciences perspective is vital (Creed et al., 2009; Creed & Macintyre,

2001; McGee & Thompson, 2015). When considering the consequences of unemployment, the majority of the available literature is quantitative in nature, with limited reflection on personal experiences (Blustein, Kozan, & Connors-Kellgren, 2013; Catalano et al., 2011). It has been recommended that more qualitative studies be conducted to uncover the multifaceted relationships between unemployment, well-being, and mental health (Giuntoli, Hughes, Karban, & South, 2015). Exploring eudemonic experiences during unemployment could enhance the theoretical knowledge on the subject by aiding psychological understanding of unemployment. With the high disparity between general and youth unemployment, the focus on young adults in a specific developmental stage could offer enhanced comprehension of the perhaps unique impact of unemployment on this vulnerable group.

Reneflot and Evensen (2014) encourage single-country research to determine the context-specific effects of unemployment. The authors hold that the incidence of mental health concerns during unemployment appears to be sensitive to the context of a specific country. Themes related to meaning in a person's life are responsive to the environment (Baumeister, 1991), and it is foreseen that conducting the present study in the South African context will elicit unique meanings and concerns, as well as ways to address these. There has also been a call for non-Western research on populations aged 20 to 30 years, as the bulk of such research originates from Western nations (Arnett, 2011; Facio & Resett, 2013). Research findings obtained from the South Africa context may yield new perspectives on the experiences of young adults from the different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds.

Research on meaning in South Africa is increasingly conducted using psychometric instruments, despite the fact that such measures show limited validity when used in cultures for which they were not originally designed (De Klerk, Boshoff, & Van Wyk, 2009). Eliciting more unstructured responses through open-ended questions may thus yield enhanced comprehension of the multiple ways in which people in South Africa create meaning in their lives. In addition, Heintzelman and King (2014) question whether descriptive statistics gathered through self-measures can truly provide a comprehensive picture of meaning in life. One of the characteristics of narrative research is that it can reveal how individuals make sense of experiences (Squire, Andrews, & Tamboukou, 2008), which could enable in-depth understanding of the research topic.

1.6 Chapter Layout

The literature review spans Chapters 2 and 3. Chapter 2 will continue with a more in-depth exploration of unemployment within the developmental stage of young adulthood. The literature on meaning as relevant to the experiences of unemployed young adult graduates is discussed in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 provides an extended discussion of the paradigmatic point of departure. The ontology and epistemology are discussed, together with the applicability of a narrative framework. The methodology to address the research question is reviewed, followed by a discussion of issues of ethics and rigour related to the present study. The findings from the narrative analysis are reported in Chapter 5, supported by quotes from the interviews with participants. The meaning narratives are then be compared to identify a common narrative. Chapter 6 is the concluding chapter, and offers an integrated discussion on the most significant findings and how these relate to extant literature. The study limitations are pointed out, together with recommendations.

1.7 Conclusion

In the current economically challenging time, the South African labour market is strained, evident in a high youth unemployment rate. Of concern is that graduate unemployment is growing. This study attempted to fill a gap in the literature on the eudemonic effect of unemployment on young adult graduates. Unemployment can be experienced as distressing, especially when taking into account the unique developmental challenges faced by young adults. A unique research design was formulated to address the research question. In this chapter, the possible contribution of exploring meaning amongst unemployed young adult graduates was considered. The findings may offer greater theoretical insight into the phenomenon, and inform the creation of support structures to assist young adults in dealing with unemployment.

Chapter 2: Unemployment Amongst Young Adult Graduates

This chapter presents the literature on young adulthood and unemployment, in order to explore the impact of being excluded from the labour market on this age group. As a specific developmental period, young adulthood is associated with strengths and vulnerabilities that could impact how these individuals approach the world of work. Young adults need to explore multiple settings and roles from which to make later commitments and establish an identity. However, a challenging labour market might prevent graduates from making occupational identity commitments, even if they are ready to do so. This chapter also discusses literature on the invasive impact of unemployment on various areas of their lives. The chapter concludes with strategies and resources that could enhance adaption during unemployment, which could prevent graduates from becoming discouraged work-seekers.

2.1 Young Adult Generations Entering the Labour Market

In addressing the unemployment experience of young adults, the characteristics of individuals entering the labour market should be recognised. Arnett (1998) first suggested the term *emerging adult* to demarcate a bridging period between adolescence and the achievement of adult status, as determined by the relevant culture. The theory implies that societal changes result in the delay of tasks that were previously conceived as normative to becoming an adult (Arnett, 2000). Additionally, a generational perspective would identify graduates currently entering the labour market as Millennials. In this paper, I will refer to *emerging adults* or *Millennials* only if theoretical assumptions related to these concepts are discussed, not to demarcate age boundaries.

2.1.1 Emerging adulthood

A shift has been noted in the perception of markers of adulthood in young adult populations (Sharon, 2016). Theoretically, emerging adulthood is proposed as a unique developmental stage, characterised by freedom from the dependency of adolescence, but not yet filled with the enduring responsibilities of adulthood (Arnett, 2000). From the accounts of emerging adults, Arnett (2004) deduced five characteristics of the developmental stage, namely identity exploration, instability, self-focus, feeling in-between, and possibility. Subsequently, research on emerging adulthood expanded to topics such as identity (Schwartz et al., 2005), parental relationships (Hendry & Kloep, 2010), goals (Salmela-Aro, Aunola, & Nurmi, 2007), meaning (Dezutter et al., 2014), social relationships (Wagner, Lüdtke, Roberts,

& Trautwein, 2014), risk behaviour (E. L. Anderson, Steen, & Stavropoulos, 2017), and work (Murphy, Blustein, Bohlig, & Platt, 2010).

Emerging adult theory has been criticised for these characteristics being too generic (Côté & Bynner, 2008), and that variations in the transition make it difficult to discern a beginning and end to the stage (Côté, 2014). In response, Arnett (2016) contends that, although there are sufficient commonalities to outline the developmental stage, there are many ways to experience emerging adulthood. In fact, heterogeneity is viewed as one of the distinguishing characteristics of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000).

The manner in which emerging adulthood is experienced is influenced by culture (Arnett, 2011), and changing demographics and societal contexts further influence on the progression of developmental stages (Arnett, 2016). If it is assumed that contextual factors influence the experience of a developmental period, South African emerging adults might have different experiences to those of their counterparts in other countries. Furthermore, the transition is no longer only about becoming an adult in a single culture, but rather negotiating the influences of many different cultures (Jensen & Arnett, 2012), which is particularly pertinent to South Africa's multicultural society. Increased access to media platforms where young adults are exposed to values and trends across the globe might further complicate what they regard as normative or valuable.

In a study by Berzin and De Marco (2010), it was found that the transition of young adults from lower socio-economic contexts to adulthood happens differently than for those from more affluent backgrounds, which brings into question the idea of a typical emerging adult experience across socio-economic contexts. The authors offered evidence that young adults from a poverty-stricken background are more likely to take on adult responsibilities, such as leaving home before the age of 18 and conceiving children, than their more affluent counterparts. Some are more likely to remain in their family homes, decreasing the likelihood of benefitting from the stability of long-term romantic relationship. In this regard, Arnett (2011) speculates that emerging adults from developing countries are more likely to have a shortened transition to adulthood, as they take up adult responsibilities sooner than required in developed countries. With the great income differentiation found in South Africa, there might thus be variation in how young adults from diverse socio-economic backgrounds deal with the transition to adulthood.

A changing labour market is another significant contributing influence on the experience of emerging adulthood. Today's knowledge-based economy has also increased the need for individuals with a tertiary education to supply the skills that are in demand (Tanner & Arnett, 2009). Aside from prolonged periods dedicated to education, unstable global and local labour markets might further increase the time it takes young adults to find employment. In researching young adults in 14 countries, Mills and Blossfeld (2009) found that individuals are delaying marriage and parenthood, due to their uncertainty of being able to enter the labour market. Understanding how emerging adulthood is negotiated by South African young adults, especially as they are transitioning to the world of work, could thus be helpful.

2.1.2 Millennials and their preferences when entering the labour market

In a Times article, *Millennials: The me me me generation*, Stein (2013) claims: "What millennials are most famous for besides narcissism is its effect: entitlement" (para. 7). The author further states that the following qualities are commonly ascribed to Millennials:

> They're earnest and optimistic. They embrace the system. They are pragmatic idealists, tinkerers more than dreamers, life hackers. Their world is so flat that they have no leaders… They want constant approval… They have massive fear of missing out… They want new experiences, which are more important to them than material goods… They're pro-business. They're financially responsible … they have less household and credit-card debt (Stein, 2013, para. 27).

This excerpt demonstrates a stereotypical opinion of how Millennials differ from other age cohorts. On a more scientific level, multiple authors have conducted research on value differences amongst generations to inform current employers on how to attract and retain Millennials (De Hauw & De Vos, 2010; Ng, Schweitzer, & Lyons, 2010; Twenge, Campbell, Hoffman, & Lance, 2010; I. A. Wong, Wan, & Gao, 2017). Such research often characterises Millennials through a comparison with Generation X (born between 1965 and 1979) and Baby Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964) (Lyons & Kuron, 2014). What Millennials would value in the work context is important, as their work values generally remain consistent during the transition from educational institutions to the workplace (Kuron, Lyons, Schwetzer, & Ng, 2014; Lyons & Kuron, 2014). These generational values further

hint at what would offer meaning to those entering the labour market, as well as the expectations they might hold.

Confounding findings have been reported on Millennials' work values. Some authors have noted that they seek greater extrinsic rewards, such as earnings and status (Twenge & Kasser, 2013; Twenge et al., 2010), as well as job security and benefits (Kuron et al., 2014), than other generations. The emphasis on extrinsic rewards might, in part, be explained by a desire for security as a result of the possibility of unemployment faced by young adults attempting to enter the labour market in present times. Other findings emphasise Millennials' prioritisation of intrinsic values associated with work, such as variety, meaning (Lechner, Sortheix, Göllner, & Salmela-Aro, 2017), and interesting occupational tasks (Kuron et al., 2014; Lechner et al., 2017). Ng et al. (2010) posit that Millennials desire a supportive work environment, with opportunities to establish social connections with colleagues. With regard to work values, it has been suggested that South African Millennials attach a value to social relationships, risk, authority, cultural identity, economic security, and creativity (Jonck, Van der Walt, & Sobayeni, 2017). Yet another South African study found a great desire for training and development amongst Millennials (Martins & Martins, 2012). Although all the mentioned values could be conducive to creating the ideal workplace, the economic climate, characteristics of the organisation, and the employees' approach to their work will ultimately determine which of these aspects the organisation considers viable to provide.

A need that is well-documented as generally considered an imperative amongst Millennials is a work–life balance (Kuron et al., 2014; Lyons & Kuron, 2014; Twenge et al., 2010). Overall, people's desire for leisure time and material rewards is increasing, and a steady decline in work centrality from the 1970s until the late 2000s has been noted (Lyons & Kuron, 2014; Twenge & Kasser, 2013), demonstrating decreased organisational commitment (Lyons & Kuron, 2014). In an 'always-on' culture where individuals are always reachable through cellular phones and electronic mail, Millennials might need to prioritise time for leisure in a way that was not necessarily required by older generations.

Cautions should be exercised in ascribing specific values to an entire age cohort. In a data set of school learners spanning 30 years, Trzesniewski and Donnellan (2010) found that personal variability explained more variance than generational differences with regard to individualism, self-enhancement, happiness, antisocial behaviour, and self-esteem. More research is required to understand what is important to a generation, and whether relying on

generational conceptualisations is an accurate way of understanding the expectations of new employees. To enhance insight, exploring the unique historical and cultural conditions of a single country could be valuable in ascertaining generational qualities (Lyons & Kuron, 2014). South African young adults may be shaped by their context, and may hold different values and priorities than their counterparts in other countries. For instance, most South African Millennials have witnessed the country's transition to democracy, which may have made them more adept at operating in a context filled with diversity than older cohorts (Martins & Martins, 2012).

2.2 Strengths and Vulnerabilities of Young Adults at the Start of Their Careers

The road to adulthood is rarely a linear process, and young adults are likely to encounter several episodes of both progression and regression (Tanner, 2006). This section discusses the assets and disadvantages that young adults would need to manage when starting their careers. With growing independence, young adults enjoy more freedom than they did during adolescence, and are able to make decisions that will direct their lives. However, some of the normative features of this developmental stage make it a time that is particularly vulnerable to psychological distress. Theories of developmental psychology allude to instability and uncertainty often being present throughout young adulthood (Arnett, 2004; Côté & Bynner, 2008; Erikson, 1958). In combination with these stressors, the period between education and work can be a turbulent time, with many trials, before an individual finds a suitable place in the labour market (Schoon & Silbereisen, 2009).

2.2.1 Responding to many possibilities

Pinker (2018) noted being optimistic about the global progress of humanity, evident in longer life expectancy, improved food security, fewer deaths due to war, greater peace, equality of rights, growing numbers of educated people, and improved quality of life when compared to history. One might argue that there has not been a better time to live than the present, and young adults can benefit from the prospects that this progress has brought at the start of their adult lives. South Africans are also enjoying the possibilities brought by progression and democracy, such as access to university for all, irrespective of race, gender, and socio-economic standing.

Young adulthood is a stage of life when many different possibilities are available for consideration, allowing individuals to find ways to explore who they want to be (Arnett,

2004). Zarrett and Eccles (2006) observe that earlier generations of young adults had well-defined pathways to follow, whereas current cohorts have greater variety and freedom in making choices during the transition to adulthood. For instance, as a generation growing up with the World Wide Web, young adults have access to endless information streams, which also offer them options beyond local contexts. Although multiple options may promote the achievement of goals and create a sense of accomplishment, it could also cause confusion and disorientation (Skaletz & Seiffge-Krenke, 2010). Societal progression further implies that young adults are venturing into uncharted terrains, where they have to negotiate new challenges. This combination of freedom, possibilities, and exploration (Arnett, 20114) may lead to instability, where the transition to adulthood overwhelms the emotional coping resources of young adults (Schulenberg, Bryant, & O'Malley, 2004).

Tanner (2006) posits that young adulthood is often a peak period for the occurrence of significant life events. Young adults constantly struggle to find a balance between personal capabilities, societal demands, and their parents' wishes (Marcia, 1966). Young adults are confronted with possibilities regarding career choice, entering a long-term relationship, having children, and managing their financial resources. Having so many choices and possibilities can easily leave the young adult overwhelmed or constantly thinking about the best choice to make. With limited life experience, young adults are also vulnerable to making decisions that could have a detrimental effect on their future.

2.2.2 Expectations

Arnett (2004) characterises emerging adulthood as an optimistic time, as personal hopes have not yet been tested in reality, and, therefore, a clear direction in life has not yet crystallised. Based on the knowledge of self and information from others and the environment, young adults form expectations of the direction they wish to take in their life. When they are exposed to new experiences, young adults then have the opportunity to see whether reality corroborates their expectations.

Choosing a career path will have a significant effect, positive or negative, on the life that young adults map out for themselves. Arnett (2016) notes that a substantial majority of young adults believe that attending university is one of the key components of achieving success. Young adults expect to achieve their educational goals, and believe that this will

ensure a successful career (Trzesniewski & Donnellan, 2010). This optimism then motivates young adults to take the necessary steps to achieve their goals.

High hopes are not limited to young adults' university life, but also impact their transition to the labour market. Being optimistic about achieving their goals, young adults also have high expectations, in the form of prioritised values, with regard to employment (Arnett, 2011). These values are discussed in greater detail in Section 2.1.2. It was found that Millennials expect to have career development opportunities and high job satisfaction (De Hauw & De Vos, 2010), coupled with rapid advancement (Ng et al., 2010). A sample of young adults in the United States of America (USA) indicated that they considered finding a meaningful job more important than a high-paying position (Arnett, 2016). Their optimistic anticipations thus seem not to be limited to extrinsic work values, but include an intrinsic drive to attain meaning. However, approaching their first work experience with pre-set expectations appears to be preventing, rather than promoting, their effective adaption to the work (Murphy et al., 2010).

Although the new roles associated with adulthood may be filled with exciting discoveries, there is also the possibility of disillusionment and disappointment if the desired prospects are not achieved (Arnett, 2004). Lyons, Ng, and Schweitzer (2012) found that Millennials are the generation most likely to have unmet expectations in terms of personal pride in their career, meaningful work, increases in earnings, training opportunities, promotions, recognition from peers, and realising their full potential. With increased access to university, South African graduates might be especially dysphoric if they fail to make the expected smooth transition to employment. When faced with unfavourable labour markets, young adults are more likely to feel frustrated, due to high expectations for their careers (Seiffge-Krenke & Luyckx, 2014). In light of these notions, it is important to establish ways that would help current South African graduates to manage disappointment.

2.2.3 Growing independence

With more possibilities and greater freedom, there may be fewer regulatory structures present in the lives of today's young adults. During adolescence, institutional and social structures play a significant role in dictating normative behaviour (Arnett, 2000). However, young adults have less collective support (Schwartz et al., 2005). The level of supervision associated with primary and secondary education diminishes at university, and might be

completely absent after graduation. When seeking employment, less institutional support implies that young adults are unlikely to have sufficient contacts with whom to engage regarding work opportunities (Bell & Blanchflower, 2011).

On the other hand, the lack of guidance obliges young adults to investigate prospects and make choices independently. New roles associated with the transition to adulthood provide opportunities to achieve success, and to avoid failure these individuals have to adjust (Schulenberg et al., 2004). Tanner (2006) uses the term *recentering* to define the process that young adults undergo to become independent from the regulation of others (e.g., society, teachers, and parents) towards self-regulation and competence as an adult. In becoming less dependent on the guidance of authority figures, young adults have the freedom to choose an approach to living that is congruent with their sense of self.

With growing independence and individuation, young adults have the opportunity to focus on their personal needs, interests, and development. According to Arnett (2004), being self-focused is one of the hallmarks of emerging adulthood, as society grants a temporary pardon from duties, commitments, and social obligations. There appears to be a developmental advantage to this self-focus. If, at a later stage, young adults learn to turn their focus towards others, significant others may also benefit from the initial self-focus (Arnett, 2004). Sufficient self-knowledge could enhance insight into others, which increases the likelihood of the young adult forming mature, healthy relationships. Indeed, young adults have long acknowledged the ability to put the needs of others before their own as an important developmental milestone in adulthood (Arnett, 1998). Young adults being expected to take responsibility for others early in their lives may hamper this self-focus.

With growing independence, many young adults are operating more autonomously from their family, without permanent commitments to long-term partners and a family of their own, making young adulthood a potentially lonely time (Arnett, 2004). However, while young adults might not receive the guidance they grew accustomed to during the earlier stages of their lives, social support is not altogether absent. A study by Carlson (2014) found that young adults often seek advice from their parents, and will implement their guidance if it seems reasonable and helpful. Young adults also approach peers and social media in decision-making (Côté & Bynner, 2008). Despite receiving less structured guidance, modern-day young adults are exposed to and can access more opinions than previous generations were able to, which inform their decision-making.

2.3 Identity Development

As young adults establish greater independence, their identity formation is also taking place. In his theory of psychosocial development, Erikson (1958) described the crisis in ego development due to vacillation between confusion and identity as typical of adolescence, but noted that the process could continue well into later life. According to Côté (2006b), in more recent times, attending to substantial parts of identity formation until the late twenties can be regarded the norm, rather than the exception. The following section presents a discussion of the moratorium that allows young adults time to create an identity. As young adults explore and commit to identity aspects, they are also moving through different statuses of identity establishment. The outcomes associated with each status are also examined in the next section.

2.3.1 Moratorium for young adults

Erikson (1968) introduced the concept of a moratorium — a period during which young adults are not expected to fulfil adult responsibilities or make commitments, but are allowed to focus on explorations that would result in the establishment of a mature identity. The conceptualisation of emerging adulthood as a developmental stage can be viewed as a prolonging of the moratorium (Schwartz et al., 2005). In his theory on emerging adulthood, Arnett (2004) notes a growing trend to delay traditional adult roles even longer, to create sufficient opportunity for the exploration of multiple avenues related to identity expression. By initiating further education, romantic relationships, and employment experiences, young adults are sifting through the available opportunities and finding ways to best satisfy their needs (Schwartz et al., 2005). The reasons for engaging in a moratorium might also change in response to an evolving society. While previous generations might have entered the moratorium driven by internal factors (e.g., self-discovery or resolving a crisis), current generations are more often externally motivated to use the time to secure work or secure a lucrative income (Côté, 2006a).

Erikson (1980) posited that the moratorium is sanctioned because communities are sympathetic to the fact that young adults need to explore multiple choices before they are able to satisfactorily direct their lives. An exploration process follows that allows young adults to imagine possible versions of themselves, which will inform their commitment to a career choice (Super, Savickas, & Super, 1996). This period of exploration can thus be

viewed as a dynamic interaction between young adults and the role they play in the greater social sphere. The length of the moratorium is also governed by societal structures and institutions, which determine when an individual is expected to take on the responsibilities associated with adulthood (Côté & Levine, 1987). The time granted for exploration comes to an end when young adults find a niche within which to participate in larger society, one that will also grant societal confirmation of their contribution (Erikson, 1968). There appears to be a point where the desire to adopt adult responsibilities to contribute to the greater community becomes more compelling than the desire for self-exploration. Côté (2006a) describes the moratorium as becoming increasingly anomic, suggesting that although young adults are gaining freedom and choice, fewer normative patterns are available to follow, which might complicate their ability to make commitments.

Not all young adults who have engaged in sufficient exploration and now desire the stability associated with commitments, such as employment, marriage, and independent living, are in a position to attain it. Literature suggests that a longer transition to the traditional commitments of adults is not always voluntary, nor is it necessarily a positive experience for young adults (Côté, 2014; Côté & Bynner, 2008; Hendry & Kloep, 2010). One explanation is that successful entry into the labour market is prolonged by a considerable period at university, as a result of the increased demand for skilled professionals (Côté & Bynner, 2008). Therefore, young adults are not avoiding employment, but are spending a significant amount of time in preparation for a career that will generate a viable income. The high unemployment rate is another cause of the prolonged transition of taking up responsibilities associated with adulthood (Aassve et al., 2013). When their efforts have failed to secure them employment, these discouraged work-seekers then need to continue relying on their families for financial support. Lomasky (2016) claims that todays' young adults are "stuck in an extended childhood" (p. 6), due to their lack of economic independence.

2.3.2 The statuses formed by exploration and commitment

Erikson (1980) argued that, through experimentation with different roles, young adults can reflect and reconstruct appropriate identity identifications and, ultimately, commitments. Attending university offers them the opportunity to increase the amount of time and effort they devote to identity exploration (Meca et al., 2015). Being exposed to a variety of new people and ideas could challenge students' previously held values and

worldviews (Tanner, 2006). Carlsson, Wängqvist, and Frisén (2015) identified three dimensions that shape identity development: the direction of personal development, engagement in meaning-making, and the approach to changing life conditions. Therefore, identity development is not only influenced by exposure to a certain context, but also by how individuals make sense of and choose to respond to that context. In this sense, developing an identity can be regarded as a process that is informed by the chosen contexts, as well as the integration processes in which young adults engage.

Marcia (1966) elaborated on the notion of identity achievement by distinguishing four identity statuses (illustrated in Figure 1) that are constructed based on the individual's level of commitment and the presence of a crisis. The four statuses are illustrated in the figure below and subsequently discussed.

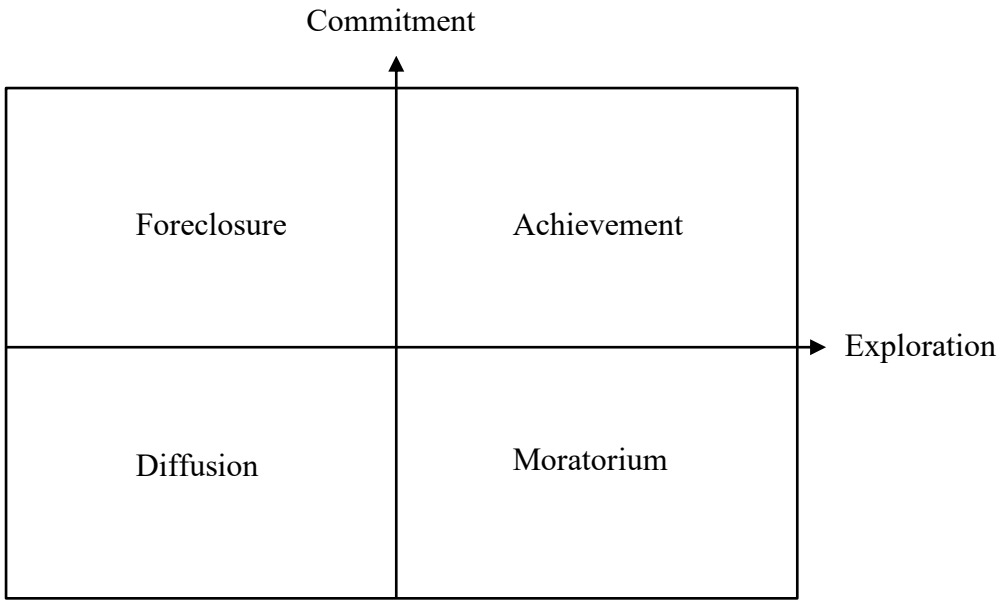

Figure 1. The four different identity statuses based on the amount of commitment and exploration present, as suggested by Marcia (1966).

According to Marcia (1966), the identity status of *Achievement* is reached when there has been a time of exploration that resulted in commitment and an established sense of identity. It has been suggested that individuals who have reached identity achievement

display less anxiety and greater self-esteem, internal locus of control, and moral reasoning (Kroger & Marcia, 2011). When viewed using the Big Five taxonomy of personality traits (Costa & McCrae, 1986), they also have the most adaptive personality profile of all the statuses — high openness to experiences, conscientiousness, agreeableness, and extroversion (Crocetti, Rubini, Luyckx, & Meeus, 2008; Luyckx, Goossens, Soenens, Beyers, & Vansteenkiste, 2005).

The status of *Foreclosure* refers to the individual making strong commitments in the absence of sufficient exploration of alternatives (Marcia, 1966). Studies have shown that individuals in the Foreclosure status show comparable scores to those in the Achievement status with regard to lower accounts of depression (Luyckx, Duriez, Klimstra, & De Witte, 2010), higher adjustment (Luyckx et al., 2005), low indications of psycho-social problems (Crocetti et al., 2008), and higher psychological well-being (Luyckx et al., 2008). These findings suggest that commitment in the absence of sufficient exploration could have positive outcomes.

Individuals who are continuously exploring without making commitments fall in the *Moratorium* status (Marcia, 1966). These individuals are more likely to show poor psychological adjustment (Lannegrand-Willems, Perchec, & Marchal, 2016). Luyckx et al. (2008) suggests the existence of a ruminative moratorium, defined as negative, fruitless, and repetitive contemplation about past decisions and the direction of one's life.

The *Diffusion* status applies to individuals who neither explore identity alternatives nor have strong commitments (Marcia, 1966). This status is associated with low psychological well-being (Luyckx et al., 2008), high identity confusion (Schwartz et al., 2015), increased risk behaviour, externalising and internalising symptoms, and a higher likelihood of rumination (Meca et al, 2015; Schwartz et al., 2015). This carefree state is characterised by relatively high levels of adjustment, similar to those seen in the Achievement status (Lannegrand-Willems et al., 2016; Luyckx et al., 2005). This indicates that not experiencing pressure to explore and commit could be beneficial to a person's well-being.

Apart from the end results of exploration and commitment indicated in the figure above, there is also evidence of a process of reconsideration (Crocetti et al., 2008), which represents identity as a sequential cycle of commitment during continuing exploration

(Beyers & Luyckx, 2016; Carlsson et al., 2015; Luyckx, Goossens, & Soenens, 2006). Stephen, Fraser, and Marcia (1992) described the identity process as being spiral, rather than linear, as it includes continuous movement from disequilibrium to consolidation. The presence of continuing and renewed exploration after identity establishment brings into question the accuracy of viewing identity development as a process that occurs in sequential stages. In fact, valuable exploration can be restricted by maintaining identity commitment in the absence of explorations. This is discussed in greater detail in the next section.

2.3.3 Critical review of exploration and commitment

Côté (1997) developed the Identity Capital Model, and asserted that a sense of identity can be viewed as a resource in dealing with life's challenges. Schwartz et al. (2005) maintain that having an established identity can assist young adults in navigating and sustaining future commitments by directing their efforts. Individuals who view themselves as being the same person in different situations over time are more likely to view themselves as syntonic — in harmony with the environment and their beliefs — and behave in a manner that strengthens social relationships (Schwartz et al., 2015). Therefore, an established sense of identity can provide a sense of stability when young adults are transitioning to adulthood. An established identity can also be a resource with a positive impact in the workplace (Luyckx et al., 2010).

The process of exploration to accomplish the establishment of identity is associated with decreased psychological functioning. Schwartz, Zamboanga, Weisskirch, and Rodriguez (2009) found that higher identity exploration is associated with greater impulsivity, depression, anxiety, and decreased psychological well-being. While exploration might be exciting, it is likely to be accompanied by uncertainty and doubt, which might explain the related negative outcomes. Schwartz et al. (2015) found that young adults experiencing high identity confusion indicated a greater number of accounts of externalising problems, internalising symptoms, health risks, aggression, depression, anxiety, and rumination. Further, rumination and lack of decision-making are associated with weaker commitment, making it a risk to attaining the status of identity achievement (Beyers & Luyckx, 2016).

The cost of exploration, as well as the adaption found in the Foreclosure and carefree Diffusion statuses, casts doubt on the role of identity exploration to achieve Commitment.

Yet, there appears to be general consensus that sufficient exploration of identity options yields the most favourable identity outcomes (Crocetti et al., 2008; Kroger & Marcia, 2011; Luyckx et al., 2005). Dealing with the novelty brought by explorations can enhance the ability to solve problems, make decisions, apply introspection, and establish an overall sense of self-direction in forming a coherent adult identity (Schwartz et al., 2005). Luyckx et al. (2008) recommend studies on long-term outcomes of the various identity statuses, to shed light on this question. The answer to this contradiction may lie in the manner in which identity explorations are approached. It is easier for individuals to explore other identity areas without rumination, hesitation, and distress if some identity commitments have already been made (Luyckx et al., 2008). In-depth exploration has a buffering effect on the association between rumination and depressive symptoms, while positive emotions during exploration may enhance identification with commitment (Beyers & Luyckx, 2016). Therefore, some identity establishment can act as an anchor while other explorations continue. According to Schwartz et al. (2005), young adults are more likely to establish an identity if they, rather than procrastinating, proactively initiate explorative tasks and activities that could yield a sense of identity.

2.4 Unemployment During Young Adulthood

Erikson (1968) highlighted work as an important domain for attention in the transition to adulthood. However, in a time of poor economic growth and increasing unemployment, an increasing number of young adults will need to transition to adulthood without the stability offered by employment. Lomasky (2016) argues that current young adults are more vulnerable than previous generations to economic problems, resulting in a generational injustice against young adults. The next section discusses occupational identities and how their establishment can benefit young adults.

2.4.1 The unemployment vulnerability of young adults

A noteworthy deterrent to hiring young adults is their lack of experience. Resistance to hiring inexperienced employees is more prevalent during unsteady economic periods, because employers have to weigh the potential of gaining human resource assets against immediately having to invest in training (Bell & Blanchflower, 2015). Young adults have to compete with older generations who have, over time, had more opportunities to develop appropriate aptitudes for the working environment (Lomasky, 2016). Additionally, there is

evidence of a perception that skills taught at tertiary education institutions are not sufficient to meet the labour market requirements. Tse, Esposito, and Chatzimarkakis (2013) highlight a disparity observed in various countries between job demands and the skills graduates acquire at university. A report by the ILO (2015) confirmed this discrepancy. Work experience would thus increase the likelihood of developing skills that are not taught during tertiary education, but, without work, young adults are failing to access experience that will improve their employability.

The absence of an employment history further makes young adult work-seekers less desirable candidates (Lomasky, 2016). A young adult might thus be considered a risk, due to little evidence that the individual will be a productive member of staff. Even when young adults do secure employment, there are no guarantees that they will be able to sustain it, as lack of seniority and those employed last are important consideration in layoffs, leaving the young adults at risk once again (Bell & Blanchflower, 2015). Structures that are put in place to protect already hired employees are thus placing potential young adult employees at a disadvantage. Although it might seem prudent to avoid hiring risks, Tse et al. (2013) argue that such caution is preventing fresh ideas and innovations from stimulating greater performance in businesses. Until labour markets become more accommodating of young adults without experience, the duty befalls individuals to prepare themselves for possible disappointments when seeking employment.

Furthermore, while being unemployed, there are fewer opportunities to build networks, causing decreases in social capital (Krahn, Howard, & Galambos, 2015). The word *scarring* is used to refer to the growing negative effect of initial unemployment on later life. Instability in employment is associated with a decrease in employment outcomes such as earnings, career satisfaction, and occupational status later in life (Gregg & Tominey, 2005). Additionally, being unemployed could have a negative impact on young adults' hope of securing work in the future (Bell & Blanchflower, 2011). Initial unemployment could thus result in young adults reducing their expectations of finding satisfactory career opportunities.

2.4.2 Work identity and unemployment

Finding satisfactory employment is a concrete and visible part of identity establishment. A work environment offers the opportunity to crystallise elements of the self that are related to work ethic, professional interaction, and status. Holland, Gottfredson, and

Power (1980) define vocational identity as “the possession of a clear and stable picture of one's goals, interests, and talents” (p. 1191). Super (1980) encouraged a more expansive view of careers that unfold over time instead of occupational practices that take place at a single point in time. The formation of a work identity is a long-term process that is responsive to the surrounding social context. Accordingly, career development depends on occupational self-concepts that develop as an interactive process between personal qualities, outcomes of roles fulfilled, and feedback from others (Super et al., 1996). From a relational perspective, work identity includes individuals’ connected and social selves that are formed as they respond to demands and expectations from others (Hall & Mirvis, 2013). As careers develop, occupational self-concepts are also influenced by other roles in life that might serve a burdening or supportive function (Super, 1980).

Even before the start of a career, there are definite advantages to career commitments. In a study of an adolescent population, Negru-Subtirica, Pop, and Crocetti (2015) found that individuals with vocational commitment are more likely to experience career confidence, control, and concern, as well as with adaptive behaviours that would prepare them for future occupational pathways. Students with a professional commitment have greater appreciation for the intrinsic values of their profession, evidenced by better academic self-esteem and self-efficacy, and had less desire to discontinue their studies (Mancini, Caricati, Panari, & Tonarelli, 2015). When secure employment is achieved, there is a notable decrease in the exploration of professional possibilities, and greater occupational self-efficacy ensues over time (Seiffge-Krenke, Persike, & Luyckx, 2013).

Unfortunately, establishing an occupational identity is not solely under the young adult’s control. Contextual factors like a country’s macro-environment also play a significant role in the ability to achieve what is regarded as identity markers (Gfellner & Bartoszuk, 2015). In a study by Sestito et al. (2015), slower identity commitment in the occupational sphere was found to be connected to the realities of a difficult job market. In the same way that unemployment prevents young adults from exiting the moratorium, the establishment of an occupational identity is also inhibited. Without employment, other avenues of identity formation, like financial competence, independent living, and maintaining a family, become more challenging.

An event like unemployment could also bring certain assumptions about the self into question, further preventing commitment to an occupational identity. Unemployed young

adults might feel compelled to reconsider alternatives to the career paths they previously chose, in order to ensure employment. A study on unemployed young adults showed that they scored higher on identity exploration and ruminative exploration, which could result in poorer mental health outcomes (Seiffge-Krenke et al., 2013). When people are in the process of establishing a vocational identity, reconsidering previous commitments can be adaptive when these are tied to becoming more flexible, but maladaptive when they take the form of self-doubt (Lannegrand-Willems et al., 2016).

2.4.3 Exploration versus floundering

Arnett (2004) noted the need for exploration as one of the characteristic elements of emerging adulthood. This time of life is easily romanticised as carefree, abounding with possibility, and full of exciting discoveries, without the monotony of adult responsibilities. However, remaining without direction can result in multiple negative consequences for young adults. Super et al. (1996) argued that people will explore the nature and expectations of new roles until they become established, at which time there will be a desire to disengage to pursue new growth opportunities. Krahn et al. (2015) caution against the risk of exploration becoming *floundering*, a term used to describe the unsuccessful attempts to progress from university to stable employment. Additionally, individuals who are unable to commit to specific goals over time experience more pressure as they grow older, which increases their likelihood of developing psychopathology (Skaletz & Seiffge-Krenke, 2010). If explorations are not contributing to a sense of direction and goal achievement, these efforts might distract young adults, instead of contributing to their self-discovery. For instance, educational exploration can have a positive effect when young adults find careers that fit their talents and interests, but, when it results in employment instability, there can be a negative impact on their later income and satisfaction (Krahn et al., 2015).

When perceiving young adulthood as the scaffolding that provides direction for later adult years (Tanner, 2006), early occupational challenges could have a lasting effect on the course of a young adult's life. Even during adolescence, occupational uncertainty can lead to doubt during young adulthood, resulting in a heightened risk of financial instability (Sikora, 2018). As an alternative to continuous exploration, commitment to employment holds multiple benefits for young adults. When compared to their unemployed or studying counterparts, young adults who are satisfied with their employment show greater self-esteem, lower negative mood, better mental health, increased life satisfaction, less social isolation

(Winefield, Delfabbro, Winefield, Duong, & Malvaso, 2017), and higher levels of overall well-being (Schulenberg et al., 2004). They enjoy more certainty as a result of lower identity exploration, and feel less 'in-between' (Crocetti et al., 2015). In a longitudinal study of young adults, self-efficacy showed stronger associations with attending university and employment than with family formation (such as marriage and parenthood) and income (Mortimer et al., 2016).

In a study in the USA, more than half of the young adults indicated that they had not yet found the job they wanted to do (Arnett, 2016). These young adults are likely to continue exploring other career opportunities as they attempt to increase the likelihood of securing more suitable employment. If satisfactory employment remains elusive, young adults might start doubting their career choice. Lechner, Tomasik, and Silbereisen (2016) add that young adults are more likely to disengage from their career-related goals if entry into the labour market is uncertain.

Viewing educational and employment explorations as the result of young adults' desire for an extended, untroubled youth can skew perceptions on the necessity of programmes and policies that offer them support in gaining employment (Côté, 2006a). This dangerous societal myth condones educational and employment instability, while not offering the support needed by young adults. It could be helpful to understand how to offer support as young adults are exploring options, and to assist them to make well-informed commitments that would ease their transition to secure employment.

2.5 Implications of Unemployment

Unemployment can have a negative effect on progression in life on several levels. Aside from not being financially able to sustain a living, early unemployment can also have a diminishing effect on later income. As mentioned in Section 2.3.1, financial independence is required to reach adult milestones, and young adults might continue struggling to catch up to achieve their dreams if their initial unemployment was protracted. This situation is further complicated by unemployment negatively impacting these individuals' physical and mental health, which prevents them from being in the optimal state to secure work.

2.5.1 Financial limitations

The financial consequences of unemployment constitute a significant burden (Reneflot & Evensen, 2014). One might argue that the lack of income should be less concerning to graduates, as they have fewer financial commitments than older individuals, and they are more likely to have a financial safety net in the form of parents and other family members (Bell & Blanchflower, 2011; Bjarnason & Sigurdardottir, 2003; Jacob, 2008). However, with South Africa's high poverty and unemployment rates, these graduates often have families who are not in a position to offer much financial support. The consequences of financial limitations can also have a spill-over effect on other areas of young adults' lives. For example, limited finances with which to fund leisure activities may result in decreased social participation (L. E. Waters & Moore, 2001) and low self-esteem (L. E. Waters & Moore, 2002a).

Lack of income during young adulthood can also become cumulative, resulting in economic deprivation even after employment has been secured (Bjarnason & Sigurdardottir, 2003; Krahn et al., 2015). Longitudinal studies have recorded this scarring effect up to 24 years after employment was secured. Therefore, protracted unemployment at a young age may result in persistent inequality in the future (Eliason & Storrie, 2006; Gregg & Tominey, 2005; Schmillen & Umkehrer, 2017). Furthermore, timing, with regard to the reigning economic climate, of an individual's entrance into the labour market could also have a scarring effect. It is estimated that even individuals with a university qualification who enter the labour force during an economic downturn will suffer a cumulative loss of their potential income over the next ten years (Cockx & Ghirelli, 2016). This bodes bleak prospects for South African young adults who are applying for work in the current time of high youth unemployment.

Not only the individual suffers financially during unemployment; society at large also faces economic losses (Tse et al., 2013). With a higher unemployment rate, fewer people participate in the labour market to enhance the economic prosperity of a country. A high unemployment rate further leads to an increase in the demand for unemployment benefits (Reneflot & Evensen, 2014). A particularly worrisome waste of human capital comes in the form of graduates who have gained a specialised skills set but are unable to enter the labour force (Xing, Yang, & Li, 2017). Given the amount of public spending in South Africa allocated to subsidising university fees, as well as bursary allocations managed by the

National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) (DHET, 2018), unemployment amongst graduates indicates a system failure.

2.5.2 Physical health and risk-prone behaviour

A review conducted by Wanberg (2012) elucidated the impact of unemployment on physical health. Paul and Moser (2009) warned that unemployment should not be underestimated when compared to other potential risks to the healthcare system. A study in Greece revealed that self-reported health problems increased during unemployment, especially amongst women (Drydakis, 2015). Furthermore, people who suffer financial strain due to unemployment are more likely to make unhealthy lifestyle choices, including smoking, not exercising, and making unhealthy food decisions (Macy, Chassin, & Presson, 2013). These poor lifestyle choices then further compromise their health. Unemployment is also associated with an increased risk of mortality (Bell & Blanchflower, 2015; Wanberg, 2012). Being troubled by health concerns can result in the individual having less energy and drive to pursue employment.

There is some divergence in the literature on the effect of unemployment on risk-prone behaviour (Ayllón & Ferreira-Batista, 2018; Kalousova & Burgard, 2014). Macy et al. (2013) highlight that, while some researchers have found an increase in unhealthy behaviour like smoking, excessive alcohol consumption, and the use of illegal or abuse of prescription medication, other studies have shown that individuals' health behaviours improved during unemployment. Ayllón and Ferreira-Batista (2018) discuss three theories to explain substance abuse during unemployment: decreased use due to a lack of funds, increased use due to psychological stress, and increased use due to having more time available. Nagelhout et al. (2017) suggest another correlation — increased substance use due to social isolation and the psychological distress it causes. Overall, extant literature mostly supports the existence of the counter-cyclical process where substance use increases as a result of the psychological stressors individuals experience during unemployment (Nagelhout et al., 2017).

De Goeij et al. (2015) support the view of Catalano et al. (2011), that the psychological distress associated with unemployment can cause increased alcohol consumption, and add that men are at a higher risk than women of engaging in alcohol abuse. Thern et al. (2017) found a particularly strong association between unemployment and

substance abuse amongst unemployed individuals up to the age of 24 (Thern et al., 2017). While such high-risk behaviours may temporarily distract individuals from the concerns that are causing their distress, it may also prevent them from seeking work opportunities. Cutler, Huang, and Lleras-Muney (2015) found that graduating during a period of high unemployment is related to lower life satisfaction, a greater incidence of alcohol and substance abuse and smoking, and, later in life, obesity, and decreased general health. Thus, it is clear that efforts to counter this downward spiral could benefit from insights into ways to minimise the psychological distress associated with unemployment.

2.5.3 Psychological health

Unemployment is associated with symptoms of psychological ill health (Daly & Delaney, 2013) such as depression (Jefferis et al., 2011; McGee & Thompson, 2015), increased severity of anxiety and depressive symptoms (Catalano et al., 2011), and overall decreased psychological well-being (McKee-Ryan et al., 2005). A study by Paul and Moser (2009) confirmed these associations, but also identified a causal relationship between unemployment and poor mental health. In a systematic review of the literature, Kim and Von dem Knesebeck (2016) found that unemployed individuals have a 19% increased risk of developing symptoms of depression. Young adults seem to be especially vulnerable to mental health concerns related to unemployment. A longitudinal study by Mortimer et al. (2016) yielded evidence indicating that young adults being unemployment is associated with a decline in self-efficacy, resulting in the interpretation of other negative events as out of their control. A longitudinal study by Thern et al. (2017) found increased risk in unemployed young adults under the age of 24 of mental health impairments associated with their unemployment. These impairments manifest in self-destructive behaviours, and may increase the likelihood of suicide (Catalano et al., 2011).

From the above, it is clear that unemployment has a scarring effect on mental health. Decreased life satisfaction has been found in individuals who are employed but had been unemployed in the past, which indicates the long-term effect of unemployment (Clark, Georgellis, & Sanfey, 2001). Strandh, Winefield, Nilsson, and Hammarström (2014) found decreased mental health amongst a population of 30-year-olds who had been unemployed for periods during the ages of 21 to 30, while Daly and Delaney (2013) discovered increases in distress levels at age 50 amongst individuals who had suffered periods of unemployment in adulthood.

Clark et al. (2001) refer to a set point or baseline of subjective well-being, which may be disturbed by certain events; however, the individual eventually returns to this baseline happiness and satisfaction. The authors found that unemployment could hamper the individual's recovery to the setpoint long after the individual has secured employment. Another possible consequence of the scarring effect is the distress associated with unemployment having a negative effect on motivation and coping abilities, to the point that it decreases the likelihood of the individual securing future employment (Breslin & Mustard, 2003). This leads to a vicious cycle, where the negative psychological consequences of unemployment prevent adaptive behaviour to obtain employment.

A study of a young adult population found that the move from school to employment is complemented by gains in mental health, whereas unemployment after school results in decreased mental health (Paul & Moser, 2009). Through a meta-systematic review of literature, Modini et al. (2016) found that work can improve mental health through the availability of more opportunities for personal development, access to resources, greater subjective well-being, and enhanced autonomy. The above discussion emphasises the importance of avoiding unemployment and offering support to those who are unemployed. The next section considers strategies to this effect.

2.6 Coping Strategies During Unemployment

With South Africa's growing youth unemployment rate, adaption strategies might be the best way to cope with the instability of initial unemployment and avoid discouragement. In the following discussion, the literature on coping strategies individuals employ during unemployment is explored in four sections, namely social support, self-directing, cognitive appraisal, and job-search intensity.

2.6.1 Social support

Finding alternative means to satisfy social needs enhances adaption during unemployment. In a meta-analytic study, McKee-Ryan et al. (2005) noted that, during unemployment, social support is associated with improved management of stressors, thereby enhancing well-being. Moreover, social support can act as a buffer by protecting unemployed individuals against a decline in their psychological health (Milner, Krnjacki, Butterworth, & LaMontagne, 2016). Social support is especially important to people who experience stigma and discrimination (Thompson, Dahling, Chin, & Melloy, 2017).

Increased social interaction could also enhance opportunities to network or gather information about employment opportunities.

It has been found that lower levels of parental support contribute to the risk of unemployed young adults developing psychological distress (Reneflot & Evensen, 2014). Graduates with educated parents are in a better position to find employment over the short term, as these parents may share knowledge on how to enter the labour market (Salas-Velasco, 2006). However, in South Africa, many graduates are first-generation students, as their parents did not have access to universities. The parents of first-generation students might not have the knowledge resources to guide their children in the transition from university to employment.

Leisure activities can also contribute to the maintenance of psychological health during unemployment. Social leisure interactions, rather than solitary activities, are associated with decreased depressive symptoms and enhanced self-esteem (L. E. Waters & Moore, 2002b). Aside from offering access to social support, leisure activities can also distract young adults from ruminating on their unemployment. An explorative study by Feuls, Fieseler, and Suphan (2014) showcased the potential of using social media resources to avoid the isolation that often occurs during unemployment. Although using social media might be viewed as a solitary activity, it can create a sense of connectedness and a feeling of belonging. As a generation who grew up with social media, young adults might be more inclined than older generations to use these forums to their advantage.

The effects of social support also have implications for behavioural outcomes. In a study by Wanberg, Basbug, Van Hooft, and Samtani (2012), individuals searching for employment indicated that engagement with others enhanced their mood and motivation. Unemployed individuals' level of self-efficacy is associated with the level of social support they receive (Maddy, Cannon, & Lichtenberger, 2015), which, in turn, increases the amount of job searching they will undertake during unemployment (McArdle, Waters, Briscoe, & Hall, 2007). This association might be explained by the fact that social support can increase resilience and positive expectations to find work (Ślebarska, Moser, & Gunnesch-Luca, 2009). Social support during unemployment also has a positive effect on self-esteem (Maddy et al., 2015; McArdle et al., 2007; L. E. Waters & Moore, 2002a), which might enhance the anticipation of and, thus, search for successful employment. The collectivistic values present in South Africa offer opportunities for unemployed young adults to expand their social

networks to establish connections and obtain leads to occupational opportunities (Blustein, Franklin, Makiwane, & Gutowski, 2017).

2.6.2 Self-efficacy and adaptability

According to adaptability theory, informed decision-making, exploration of the self and the environment, and a planful attitude are necessary to be responsive to a changing work environment (Savickas, 1997). The theory suggests paying attention to available resources and taking action based on the best option. It is possible to acquire these abilities. A study of one such training programme for students showed that the training enhanced their career adaptability, and resulted in higher rates of employment and improved job quality six months later (Koen, Klehe, & Van Vianen, 2012). The advantages of career adaptability make it a valuable skill set to teach unemployed young adults. Koen, Klehe, Van Vianen, Zikic, and Nauta (2010) combined these qualities with self-confidence, and found an association with better preparation and mental readiness to utilise different job-search strategies. While adaptability theory concentrates on personal attributes, social cognitive career theory regards career progress as an interactive process between subjective qualities, learning experiences, resources, and environmental opportunities or barriers (Lent, 2013). Skills development and other educational initiatives can offer unemployed South Africans the opportunity to experience a sense of accomplishment that would enhance their self-efficacy (Blustein et al., 2017).

L. E. Waters and Moore (2002c) found that psychological health aspects play a greater role in predicting re-employment than the current labour market or demographic variables. Optimism, resilience, hope, and self-efficacy contribute to psychological capital, which, in turn, improves employment prospects (Lim, Chen, Aw, & Tan, 2016). Individuals who expect positive outcomes while believing in their capacity to realise them are more likely to succeed in the labour market (Thompson et al. 2017). Social cognitive career theory posits that self-efficacy is a permeable quality, which is influenced by past and present interactions with the environment (Lent, 2013). People who receive good feedback when performing well in non-work areas, or recall previous acknowledgement, could experience positive self-efficacy despite unemployment.

Higher autonomy is also related to elevated motivation to secure employment or a better position (Koen, Van Vianen, Van Hooft, & Klehe, 2016). Locus of control is another

factor that influences adaption during unemployment. An external locus of control refers to the belief that life is controlled by outside forces, while an internal locus of control is the conviction that one is in control of one's own life (Rotter, 1954). An internal locus of control contributes to improved psychological well-being during unemployment (McKee-Ryan et al., 2005), and predicts a greater likelihood of securing employment (L. E. Waters & Moore, 2002c). It thus appears that people who find themselves unemployed would benefit from an internal drive and a focus on what can be changed, instead of becoming fixated on what is out of their control.

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) distinguished between problem-focused coping, where strategies are followed to solve the cause of the problem, and emotion-focused coping, which entails the regulation of the emotions associated with a problem. Problem-focused coping moderates the effect of financial lack on self-esteem, lowering the likelihood of depression, while emotion-focused coping is more likely to result in continuing unemployment (L. E. Waters & Moore, 2001). Establishing practical goals to overcome unemployment would thus be more beneficial than simply attempting to create or maintain a positive emotional state. Having self-regulatory efficacy can assist individuals to remain motivated by managing emotions that arise while they are applying for work and receiving feedback (Blustein, Medvide, & Wan, 2012; Thompson et al., 2017). Provided the centrality of work and the pervasive influence of unemployment on people's lives, seeking mental health interventions can prevent discouragement (Blustein et al., 2012).

2.6.3 Cognitive appraisal

Instead of emphasising the lack of benefits associated with employment, theories on cognitive appraisal focus on people's perceptions of loss and the possibility of employment. Unemployment can cause individuals to perceive incongruence, resulting in discomfort. Using discrepancy theories, Paul and Moser (2006) explain that the distress associated with unemployment is due to the incongruence between being committed to employment and the state of being unemployed. According to Festinger's (1957) cognitive dissonance theory, individuals experience discomfort if they hold inconsistent values, ideas, or beliefs, and will consequently attempt to achieve consistency. During unemployment, individuals' cognitions need to be adapted to include new information about the period of unemployment, despite their commitment to a career.

A poor fit between a person's employment situation and commitment level will result in distress (Paul & Batinic, 2010). When a person values employment highly, the intensity of loss becomes even greater if the person does not secure employment soon (Van Hoye & Lootens, 2013). Backhans and Hemmingsson (2011) indicate that higher job identification (attachment) and a tendency to work overtime (commitment) are associated with higher mental distress during unemployment. Therefore, if work plays a central role, unemployment is likely to decrease mental health and life satisfaction (McKee-Ryan et al., 2005; Paul & Moser, 2006). It is therefore especially important that people with a higher job commitment develop adaptive cognitions and avoid equating temporary unemployment with personal failure.

Beneficial cognitive appraisals are more likely than high self-esteem to improve an individual's prospects of re-employment (L. E. Waters & Moore, 2002c). Beliefs about personal competence and subjective perceptions about the capacity to work are also associated with decreased psychological distress during unemployment (Vastamäki, Wolff, Paul, & Moser, 2014). Similarly, being focused on the present, instead of being apprehensive about the future or dwelling on the past, is correlated with the psychological well-being of unemployed individuals (Van Hoye & Lootens, 2013). A study by Pfeifer and Strunk (2016) found that cognitive behavioural skills (including awareness of core beliefs and schemas, handling automatic thoughts, and behavioural activation) not only protect individuals against depressive symptoms, but also increase their job-search behaviour. Within the South African context, Blustein et al. (2017) suggest increased critical consciousness – the ability to regard the world critically and adopt appropriate actions – as a way to reduce self-blame for unemployment. The above-mentioned results allude to the fact that creating and focusing on more constructive appraisals of oneself and the unemployment situation enhances adaptive behaviour during unemployment.

2.6.4 Job-search behaviour

The wide range of negative implications of unemployment make it imperative that unemployed people secure employment as soon as possible. However, in the South African context, securing employment may require continuous and intense effort. Job-searching involves the use of resources, effort, and time to engage in activities such as compiling a curriculum vitae (CV), looking for advertisements of posts, and making contact with potential employers (Creed et al., 2009). Unemployed graduates who display higher job-search

intensity are more likely to experience a shorter period of unemployment after graduation (Kanfer, Wanberg, & Kantrowitz, 2001; Salas-Velasco, 2006). Higher job-search intensity is also associated with attending more interviews, thereby increasing the likelihood of work offers (Creed et al., 2009). The motivation to continue with job-searching may be based on a comparison between the costs involved in continuing the search and the expectation of an opportunity arising as a result (Jacob, 2008).

Literature further demonstrates that job-search initiatives are influenced by individual characteristics. Ślebarska et al. (2009) found a correlation between job-search behaviour and both self-esteem and social support. According to McArdle et al. (2007), individuals with proactive personality traits and a stronger work identity are more likely to exhibit high job-search intensity. Creed et al. (2009) indicate that people who have a learning goal orientation (a focus on self-improvement and building competence, despite difficulties) display higher job-seeking intensity. Decreases in job-search intensity were noted if individuals had a desire to prove how well the perform and gain approval for it — a performance-prove approach, as they shy away from situations that might reveal incompetence (Creed et al., 2009). Individuals with greater job-search self-efficacy are more likely to engage in self- and environmental exploration, which enhance job-search focus (Zikic & Saks, 2009). On the other hand, unemployed individuals with fewer social, financial, and psychological resources are more likely to become fatigued job-searchers, which could have detrimental effects on their employment as little as one year later (Lim et al., 2016). There is thus a case to be made for the improvement of psychological constructs in an effort to enhance job-search intensity.

With regard to intensive effort to actively search for a job, McArdle et al. (2007) cautions that, while job-search initiatives are reliant on the individual's internal drive, employment is determined by the employer. An offer of work is therefore not directly correlated with the individual's effort. Furthermore, job-searching might yield the best probability of finding employment, but not necessarily to sustain psychological well-being. The strain of searching for opportunities and being exposed to rejection might explain decreased psychological well-being during unemployment (McKee-Ryan et al., 2005). Lin and Leung (2010) identified negative appraisal by others as a contributor to decreased mental health during job-search initiatives.

Another valuable construct to consider in the search for work is employability, which is a multidimensional construct that includes social and human capital, personal adaptability,

and career identity (Fugate, Kinicki, & Ashforth, 2004). Employability requires initiative from the individual to adapt to the world of work in order to secure career opportunities (Fugate et al., 2004). De Vos, De Hauw, and Van der Heijden (2011) found that engaging in initiatives aimed at improving career-related competencies resulted in greater self-perceived employability. A successful journey through unemployment is thus reliant on individuals' capacity to initiate the necessary actions to enhance their competence and become more sought after in the labour market, which might be challenging when they are in a state of distress.

2.7 Conclusion

While some developmental milestones for young adults are common amongst many societies and generations, there is variation in these groupings' perceptions of the required developmental tasks. Theories on emerging adulthood and Millennials offer an enhanced understanding of modern-day young adults as they approach the transition from university to work. While being exposed to new environments, young adults have the opportunity to explore different aspects of themselves to establish their identity. Previous studies indicate that exploration can be distressing, especially when few other identity commitments have been made. Commitment to a career is an important contribution to young adults' overall identity formation. Unfortunately, in an unstable economy with known biases against young adults, many graduates are left unable to secure a job. At a point where they might be ready to commit to more adult responsibilities, young adults then find themselves in an obligatory moratorium.

What is especially troubling is the fact that the negative consequences associated with unemployment can limit individuals' progression in the labour market for years to come. Aside from financial constraints, unemployment also compromises physical and mental well-being. According to Savickas's (1997) theory on adaptability, the most helpful way to respond to unemployment is a dynamic interaction between the person and the contextual factors. Concerted attempts to improve employability might be the best option for unemployed young adults while structural imbalances in the labour market persist. In a time when young adults are exploring career possibilities and occupational identities, they are also committing to avenues that would offer meaning to their lives. The following chapter expands on these ideas by focusing on the construct of meaning and its relevance to unemployed young adult graduates.

Chapter 3: Meaning and Unemployed Young Adult Graduates

While there are many definitions of meaning and numerous perspectives on the concept (C. L. Park, 2010), great progress has been made in realising the term's complexity in the field of psychology. Regarding the definition of meaning, the literature points to three related concepts, namely purpose, significance, and coherence. In the present study, meaning as it relates to young adulthood, and identity formation in particular, is discussed below. Extant literature indicates various contributing factors to meaning, and the discussion below considers how work, or the absence thereof, may impact meaning. I will further argue that theories explaining poor psychological health during unemployment are relevant in understanding meaning-making. The benefits of having meaning in life are investigated, to substantiate its value to those who are unemployed.

3.1 Clarifying Meaning

Many researchers consider meaning a nebulous concept (Kashdan et al., 2008). Yet, the amount of scholarly effort devoted to fully grasping what a meaningful life is signifies its centrality to the human experience. When attempting to understand meaning, a possible starting point might be consideration of the Aristotelian distinction between a hedonic and an eudemonic life. Hedonic endeavours are focused on the optimisation of pleasure in the absence of pain, while eudemonic well-being is concerned with personal fulfilment and self-realisation (R. M. Ryan & Deci, 2001). Baumeister, Vohs, Aaker, and Garbinsky (2013) maintain that, while humans and animals share the desire to satisfy basic needs, the quest to find meaning is unique to humans. King, Hicks, Krull, and Gaiso (2006) describe experiencing meaning as a person experiencing having a purpose in life, coherence that overrides chaos, and feeling significant. Martela and Steger (2016) also consider purpose, significance, and coherence as the trichotomy of facets of current-day perceptions of meaning. The three concepts of the meaning triad are defined below, and are applied in exploring meaning in the ensuing discussion.

3.1.1 Purpose

Yalom (1980) associated meaning with purpose, positing that meaning provides aim, intention, and function. A purpose that offers direction in life is regarded as the motivational component of meaning (King, Heintzelman, & Ward, 2016). Having a purpose in mind may help people to direct their efforts and remain persistent in this endeavour. McKnight and

Kashdan (2009) argue that meaning stimulates the development of purpose, which, in turn, drives the further search for meaning. This indicates a reciprocal relationship — perceiving something as meaningful results in a purpose, which could stimulate action, and, as a result, greater meaning is achieved.

When compared to the constructs of significance and coherence, seeking purpose has a unique time perspective, as it is fuelled by desired future states. Purpose is, therefore, the connection between current activities and possible future outcomes (Baumeister, 1991). Herein lies a reference to the distinction between hedonic and eudemonic approaches to life, where happiness is mostly experienced as a present state, and meaningfulness may arise when considering past experiences or future goals (Baumeister et al., 2013). What is valued determines long-term pursuits, which, in turn, direct the achievement of shorter-term goals. Having purpose can thus enhance an individual's agency, through an awareness of the instrumentality of present behaviour in reaching a purpose.

Purpose can shape the trajectory of someone's life through the organisation of sequential activities that will result in achieving valued goals (Steger, 2012). In fact, goals can be regarded as the drive to reach a greater purpose (Feldman & Snyder, 2005). The university context offers a good example of how achieving instrumental goals, such as passing a subject, are directed toward the purpose of becoming a successful professional in the labour market. How intently goals are pursued is determined by the strength, scope, and presence of awareness of the purpose (Martela & Steger, 2016); for example, people are more likely to remain committed to actions related to a highly valued career choice.

Purpose further includes the desire to engage in present activities in pursuit of future objectives, even if these objectives are never attained (Baumeister, 1991). This means that pursuing goals with the hope of one day achieving the desired outcome could make the individual feel that life is meaningful, even if the goals are never achieved. Therefore, experiencing purpose does not depend on the accomplishment of goals, but rather on striving to reach those goals. Meaning can therefore be a byproduct of engagement in activities aimed at attaining goals (McKnight & Kashdan, 2009). Cognisance of the meaning gained from instrumental actions thus allows people to derive meaning from the journey, not only the destination.

3.1.2 Significance

The second facet of meaning is significance, which refers to the conviction that one's life has value and importance (King et al., 2016). When an individual evaluates his or her life against the criteria of personal standards, values, and expectations, the result will be significance if the current circumstances meet these criteria (Martela & Steger, 2016). What individuals perceive as adding significance might be important indicators in making life choices. Significance also relates to behavioural components, as what is regarded as significant provides justification for engaging in certain actions (Baumeister, 1991). Therefore, perceived significance influences motivation, which could increase purposeful activities. Although related, there is an important distinction: attaining significance is about finding what is subjectively valued, while purpose is associated with pursuing goals that are considered valuable (Martela & Steger, 2016).

Significance is further connected to how an individual's life fits into greater society, and even the world. People regard life as meaningful if they experience themselves as mattering and feel that they have an impact on the world (George & Park, 2016). Therefore, people have a desire to be involved with others in direct or indirect ways. Meaning is also derived from culture. In this instance, significance is dependent on pursuing goals that are sanctioned or valued by the relevant society (Baumeister, 1991). Social comparison is required to ascertain an area of pursuit that would be deemed worthy by a specific culture, and young adults might thus look to their peers to determine the norms with which they would have to comply in order to feel significant.

The perception of one's life having value is associated with greater self-esteem, worth, and satisfaction, whereas viewing one's life as insignificant can result in distress (Steger, 2012). In the absence of experiencing significance, people can perceive their actions as inconsequential, and, ultimately, they may feel that their existence in relation to the rest of the world is irrelevant (George & Park, 2016). Significance therefore ensures that people view themselves as contributing to something greater by enhancing their perception of being part of a larger community. This reduces feelings of isolation. Insignificance may manifest if people are no longer members of a formalised relational group, which may be the case when graduates exit university but fail to secure unemployment.

3.1.3 Coherence

Coherence refers to routine and predictability creating the perception that life makes sense (King et al., 2016). Steger et al. (2006) view the process of making sense of one's being and existence as a determinant of experiencing meaning. Whereas purpose and significance can be viewed as motivational, coherence is considered the cognitive component of the meaning triad (Heintzelman, Trent, & King, 2013). In the words of Martela and Steger (2016), "coherence is about not merely experiencing the world as it is, but about forming a coherent mental representation about that world, having a cognitive map of the world that makes sense out of our experiences" (p. 538). Seeking coherence could be particularly relevant to young adults who are in the process of establishing an integrated identity.

Steger (2012) emphasises the importance of comprehension as evident in people's understanding of themselves, the world, and their niche in it, which results in appropriate responses in specific contexts and relations with others. Making sense of situations has a very significant function — it allows people to evaluate their behavioural repertoire and achieve the most adaptive outcome. As young adults are exposed to new contexts, accommodating information more coherently could help them develop a more appropriate and mature approach to their life.

Proulx and Heine (2006) define meaning as reliant on the relationships between events, objects, places, and people, and note that disruptions in meaning can occur when mental representations of these relations are not suited to new information brought by situations. People form coherent and consistent meaning frameworks when they experience congruence between their perceptions about the world and their life experiences (George & Park, 2016). This meaning framework creates a sense of predictability, which makes the world appear less chaotic. People have a proclivity for meaning representation that governs everyday actions in a manner that is free of dissonance and contradiction, and inconsistencies can result in a sense of a lack of control and the sense of predictability (Proulx & Heine, 2006). Janoff-Bulman (1992) uses the term *assumptive worlds* to denote systems of assumptions about the self and the world that might be disrupted when a situation challenges existing perspectives.

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) distinguish between global meanings and the meaning attached to a specific event. Global meanings allow people to draw together and arrange

everyday situations into a coherent framework, which enhances their sense of purpose (Reker & Wong, 2012). A global meaning can be regarded as a general view of or orientation toward the world, which consists of goals, beliefs, and a subjective sense of meaning, while situational meaning refers to the meaning inferred during a specific encounter, and depends on how the event is appraised and then integrated into the greater framework (C. L. Park, 2010). The comprehension of a specific event (situational meaning) can bring about a cognitive dissonance with an existing belief or goal (global meaning). Global meaning frameworks can result in expectations about future encounters, and disappointment may follow if reality does not to meet these expectations. To resolve this conflict, individuals engage in a meaning-making process, in an attempt to reduce the discrepancy between the meaning appraised from a present situation and their global beliefs (C. L. Park, 2010).

3.2 Young Adults and the Process of Finding Meaning

The first part of this section is a joinder to the previous discussion on identity development, which illustrated how identity processes are related to the establishment of meaning. In an attempt to clarify what the process of finding meaning entails, Steger et al. (2006) propose a distinction between the search for and the presence of meaning. This distinction will be compared to Erikson's (1968) conceptualisation of identity exploration and establishment, followed by postulations on how identity and meaning processes could unfold for unemployed graduates.

3.2.1 Meaning during identity development

How meaning is sought and experienced can be influenced by developmental processes. There is a connection between meaning and individual development — meaning unfolds as identity, goals, and relationships evolve (Steger, Oishi, & Kashdan, 2009). Yalom (1980) asserted that people's sources of meaning are responsive to the focus of each developmental task, as proposed by Erikson (1980). Mayseless and Keren (2013) also argue that the self-focus found in young adulthood is an attempt to self-actualise, and is related to the search for a meaningful life. There are indications in the literature that the exploration and commitment of identity establishment happen in parallel with the search and presence of meaning (Burrow, O'Dell, & Hill, 2010; Kashdan & McKnight, 2009; Kiang & Fuligni, 2010; Steger et al., 2006; Sumner, Burrow, & Hill, 2015). Not being able to find meaning in

life can prevent young adults from understanding themselves and expressing their identities in a congruent manner.

Purpose can be a driving force and guide in activities, resulting in exposure to novelty and opportunities to explore areas of identity development. Coming to understand what satisfies their personal desire for meaning and how it can be obtained could be considered a significant developmental task for young adults. What is perceived as meaningful in life could also guide the considerations in acquiring a stable occupational identity. Having a purpose could direct the use of available resources to achieve goals that contribute to a personally meaningful life, which then leads to identity commitment (Burrow & Hill, 2011). The argument can also be made that lacking meaning in one or more areas of life could prevent engagement in contexts that may inform identity establishment.

When comparing identity and purpose amongst a student population, Sumner et al. (2015) found that purpose predicted psychological well-being more than identity establishment. Having a sense of meaning during the identity establishment process could also have other benefits. Commitment to a purpose mediates the relationship of identity commitment with well-being, life satisfaction, hope, and emotional adjustment in young adults (Burrow & Hill, 2011). It thus seems that having purpose can protect young adults against the negative aspects of identity explorations. Experiencing meaning can further have a positive effect on occupational identity during the uncertainty caused by unemployment. Perceiving a chosen career as meaningful could enhance persistence to pursue related opportunities, despite unemployment being an obstacle to the validation of an occupational identity.

3.2.2 Loss of meaning and initiating a search

Mayseless and Keren (2013) hypothesise that the complexity of living in a postmodern world intensifies the need for young adults to experience meaning and purpose. Yet, when considering the significant investments that graduates make in their occupational identity while studying, unemployment can cause a loss of meaning. According to Yalom (1980), the absence of explanations, patterns, and meaning can cause distress, while a life without meaning, ideals, and goals would result in anguish. In the words of Heintzelman and King (2014) “Profound meaninglessness, when it happens, holds our attention and occupies our energy not only because it often occurs in a traumatic context, but because it is not what

we are wired for" (p. 161). Lack of meaning results in discomfort, which could bring about the desire to search for meaning (Baumeister, 1991; Dezutter et al., 2014; Frankl, 1946; Steger, Kashdan, & Oishi, 2008).

In attempting to re-establish meaning, people have the need to organise and understand experiences (Steger et al., 2008). Searching for meaning can thus create coherence from past and present situations, but also open people up to other conceptualisations of meaning. Young adults are more engaged than older cohorts in searching for meaning, and older adults tend towards decreased well-being and greater distress if the search for meaning is greater (Steger et al., 2009). It is possibly that the searching process is better accepted and tolerated by young adults, because it is socially sanctioned. This finding is in line with Arnett's (2004) characterisation of emerging adulthood as a time of exploration. Being exposed to changing environments can bring about new goals to a pursue, opportunities to experience significance, and new information to integrate into a coherent meaning framework. Losing the meaning attached to a career due to unemployment could drive a new search for meaning by unemployed young adult graduates. However, the presence of motivation to search for meaning is not limited to the absence of meaning (Steger et al., 2006); it could also sprout from the desire for personal development or frustration with current levels of growth (Steger et al., 2008). Seeking meaning can be considered a transition whenever there is a desire for a greater sense of meaning.

Some young adults might find it more challenging than others to attain a sense of meaning. A study by Zhang, Sang, Chen, Zhu, and Deng (2018) showed that individuals who have less clarity about what it entails to have a meaningful life and how to attain such a life are more likely to avoid thinking about meaning. It appears that certain personal qualities might predispose people to faring better when searching for meaning. Self-awareness is necessary to decide when to initiate periods of personal growth, and when to integrate foreign experiences or information to attain a sense of stability (Kashdan & Steger, 2007). Steger et al. (2008) concluded that a search for meaning is further driven by certain cognitive styles, including a questioning inclination, the need to organise information, seeking intellectual challenges and novelty, and pursuing goals, as well as difficulty integrating painful past experiences. People differ in their ability to tolerate ambiguity, which influences their drive to seek out novel experiences in searching for meaning (Kashdan & Steger, 2007).

Similar to identity explorations, there are no guarantees that the journey of searching for meaning will be easy or enjoyable. Searching for meaning is related to negative affect (Steger et al., 2006; Sumner et al., 2015), decreased satisfaction with life (Steger, Oishi, & Kesebir, 2011), and depression (Steger et al., 2006), as well as increased emotional lability, greater distress, and decreased self-esteem (Kiang & Fuligni, 2010). With regard to establishing coherence, Webster, Weststrate, Ferrari, Munroe, and Pierce (2018) state that less mature young adults' emotional regulation might be temporarily overwhelmed by stressful events, which offers a possible explanation for the negative emotions tied to seeking meaning. Furthermore, individuals who are searching for meaning are more likely to ruminate on past and present negative events, and therefore experience greater a helplessness or a perception of having limited control over environments (Steger et al. 2008). Although higher meaningfulness has been found amongst people who make connections by thinking of their past and future, they also indicated lower happiness, as happiness is associated with a present state (Baumeister et al., 2013).

The negative associations with exploration might be worthwhile if the search for meaning eventually culminates in newfound meaning. However, while investigating the stability of meaning, Steger and Kashdan (2007) found that the search process remained fairly stable over a year, suggesting that people who are inclined to search will continue to search, whereas those who are satisfied with the meaning of their life are unlikely to start searching again. These results imply that there might not be an ultimate point of achieving meaning. Furthermore, despite the presence of meaning, individuals might still desire a deeper understanding or appreciation of life, leading to a continuation of the search for meaning (Steger et al., 2008).

Frankl (1946) offered some reassurance in this regard by contradicting that equilibrium is the ideal state for human beings. Rather, he proposed that the tension between what is and what could be encourages growth and development. Arguably, eudemonic well-being is not about the avoidance of pain, but rather about finding fulfilment in the face of suffering. Furthermore, the active participation in a search for meaning can result in fulfilment, even if the ultimate meaning has not yet been attained. However, as the searching process could continue with a consistent intensity, it would be especially important to investigate protective factors to minimise the negative effects associated with searching.

3.2.3 Finding and maintaining meaning

When compared to the process of searching for meaning, the presence of meaning shows a greater correlation with well-being (N. Park, Park, & Peterson, 2010) and adaptive thinking processes like cognitive flexibility and agency (Burrow et al., 2010). The discomfort of the search process (even if it continues) might be more tolerable if greater meaning ensues. Although uncomfortable in the present, rumination associated with the search for meaning is positively correlated with the later presence of meaning (Newman & Nezlek, 2019). The anxiety associated with rumination might thus be beneficial if it results in changes that will produce long-term benefits.

The presence of meaning can also have a protective effect while the search for greater meaning is ongoing. Moreover, the subjective experience of having meaning during the search process is associated with greater wellbeing, enhanced self-esteem (Dezutter et al., 2014), happiness (Cohen & Cairns, 2012), life satisfaction (Steger et al., 2011), and decreased depression (N. Park et al., 2010). People who have explored various avenues of potential meaning should have a greater meaning repertoire with which to find further purpose, significance, and coherence. Therefore, having established some meaning can be a protective resource during the search for greater meaning. These results are similar to the finding discussed in Section 2.3.3, illustrating that identity exploration is less invasive if a certain measure of identity commitment has been established. The fulfilment of finding meaning might also sensitise people to other opportunities for discovering meaning.

An alternative to searching for meaning is the maintenance of available meaning frameworks. Baumeister (1991) theorises that, instead of being compelled to find new meaning when a sense of purposelessness is experienced, people should revert to reinforcing other sources of meaning. In the Meaning Maintenance Model proposed by Heine et al. (2006), the term *fluid compensation* is used to represent the reaffirmation of one meaning structure when the unity of another meaning framework is disturbed. When faced with disruptions in the meaning framework related to employment, young adults might increase their reliance on alternative roles that provide significance. Threats to a meaning system include alienation, social rejection, self-doubt, and uncertainty (Proulx & Heine, 2006). Adjustments to meaning frameworks could also happen in response to neutral or positive events that occur unexpectedly (Moser & Schroder, 2012).

3.3 Meaning During Employment and Unemployment

In writing how people are shaped by their work, Gini (1998) claims, "It is in work that we become persons. Work is that which forms us, gives us focus, gives us a vehicle for personal expression and offers us a means for personal definition" (p. 708). Although there are alternative ways to establish personhood and focus, many authors support the notion that work is an influential part of many people's lives. Blustein (2013) advocates a psychology-of-working perspective that situates work as a fundamental part of life that happens within a social context and can fulfil basic human needs while promoting mental health. Additionally, the theory is inclusive of students who are regarded as people who want to work in future. Without the occupation that higher education offered, unemployed young adults would be facing a sudden paucity in their lives.

Steger, Dik, and Duffy (2012) noted a growing need for people to be involved in work that they experience as meaningful, a finding that has also been confirmed in research on Millennials (Lechner et al., 2017). In fact, the workplace is increasingly looked upon as an important contributor to experiencing meaning (Burger, Crous, & Roodt, 2013). Work opportunities are not only sought for financial gain; they should ideally also be rewarding and meaningful (Arnett, 2010; Pryor & Bright, 2011). Frankl (1978) referred to the state in which people are left confused by the uselessness and meaninglessness of unintentional leisure as *unemployment neurosis*.

The aim of the following section is twofold. The first is a review of extant literature on that which contributes to meaning, as well as how employment could impact these contributions. Secondly, the manner in which unemployment could impact the experience of meaning is discussed, with speculation on how it contributes to the psychological distress associated with unemployment.

3.3.1 Goals and self-determination to achieve purpose

Human beings derive purpose from activities that allow them to work towards and achieve goals, as well as avoid feelings of aimlessness. Similar to the educational contexts that graduates were exposed to, the work environment provides a space for setting and achieving short- and longer-term goals. Work enhances sense of meaning by providing people with tangible incentives when they achieve goals, such as economic rewards,

structure, enhanced feelings of achievement, and opportunities for generativity — guiding the next generation (Ward & King, 2017).

The amount of purpose offered by occupational goals is determined by the amount of personal significance attached to it. If goals are pertinent to a person's interests and values, he or she would be more eager to engage in persistent efforts to achieve the goals and attain the associated purpose (Kashdan & McKnight, 2009). Occupational values, informed by life experiences, provide purpose, which will guide the choices people make in their careers (Super et al., 1996). A good fit between a career choice and personality, aptitude, and values would thus enhance the purpose of work and further studies. Indeed, being engaged in activities that allow an opportunity for self-expression is an important contribution to a meaningful life (Baumeister et al., 2013). In addition, people are motivated to achieve goals that will improve their self-esteem, in an effort to maintain meaning (Heine et al., 2006). In line with social cognitive career theory (Lent, 2013), the workplace can offer consecutive opportunities to achieve goals that will result in improved self-efficacy. On the other hand, in the absence of career achievements, individuals might set goals in other domains of life to gain self-esteem and find fulfilment.

Self-efficacy is also tied to the concept of purpose, as a belief in one's ability to achieve a goal is necessary for that goal to provide meaning. Furthermore, people who believe in their capacity to achieve goals are more likely to have a sense of control over their lives (Baumeister, 1991), which might stimulate the desire to set further goals. Satisfying the basic psychological goals of relatedness, autonomy, and competence enhances eudemonic well-being (R. M. Ryan & Deci, 2000). A work context offers an opportunity to achieve goals related to each of these facets, emphasising the potential of employment to enrich a sense of meaning.

Goals are often stimulated by new possibilities that arise as people investigate their environments. Work environments differ in the amount of exposure people have to new tasks, ideas, and skillsets. Curiosity and the desire to explore could result in discoveries, yielding new interests that could enhance the sense of purpose (Kashdan & McKnight, 2009). Setting and pursuing goals appear to be related to personality constructs. Accordingly, people with higher curiosity as an inherent trait are more likely to seek out behaviours that are growth-orientated, which could also yield greater meaning (Kashdan & Steger, 2007).

During unemployment, people who are more open to embracing opportunities are more likely to explore and identify new purposeful goals.

3.3.2 The significance of belonging and social deprivation

The human aversion to loneliness, isolation, or exile indicates an evolutionary need to belong (Baumeister, 1991). People who feel connected to others and perceive others as connected to them are more likely to experience meaning (Baumeister et al., 2013; Martela, Ryan, & Steger, 2018; Ward & King, 2017). When comparing collective, relational, and intimate connectedness in a longitudinal study, Stavrova and Luhmann (2016) found that collective connectedness made the greatest contribution to meaning. This finding alludes to the importance of experiencing a sense of community and, therefore, the importance of engaging in activities and occupations that stimulate affiliation with the collective. When measuring the daily tasks contributing to meaning, social interactions play an equally significant role as events of achievement, while predicting more variance than affective experiences (Machell, Kashdan, Short, & Nezlek, 2015).

Blustein (2011) proposed a relational theory that entails viewing work as embedded in relations. Work environments provide social interaction, collegiality, structured routines, and mentoring, which are important relational structures for young adults (Benjet, Hernández-Montoya, Borges, Mendez, Medina-Mora, & Aguilar-Gaxiola, 2012). Although work is by no means the only avenue of interpersonal connection, it can provide structured and consistent interactions. Yalom (1980) also theorised that dedication to a person or cause is a strategy to avoid isolation. By devoting their time and energy to tasks, customers, and colleagues, people feel they matter. Work can enhance significance by offering opportunities to achieve an occupational status in the greater society, provide for significant others, and contribute to something greater, while receiving positive feedback on that contribution (Ward & King, 2017).

As a social species, humans create a sense of belonging by assigning themselves to certain groups and taking a stand against others (Heine et al., 2006). A literature review by Heintzelman and King (2014) showed that social inclusion is regarded as a significant contributor to the experience of meaning. Belonging has shown positive correlations with present meaning, as well as with meaning experienced at a later time (Lambert et al., 2013). Not being part of an institution that offers interactional possibilities could be a possible

primer for the development of psychological ill health in unemployed young adults (Benjet et al., 2012). As young adults undergo transitions, they might be more exposed to insignificance if lost memberships are not replaced by new ones. What is further concerning about the effect of social exclusion on meaning is that it is not associated with a desire to search for fulfilment; instead, it exacerbates the sense of futility (Stillman et al., 2009). It is therefore vital that unemployed young adults receive social support to prevent growing isolation.

3.3.3 Creating coherence

A study by Heintzelman et al. (2013) found that people report decreased meaning in life when they are exposed to incoherent photographs and sentences. This finding suggests that people are sensitive to incoherence, and viewing images or words that seem disorganised threatens their perception of meaning. When considering that incoherence in inconsequential experiences can disrupt a person's sense of meaning, unexpected or distressing events are a considerable cause for concern. Unsettling events in life can disrupt the expectation that events are predictable and will occur in an orderly fashion, which could have a further negative influence on meaning frameworks (Proulx & Inzlicht, 2012). Given the importance of finding meaning during young adulthood, the loss of coherence accompanying unemployment could be especially unnerving. Unlike positive events, the discomfort accompanying negative events creates an urgency to restore coherence.

There might be opportunity for growth during distress, and even traumatic experiences, if the individual engages in new reflections that result in a different purpose (Kashdan & McKnight, 2009). Finding coherence in chaotic times can create an anchor for finding meaning (Martela & Steger, 2016). On the other hand, Lilgendahl, McLean, and Mansfield (2013) caution that traumatic or transgressional events do not result in self-growth for all people. Meaning should not be viewed as an automatic byproduct of suffering; instead, awareness and reflection are needed to reconstruct and enhance a sense of meaning. People who reflect on past challenges are more likely to experience meaning as they integrate past and present behaviour (Baumeister et al., 2013). Fivush and Baker-Ward (2005) suggest that events experienced as emotionally loaded may require more work in terms of reflection and processing in order to understand the event. Young adults can create coherence during their transition to employment, despite labour market instability, when they are aware of and

remain engaged in long-term goals (Devadason, 2007). Being aware of the purpose behind seeking employment can decrease the incoherence felt during temporary unemployment.

Just like incoherence, coherence is not only found in the extraordinary, but also in the mundane. Heintzelman and King (2019) found that people with more routine in their lives also indicated a higher score on meaning in their life. Structured times — the similarity in context and daily occupational activities associated with work — could, therefore, enhance coherence. Vastamäki, Moser, and Paul (2009) found that, within the meaning triad, coherence is the component that is best restored when individuals return to employment. In addition, Machell et al. (2015) found that negative social events have less impact on the daily perception of meaning in life than positive events, thereby challenging research that supports the notion of psychological growth through distressing experiences. Establishing new coherence is not limited to resolving challenges; it can also be the result of people reflecting on the meaning of positive events in their life. Roepke (2013) provided evidence that positive events that stimulate the perception of new possibilities can also result in growth that could enhance meaning. Making sense of a positive experience can thus contribute to coherence and inspire other positive experiences.

3.3.4 Affect and meaning during unemployment

Hedonistic and eudemonic well-being is often described as opposing notions in literature (Baumeister et al., 2013; Steger, Kashdan, & Oishi, 2008; Ryff & Singer, 1998). However, the relationship between the two concepts appears to be more complicated and interwoven than previously thought, with recent literature highlighting happiness as an important contribution to and consequence of meaning. A study by Heintzelman and King (2014) found that positive affect holds a prominent place in the literature on contributions to enhanced perceptions of meaning. When positive affect is primed, enhanced judgments of meaning emerge, indicating that happiness might facilitate the experience of meaning (King et al., 2006). Finding ways to enhance positive affect can be a valuable strategy to enhance meaning during unemployment. Other studies have indicated the reciprocal influence between meaning evaluations and components of affect (Hicks & King, 2009; Hicks, Trent, Davis, & King, 2012; King et al., 2016). Conducting occupational tasks that are pleasurable could thus enhance sense of meaning. Conversely, negative affect, often present during unemployment, could thus decrease individuals' sense of meaning.

Furthermore, positive affect sensitises individuals to the meaningfulness of a task, resulting in a higher subjective experience of meaning (King et al., 2006). This finding is aligned with Fredrickson's (1998) broaden-and-build theory, which holds that positive emotions enhance a person's thought–action repertoire, thereby expanding the available scope of action, thinking, and attention. This capacity can make people aware of the meanings embedded in situations and experiences that might otherwise have gone undetected. The negative emotions that result from disappointment might thus prevent people from seeking alternative avenues to obtain meaning. Awareness of these processes appear beneficial. Abeyta, Routledge, Juhl, and Robinson (2015) found that people who can accurately identify their emotions are more likely to experience meaning in life, and are better able to identify times when meaning is threatened. Enhancing emotional insight could thus be a possible way of enhancing a sense of meaning when it is threatened by uncontrollable life events.

Research findings on the contribution of affectional states to meaning bring into question whether there should be a prominent distinction between hedonistic and eudemonic well-being (King et al., 2006). Kashdan et al. (2008) also expressed criticism against this dualism, suggesting that, in the field of psychology, hedonistic and eudemonic well-being should be viewed as complementary, instead of opposing, concepts. In this regard, it should be considered that fulfilment and satisfaction can occur as the result of the happiness people experience when they attain their goals (Cohen & Cairns, 2012). Constructs associated with work, such as being productive and not feeling bored or alone, can contribute to a sense of both happiness and meaningfulness (Baumeister et al., 2013). The potential benefit of engaging in joyful activities when individuals are experiencing a decreased sense of meaning should not be underestimated.

3.3.5 Previous theories on the psychological distress of unemployment

Jahoda, Lazarsfeld, and Zeisel (1933) conducted a seminal sociographic study in the town of Marienthal where most of the population was left unemployed for a prolonged time after a factory closed down. One of the main findings of this study was the emanating apathy that prevented people from utilising other opportunities (such as borrowing books or joining social clubs) that they benefitted from before. The latent deprivation theory of Jahoda (1981) is regarded as an influential explanation of the decline in well-being in unemployed individuals (Muller & Waters, 2012; Wanberg, 2012). The theory emphasises the importance

of employment as a means to provide fulfilment of five basic human needs beyond simply making a living (Jahoda, 1982). Individuals have the opportunity to experience five latent consequences of employment, namely structure in time, regular contact with fellow employees, involvement in a greater purpose, a defined identity and status, and the enforcement of activity (Jahoda, 1979). Each of these concepts can be related to the meaning triad of purpose (involvement in a greater purpose, enforcement of activity), significance (contact with fellow employees, definition of identity and status), and coherence (structure in time). Therefore, the loss of self-respect and disheartenment identified by Jahoda (1981) are also related to a decreased sense of meaning. The Latent Deprivation Model is increasingly noted as influential in the theory on the meaning of work and how it contributes to mental health (Paul & Batinic, 2010), and various authors have validated the robustness of the theory (Paul & Moser, 2009; Van Hoye & Lootens, 2013; L. E. Waters & Moore; 2002b). A six-wave study by Zechmann and Paul (2019) showed that latent benefits increased if unemployed individuals were re-employed. Finding alternative ways for unemployed young adults to experience the latent benefits could result in greater fulfilment.

Unlike latent deprivation theory, the theory underpinning the Agency Restriction Model explains the psychological distress associated with unemployment due to the consequences of not having an income (Muller & Waters, 2012). Fryer (1986) argued that people are intrinsically motivated by the intention to approach situations in a manner that is congruent with their personal goals, values, and expectations. Lack of financial resources would then limit their ability to self-determine. In accordance, McKee-Ryan et al. (2005) suggest that the level of perceived financial strain decreases psychological health during unemployment. It is further arguable that financial limitation is related to meaning, as the lack of income deprives individuals of significant aspects they attach to money (e.g., independence, status, being able to provide, and opportunities for development).

Muller, Creed, Waters, and Machin (2005) designed the Latent and Manifest Benefits Scale to incorporate and assess both theories: latent deprivation and agency restriction. The scale has subsequently been used in various populations, with results indicating the applicability of combining both theories in predicting well-being during unemployment (Muller & Waters, 2012). For instance, Paul and Batinic (2010) found that finances explained a similar amount of variance in psychological health as the combination of the

latent functions. It can thus be deduced that the absence of both latent and manifest benefits contributes to explaining decreases in psychological well-being during unemployment.

3.4 Consequences of Having Meaning During Unemployment

Pursuing meaning would only be worthwhile if there were value in experiencing meaning. The literature points to the multiple benefits of having meaning, which explains why people engage in this difficult search process. Meaning is associated with psychological strengths, mental health benefits, and interpersonal advantages. In addition, meaning can act as a protective factor during challenging times. The following discussion explains how meaning can be constructive by improving adaption during unemployment.

3.4.1 Psychological strengths

Meaning being related to increased well-being (Brassai et al., 2011; Dezutter et al., 2014) has been found across all the adulthood life stages (Steger et al., 2009) with regard to life satisfaction, positive affect (Steger et al., 2006), high self-esteem (Dezutter et al., 2014; Kiang & Fuligni, 2010; Steger et al., 2006), and adaptive psychosocial functioning (Dezutter et al., 2014). These positive qualities are useful resources with which to navigate challenging periods in life, including times of unemployment.

In a university-age population, it was found that spiritual meaning (purpose as a result of belief in a spiritual force) and personal meaning (purpose and coherence in life irrespective of life status or metaphysical influence) showed a positive relationship with hope (Mascaro & Rosen, 2006). Individuals who experience meaning are also more likely to have greater optimism (Steger et al., 2006). A possible explanation for the correlation between meaning and hope is the positive self-characteristics associated with the presence of meaning, which could create greater optimism in individuals regarding the direction of their life (Webster et al., 2018). The fact that meaning is more than a momentary emotional state implies that envisioning a positive future can render current disappointments and failures less permanent. Having a strong commitment to a purpose is associated with an enhanced hope of achieving future outcomes (Burrow et al., 2010). In this regard, meaning could enhance current job-search behaviour through a belief that the goal of employment will be achieved.

Meaning is also related to increased success-orientated behaviour. It was found that individuals with a higher scores on the presence of meaning indicated higher intrinsic

motivation and a positive academic attitude (Kiang & Fuligni, 2010). Although the presence of extrinsic values, such as financial rewards, have been correlated to securing a job, intrinsic values have been found to contribute to the likelihood of finding satisfactory employment (Sortheix, Chow, & Salmela-Aro, 2015). People who are orientated to meaning are more likely to strive towards intrinsic, rather than extrinsic, goals (Zhang et al., 2018). The attainment of intrinsic goals, which include physical health, community involvement, close relationships, and personal growth, shows a greater correlation with psychological health than extrinsic goals, such as financial standing and personal image (Niemiec, Ryan, & Deci, 2009). Having a sense of meaning could thus help young adult graduates to focus on internal growth, instead of the lack of income associated with unemployment. Moreover, greater purpose can result in greater goal adaptability, positive emotions associated with achieving goals, and enhanced pursuit of goals (George & Park, 2016).

3.4.2 Mental and physical health

People who believe their lives are meaningful have a decreased risk of continuing negative emotions and the development of psychological ill health (Feldman & Snyder, 2005). Research has also found a relationship between increased presence of meaning and decreased depressive symptoms (Dezutter et al., 2014; Mascaro & Rosen, 2006; Steger et al., 2006; Vehling et al., 2011). Meaning can thus act as a protective factor against the depressive symptoms that are triggered by challenging life events. Expanding on the positive effect on mental health, meaning has further been related to decreased anxiety (Dezutter et al., 2014; Shiah, Chang, Chiang, Lin, & Tam, 2013). However, this finding was contradicted in a study by Baumeister et al. (2013), in which the results suggested a correlation between meaning and the experience of greater stress and worry. To clarify this result, the researchers asserted that experiencing meaning depends on a person's ability to reflect on the future, which might result in anxious anticipation. This finding might also be explained by there being a difference between the presence of meaning and the search for meaning (Sections 3.2.2 and 3.2.3). Although it might be anxiety-provoking for unemployed young adult graduates to explore new avenues of meaning, alternative sources of purpose, significance, and coherence could decrease anxiety related to job-searching.

In a literature review, Roepke, Jayawickreme, and Riffle (2014) found ample evidence suggesting a correlation between meaning and physical health. In a population of cancer survivors, the experience of meaning was associated with higher health-related quality

of life (Salsman, Yost, West, & Cella, 2011). Meaning is further negatively correlated with behaviours that would pose a risk to good health (Roepke et al., 2014). Brassai et al. (2011) found that people with higher meaning in life are less likely to engage in behaviours such as unsafe sex, poor nutrition, lack of exercise, and substance abuse, as well behaviours that could be detrimental to their psychological health. Thus, meaning could be a way to combat risks to mental and physical health posed by unemployment.

3.4.3 Interpersonal qualities

The importance of social relationships as a contribution to significance was emphasised in Section 3.3.2. The interaction appears reciprocal, as having meaning is also associated with enhanced connectedness. People who see meaning in their life are more likely to participate in civic associations and join groups who offer voluntary services (Stavrova & Luhmann, 2016). Furthermore, an unstable sense of meaning has shown relations with decreased satisfaction with interpersonal relations (Steger & Kashdan, 2013). Experiencing greater meaning has been correlated with an increased likelihood of entering into marriage, while lower meaningfulness heightens the risk for separation (Stavrova & Luhmann, 2016). When considering the important role of social support during unemployment, lack of meaning could have a detrimental effect on this potential resource.

In a study by Stillman, Lambert, Fincham, and Baumeister (2011), participants rated people with higher meaning in their life as interpersonally appealing, indicating that they would be more likely to befriend such individuals. The results further demonstrated that people who experience greater meaning in life are evaluated as more desirable, better conversation partners, and as having greater potential to be good people. It was further found that meaning in life predicted interpersonal appeal more than happiness, self-esteem, religiosity, or any of the Big Five personality traits of openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism (Stillman et al., 2011). Thus, during a period when social isolation is a risk, individuals who experience a meaningful existence could attract people who could then offer social support.

3.4.4 Meaning as a protective factor during distress

Experiencing meaning can be a way to diminish the negative impact of distress by enabling people to adapt to difficult times, despite the unavoidability of the negative situation (Frankl, 1946). Having a strong sense of meaning was found to enhance better psychological

functioning in a stressful situation (Reker & Wong, 2012). More specifically, purpose is a resource that can enhance persistence (Kashdan & McKnight, 2009), improve affective regulation, and stimulate greater agency (Burrow & Hill, 2011). When committing to a purpose, individuals need to be flexible and adapt to changing environments, which can enhance their resilience (McKnight & Kashdan, 2009). The direction that results from a strong sense of purpose can thus direct focus, despite temporary disappointments.

Establishing coherence during a time of distress can also enhance the resilience of individuals. Finding coherence in challenging events can direct the development of coping strategies that provide a buffer against psychological distress (T. E. A. Waters, Shallcross, & Fivush, 2013). Cognitions aimed at making a situation feel less foreign and uncontrollable could thus also have a positive impact on adaption in future situations. Establishing coherence when faced with unexpected situations could result in an increased ability to make sense of challenging situations, gain greater clarity on navigating life, and lower uncertainty (George & Park, 2016). Variables that determine whether negative experiences will become transformative when a positive meaning is established include emotional stability, the belief that personality can change, and the sharing of memories (Lilgendahl et al., 2013). The distress of unemployment could be mediated if the individual is more likely to view his or her environment as manageable and comprehensible (Vastamäki et al., 2009). Adaptive cognitions could thus help unemployed graduates to combat incoherence and focus their energy on strategies to improve the situation.

3.5 Conclusion

This chapter provided a review of perceptions of purpose, significance, and coherence, to elucidate how meaning is experienced in everyday situations. It was postulated that meaning is a central aspect of being human, and that a lack thereof would propel people to seek it. Similar to identity development theories that postulate distinct processes of exploration and commitment, a distinction can be made between a search for and the presence of meaning. Work is regarded as an important contributor to the experience of meaning, making the absence of work a potential threat to meaning. It is further argued that the detrimental effect of unemployment on psychological well-being is partly due to a loss of meaning. The multiple positive qualities associated with meaning emphasise the value of one's life having meaning. The following chapter discusses the research method followed in the present study.

Chapter 4: Research Method

This chapter describes the conceptual framework followed in this integrated study of unemployment, young adulthood, and meaning. I will briefly discuss personal experiences and ideas that gave rise to the research question, to acknowledge my subjective position in the research. This is followed by a discussion of a combination of existential and humanistic principles, to relay the ontological and epistemological principles of the research paradigm. A narrative framework was considered appropriate to access and reveal rich information pertaining to the research question.

The methodological steps were designed to answer the research question: *What are the meaning themes that emerge from the narratives of unemployed young adult graduates?* A convenience sampling method made it possible to identify a sample that was representative of the population under study — unemployed young adult graduates. The data were collected through individual interviews to elicit narratives, which were analysed using thematic analysis. The steps taken to ensure ethical and rigorous research are also discussed.

4.1 The Effect of My Narrative on the Research

I chose the research topic while I was settling into multiple roles associated with adulthood. Although I enjoyed the independence and freedom to seek out novel environments and experiences, I also felt uncertain about the important choices I had to make about my life. I found adapting to new roles and fulfilling the consequent demands for the first time very challenging. During my interactions with peers, it dawned on me that many young adults were disappointed by the unexpected obligations and constraints that come with the independence we so desired as adolescents. I became interested in understanding the psychological upheaval accompanying the transition to adulthood.

I also noticed how questions regarding a person's occupation were often asked in introductory conversations as a way of understanding or measuring another person. I deduced that work informs our perceptions of other people and of ourselves. The focus on employment was further informed by my work as a psychologist in a public hospital, where I witness multiple socio-economic problems brought on by unemployment. The desperation I saw in my clients to find any job made me realise the importance of having a job, which is something I have always taken for granted.

As a psychologist, I am in a privileged position, where people trust me and share very personal parts of their life stories. I have come to appreciate the power of narratives to captivate the listener and evoke empathy. Narratives carry rich information, offering a way to acknowledge and honour the complexity of human beings. The knowledge shared by my clients contributed greatly to my current insights into people and the world in which we live. I am convinced that every person possesses some wisdom, and I believe this can be accessed through the sharing of narratives.

Since I was first introduced to existential theories, the philosophy has always appealed to me. I recognise a personal need to have a meaningful life and to live in a way that would bring meaning to the lives of others. Meaning is not a topic that is always discussed pertinently, but I believe it is central to our drives and ambitions as human beings. I find not experiencing meaning an uncomfortable prospect, which piqued my interest to determine whether it would be similarly unnerving to other people, and how they would respond.

4.2 Research Paradigm

Within the qualitative tradition of research, there is an appreciation for the depth and multitude of perspectives that contribute to what can be conceived as truth and knowledge. Since the chosen paradigm becomes the filter through which the research phenomenon is viewed and studied, the assumptions presumed by the approach are explicitly stated as these were tailored to the current study. A narrative approach shares constructionist, postmodern, and realist features (Riessman & Speedy, 2007). Narrative research is often situated within a social constructionist paradigm where the focus is on how people live within and make sense of their environments (Gergen & Gergen, 1986). Similarly, the relativism associated with postmodernism requires an emphasis on cultural contexts and historical periods (Lock & Strong, 2010) and the impact of the greater system on individuals is prominent. Instead, Caine et al. (2013) argue for a narrative approach where understanding subjective experience takes the central position. A paradigm that pays closer attention to personal experiences as they relate to meaning is better suited to the current research aims. Existentialism and humanism share many common foundations (Winston, 2015), and the use of a combination of the two fields was a viable way of considering the research problem in the present study.

4.2.1 Ontology of the existential-humanistic paradigm

The following discussion of the ontological perspective of the present study clarifies how the realities of the participants were construed, and how the information provided by them could enhance understanding of the phenomenon under study. Instead of a realist ontology, where the world is viewed as orderly and rule-bound, a relativistic ontology is concerned with interpretative diversity (Willig, 2013), which I considered more appropriate for focusing on personal accounts of meaning.

Against criticism that existential thinking is hopeless and filled with despair, Sartre (1947) posited that it is an optimistic call for people to rediscover themselves when faced with the anguish of freedom. Existential thinking inherited a focus on self-actualisation from humanism (Winston, 2015). Within existentialism, people are not viewed only as existing beings, but also as beings that are in the process of becoming (Gander, Proyer, & Ruch, 2016; May, 1696). The assumption is that a continuous desire to progress will steer people towards overcoming stumbling blocks. Embracing, and perhaps even transcending, the existential challenge of mortality entails a celebration of every stage of life, while noting how it shapes the larger story (Greening, 1992).

Self-actualisation implies welcoming every developmental transition (and the inherent challenges), and appreciating how it fits into the greater life narrative. Frankl (1946) defined self-actualisation as the culmination of tension between what is and what can be, which could give rise to growth and development. This tension might be especially heightened when people's efforts to progress are impaired. The disequilibrium caused by this tension should thus not be avoided, but rather accepted as an opportunity to reflect and reach one's potential. In fact, Stumm (2008) regards the acknowledgment of existential anxieties as the motivation for authentic living. It is thus proposed that people are forever seeking ways to become truer to their self, a quest that is guided by what they view as meaningful.

Existentialism and humanism also share an emphasis on self-authorship, and hold that, accordingly, choices shape a person's character (Burston, 2003). The narratives that people share provide a way to recognise the expression of self-authorship. A strong notion of self-determination is present in the belief that people receive existence, but that destiny is shaped by the individual (Killinger, 1961; Lowenstein, 1993). Sartre (1947) maintained that people have an essence that precedes existence, indicating that the evolving self is dependent

on choice and will. When studying behaviour from an existential-humanistic perspective, the choices people make in the presence of challenges shed light on their self-determination and, consequently, self-authorship.

Freedom is another pertinent concept within the existential-humanistic paradigm. Freedom is present in considering alternatives from various directions and deciding what is most valuable to pursue (May, 1981). Embracing freedom further entails the exploration of options while considering the limitations inherent in physical and social contexts (Greening, 1992). The difference between aspirations and limitations in the form of contextual constraints translates into the potential of a person (Maslow, 1969). For example, contextual limitations, such as economic restrictions, could play a major role in preventing people from achieving their ambitions. Fortunately, when faced with hardship, individuals have freedom in choosing an attitude towards their fears and anxieties, and this attitude determines their behavioural response (Frankl, 1978). Freedom is not always positive, and Killinger (1961) stated that people often avoid seeking freedom, because it implies taking responsibility, which could detract from enjoying a carefree existence.

How the nature of people in the world is perceived is another important ontological issue (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). Humanistic psychology is often criticised as overly concerned with the self, at the cost of communal concerns (Davidson, 1992). Similarly, the existential-humanistic orientation has been appraised as self-indulgent (Rice, 2015). Greening (1992), however, maintains that human consciousness develops mostly through internalisation of interactions within the social world. Sartre (1947) also believed that using one's freedom to take seemingly personal choices could have an effect on greater society. Therefore, it would be reductionistic to assume that people are immune to the social influences they encounter. Meaning is not static; rather, it evolves through interactions between people (Polkinghorne, 2015). Social contexts and the related interactions play a vital role in the lives of individuals, and should be appreciated, in the humanistic tradition, as an expression of what being human entails (Davidson, 1992). If the aim is to understand an individual's narrative, taking the role of other people into account is necessary.

4.2.2 Epistemology of the existential-humanistic paradigm

How people are perceived ultimately determines how the information they share will translate to knowledge. This epistemological concern informs research by providing the

foundations and justification, as well as limits to, what can be conceived as knowledge (Stone, 2008). In the current study, the participants were viewed as vessels of knowledge, and the information they shared through narratives was considered an entry point to understanding the phenomenon under research, as well as how it might apply to the greater population. Wertz (2015) asserts that true understanding comes from the meaning that individuals attach to experiences. The epistemological concern regarding the relationship between the researcher (future knower) and participant (current knower) (Ponterotto, 2005) is a valuable consideration at this juncture. The approach to eliciting narratives should be planned to encourage the participants to access and relay valuable information.

The commonality between the existential and humanistic fields is perhaps best understood by considering how these perspectives are opposed to prevalent ideas in human sciences. Historically, humanism arose in response to scientific theories that were viewed as reductionist and restrictive in the pursuit of comprehending what it means to be human (Moss, 2015). According to Schneider, Pierson, and Bugental (2015) state that living a life of fulfillment with vitality is only possible through an understanding of what it means to be wholly experientially human. The existential movement acknowledges the limits of conceptual, analytic, and verbal rationality and rather focuses on exploring the raw experience of being human (Maslow, 1969). Therefore, methods used to study natural phenomena should not be deemed sufficient to uncover the complexity of being human. Although psychology research has progressed to revealing and predicting human tendencies, only searching for the global may obscure the potential depth of individual deviations (Bruner, 1991). Qualitative research enables appreciation of the broader experiences around a specific topic.

Existentialism and humanism share the phenomenological orientation of an emphasises on personal experience and subjectivity (Winston, 2015). In fact, humanism disregards the general for the sake of capturing what is unique, by considering multiple perspectives (Davidson, 1992; DeRobertis, 2016). Knowledge is also regarded as variable and tentative, and narratives offer insights that are true for moments in time and space (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). For the current research, it was more important to study the participants' subjective experiences and worldviews, to uncover personal conceptualisations, rather than to find ultimate truths. Objectivity is then a futile aim, as the researcher cannot be separated from the research. My choice of subject, method, design, inquiry, and

interpretation therefore had bearing on the findings. However, despite the unique findings obtained from the current sample, the participants' experiences might share similarities with those of others, suggesting that lessons learned from this sample might be relevant to other contexts as well (Emmel, 2014).

The existential-humanistic framework incorporates a gestalt orientation (Winston, 2015), the belief that the full spectrum of being human can best be understood through a holistic conceptualisation of the person (DeRobertis, 2016; Rogers, 1696). A singular experience or event (such as unemployment) can have a spill-over effect, influencing many areas of life. The assumption is that people integrate different parts of themselves and their experiences, resulting in a holistic response to situations. By relaying a narrative, individuals can communicate the various incidents that contributed to how they view their whole self. This is unlike postmodern notions that views the self as multiple and fragmented (Hoffman, Stewart, Warren, & Meek, 2015).

4.3 A Narrative Approach within the Existential-Humanistic Paradigm

The current research further departs from the ontological supposition that life is, in essence, storied. Although, the narrative approach has various paradigmatic homes (Caine et al., 2013; Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007; Mishler, 1991; Riessman & Speedy, 2007), it is well aligned with an existential-humanistic paradigm. Similarly, the aim of a narrative framework is not to establish ultimate truths, but, rather, to include concepts like pluralism, holism, relativism, and conceptuality (Josselson & Lieblich, 2015). A narrative perspective can illuminate some epistemological questions by clarifying what can be known and how it can be known (Willig, 2013). Many authors agree that it is difficult to establish a definition of narrative research that covers all applications (Caine et al., 2013; Gergen & Gergen, 2010; Riessman & Quinney, 2005; Riessman & Speedy, 2007). Instead of attempting to define the narrative scope, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) posit that it would be more useful to ask what narrative inquirers do. In this regard, four narrative functions (narrative identity, temporality, coherence, and social embeddedness) are discussed below, to illustrate how the research phenomenon was approached in the present study.

4.3.1 Narrative identity

Mcadams and Mclean (2013) define a narrative identity as "a person's internalised and evolving life story, integrating the reconstructed past and imagined future to provide life

with some degree of unity and purpose" (p. 233). The self-expression that is found in narratives is a means to accessing identity, as the stories that are shared are inextricably tied to conceptualisations of the self. The integration of significant life events when a personal narrative is shared demonstrates the possibility of creating a sense of self through narratives (Lawford & Ramey, 2015), which is in line with the existential-humanistic conceptualisation of holism and self-authorship. Furthermore, in telling a story, individuals reveal personal tendencies, skills, traits, goals, and patterns (McAdams & Mclean, 2013). According to Ricoeur (1992), "it is the identity of the story that makes the identity of the character" (p. 148). In narrative thinking, stories are told, both as a result of established identities, and as a precursor to who a person is becoming. It is then possible to make interpretations from the narrative that are consistent with and reflective of the narrator's identity.

The identity conveyed by a narrative is a compiled history of relevant memories. Habermas and Bluck (2000) refer to autobiographical reasoning as a self-reflective process, where individuality is shaped as connections are made between elements from previous and present situations. Especially memories that are well-rehearsed, important, affectively intense, or related to ongoing conflicts or goals can become self-defining memories (Singer, Blagov, Berry, & Oost, 2013). As people access memories to share in a story format, the listener can gain insight into their values, beliefs, and, how they regard themselves. People also portray a public sense of self as they integrate significant life events, and share these with others (Lawford & Ramey, 2015). Therefore, the narrative of young adults who are in the process of establishing their identities could bear witness to how different parts of their identities were constructed. McAdams (2001) suggests that young adults start restructuring past selves while perceiving the present and anticipating the future, in order to establish an integrated, holistic identity that directs who they are becoming. The aim is not only to understand where individuals find themselves at present, but also the journeys that brought them there and the people they have become.

4.3.2 Temporality

One of the aims of an existential-humanistic orientation is to establish an inclusive account of human experience. Temporality refers to the continuity in experience by acknowledging that people are in a constant transition between experiencing their past, present, and possible future (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007; Ricoeur, 1992). The retrospective capacity inherent in narratives presents an opportunity to discover a plot that takes shapes as

events are shared (Freeman, 2015). Viewing people in terms of ongoing storylines provides a more comprehensive view of the self than characterising a person at a single moment in time (Polkinghorne, 2015). Unlike qualitative methods that require adherence to specific procedures and methods, a narrative approach opens the possibility to gain a broader and richer perspective on unemployment (Blustein et al., 2013). In the present study, when encouraged to share a story about their career journey, participants were also asked to pay attention to parts of the narrative that had significantly shaped their current perceptions and experience. Reflection can result in new insights, providing both the narrator and the listener with a more holistic perception of the meaning of the narrative. Even diverse events can be linked along a temporal line if one pays attention to the effect of one occurrence on another. When looking back, there may be a constellation of meanings that creates a unity (Freeman, 2015).

4.3.3 Coherence

Although stories are constructed to make sense to the receiver of the story, narratives are also composed to create a meaningful whole of multiple events or actions for the narrator (McAdams, 2001). As events are linked together in a story, themes will emerge, which create coherence (Caine et al., 2013; Gergen & Gergen, 2010; Hiles & Čermák, 2008; Squire, 2008). The stability brought on by creating order is particularly valuable during challenging times, when individuals may feel overwhelmed (Riessman, 2008). A narrative inquiry into an unexpected or disappointing plot is thus an appropriate way of organising and, at the same time, integrating events, in order to generate new meaning.

Creating coherence from a narrative is a significant way of generating meaning themes (Elliot, 2005; Mishler, 1991; Polkinghorne, 1988; Riessman, 2008; Squire, 2008). Bauer, King, and Steger (2018) suggest that, by attending to the values and motivations present in a coherent narrative, it is possible to understand what the narrator views as meaningful. Narrators can then rewrite their individual meaning-making processes as they reflect on experiences, gain insight into reality, and realise their place in that reality (Hiles & Čermák, 2008). Therefore, the personal meanings that are elicited by crafting narratives become an opportunity to study and understand existential concerns. For this reason, Blustein et al. (2013) argue that narrative research has a significant role to play in exploring how meaning is experienced during unemployment.

On the other hand, Freeman (2015) warns that focusing on the creation of coherence in a narrative can cultivate ignorance of the incoherence inherent in life. When attempting to establish coherence, there is a risk of recognising only one dominant storyline, which would result in a simplistic perspective (McAdams, 2006). To remain true to the existential-humanistic spirit of multiplicity, discord and incoherence were also noted and kept in mind during the analyses of the narratives in the present study.

4.3.4 The social embeddedness of narratives

In line with existential-humanistic thinking, it is important to recognise how narratives are situated within and informed by social contexts. When the aim of narrative research is to study the subjective, both personal and sociocultural elements should be recognised and explored (Josselson & Lieblich, 2015). Paying attention to how meanings attached to narratives are informed by the greater context (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007) allows a more holistic appreciation of the narrator's experience. Polkinghorne (1988) argued that human experience is organised through the interaction of environmental impact (including interaction with others) and attempts from the individual to interpret and organise such encounters.

It is especially when the organised narrative is communicated within a social context that meaning is generated (Phoenix et al., 2010). Individuals thus have a unique opportunity to make sense of their own experiences as they create and share their stories through interaction with others (Ricoeur, 1992). If a researcher requests a narrative that pertains to challenging events, the act of disclosing the narrative can bring about a different perspective. Since narratives are constructed with an audience in mind, and the researcher's presence and guidance make the produced narrative a co-constructed product (Squire, 2008).

Lastly, the impact of a narrative does not end with the story. It can have continuing effects as people integrate and respond to the narrations they heard from others. In the current study, the audience includes potential readers of the paper. Polkinghorne (1988) stated that, when narratives are heard or shared, people develop the skill to decipher why they, and other people, act in certain ways. Sharing narratives is considered a cyclical process, where the meaning of the story evolves every time it is told. Riessman (2012) further describes narration as a relational action, as it compels others to listen and empathise. If the audience finds the narrative relevant, there is the potential for the message to have a

transformational effect (Squire, 2008). Through an increased understanding of another's narrative, people are able to reconsider their own assumptions. Finally, relaying the findings obtained from analysis of the narratives can be done in a relatable way, which may enhance the audience's awareness of the themes highlighted by the research. A narrative approach offers a unique way to understand the meaning that people ascribe to unemployment and the researchers' inferences can be influential in informing theory and practice (Blustein et al., 2012; Blustein et al., 2013).

4.4 Participants and Sampling

The first step of the methodology was to identify a relevant population and draw a sample that could provide adequate data. The population of the present study consisted of young adults between the ages of 21 and 30 who had graduated from a university and had been unemployed for at least six months. The search for participants was further limited to individuals who would be available for interviews in Gauteng, South Africa. Choosing a heterogeneous sample offers the opportunity to gather multidimensional perspectives on a phenomenon (Yin, 2011), and the findings may be applicable to a wider group (Robinson, 2014).

In the present study, a purposive sampling method was initially selected to identify potential participants who vary in terms of gender, race, socio-economic status, and field of academic study. With the focus being on graduates, universities were considered as an access point to obtain participants. However, the Protection of Personal Information Act (Republic of South Africa, 2013) prohibits institutions from releasing the contact information of graduates. Consequently, two organisations that provide support to unemployed graduates in facilitating employment were identified as a potential source of contact information of possible participants. A document (Appendix A) explaining the nature of the research and requesting access to members that could participate in the study was forwarded to these organisations. The first organisation withdrew its initial consent, due to concerns about the absence of benefits for the members. The second indicated willingness to assist, and appointed a representative who would access the organisation's database to obtain the contact details of members who fit the criteria for inclusion in the study. Permission was then granted for the representative to forward an e-mail requesting members who are willing to participate in the research to complete an electronic form online. Ten individuals responded to the e-mail, of whom only six met the research criteria.

With the small number of potential participants, implementing a purposive sampling method was no longer viable, and convenience sampling was chosen as a practical alternative. Therefore, the approach to obtaining participants changed to including all individuals who met the research criteria and were willing to participate. Two interviews followed from collaboration with the aforementioned organisation. As it proved difficult to obtain participants through institutions, I made efforts to identify viable candidates through personal contacts and their acquaintances. Five participants were obtained in this manner. I also used online professional platforms to access unemployed candidates. This resulted in a further five candidates agreeing to participate in the research.

Many authors agree that determining an appropriate sample size is a complicated matter in qualitative research, and there are diverse views on strategies to decide on the number of interviews to conduct (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006; Vasileiou, Barnett, Thorpe, & Young, 2018). Data saturation is often used as the standard in determining the number of participants required for a study. However, when requesting participants to share narratives, each story is likely to bring unique angles on a shared experience, which makes it challenging to prove that any particular number of interviews will ensure data saturation. In place of saturation, Levitt, Motulsky, Wertz, Morrow, and Ponterotto (2017) propose data adequacy, which is dependent on the richness of the data.

When compared to quantitative methodologies, literature on qualitative studies offers few guidelines on sample size (Vasileiou et al., 2018). Therefore, the sample of the present study was chosen mainly with practicality in mind. Eliciting and analysing in-depth narratives is a time-consuming process, and it was therefore necessary to limit the number of interviews. Although some authors argue against relying on numbers as a guideline (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Morrow, 2005), the findings of an influential study by Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) showed that, after interviewing 12 people, new themes emerged infrequently. To obtain rich descriptions from a reasonably diverse group while limiting the data to a manageable amount of text for analysis, a sample of 12 participants was deemed sufficient for the present study. After the interviews had been conducted, the data were considered sufficiently substantial to yield main themes with varying interpretations, and I decided not to initiate further interviews. The biographical details of the participants are presented in Table 1, below.

Table 1

Biographical Details of Participants

Name	**Age**	**Race**	**Field of study**	**Qualification**	**Time unemployed**
Phatu	30	Black African	Geography	Bachelor's degree and post-graduate certificate	11 months
Ian	28	White	Informatics	Bachelor's degree	1 year
Funani	25	Black African	Media studies	Bachelor's degree	1 year
Zanele	26	Black African	Dietetics	Honour's degree	2 years, 2 months (26 months)
Miriam	29	Black African	Psychology	Master's degree	2 years (24 months)
Akani	28	Black African	Education	Diploma and post-graduate certificate	6 months
Tanya	27	White	Home economics	Bachelor's degree	9 months
Tsepiso	26	Black African	Human resource management	Diploma	1 year (12 months)
Dimpho	27	Black African	Horticulture	Bachelor's of technology degree	1 year (12 months)
Danai	27	Black African	Chemical engineering	Master's degree	10 months
Hlanganani	26	Black African	Tourism management	Bachelor's degree	2 years (24 months)
Melinda	27	White	Psychology	Master's degree	11 months

Note. The names provided in the table are pseudonyms.

4.5 Data Gathering

In the current study, interviews were conducted to elicit the narratives of the participants on the topic under study, and thematic analysis was employed to analyse the data. The objective of obtaining detailed self-reports made individual interviews the most appropriate method to gather data. Face-to-face interactions ensured that rapport was established, which facilitated the co-creation of detailed narratives. The data-gathering took place in several sequential steps, designed with the aim to obtain rich data. An interview protocol was designed to guide the interview process, which incorporated strategies to elicit detailed descriptions. The following discussion provides details about the design of the interview process.

4.5.1 The interview protocol

A semi-structured interview design was chosen, because it offers sufficient structure to address the research intention, while allowing flexibility to explore the participants' narratives by asking probing questions when an important issue arises. Subjective perspectives on meaning can be best understood through rich accounts, and the protocol contained open-ended questions that would stimulate unstructured responses, to elicit detailed personal experiences (McIntosh & Morse, 2015). The protocol further ensured a balance between questions aimed at gaining a holistic perception of the participant's perspective and more directive questions to remain within the parameters of the study, as recommended by Josselson (2013). The interviews continued until a point where no further significant themes seemed to emerge. The interview protocol (provided in Appendix B) thus contained the main (open-ended questions) and additional probing questions.

The questions were formulated to elicit autobiographical memories, the system of memory that organises, integrates, and recalls facts and events of a personal nature (Singer & Bonalume, 2010). Autobiographical memories are not limited to what happened, but also relate to emotions, thoughts, evaluations of the reasons for events, and possible explanations, which are used to make sense of human intentions and motivations (Fivush, Habermas, Waters, & Zaman, 2011). Episodic memories are less general, and involve thinking about a specific personal past event, which could involve people, places, emotions, and details. These memories are relevant to meaning and sense of self (L. Ryan, Hoscheidt, & Nadel, 2008). Farrell (2012) defines episodic memory as "our ability to mentally revisit the past and

re-experience past episodes and events" (p. 223). For this reason, the protocol included questions that were phrased specifically to elicit memories of relevant events (Singer & Blagov, 2004).

According to Singer and Bonalume (2010), narrators' emotional regulation strategies, cognitive complexity, and personality dynamics become evident when they share autobiographical memories. It can thus be argued that memories have the capacity to bring forth, not only cognitive perceptions of storylines, but also an affective component, resulting in a richer narrative. Participants revisiting affect associated with previous experiences could yield rich insights into a research topic. Retelling autobiographical memories can also be a means of self-expression, as memories are fundamental to the perception of self as an enduring individual in a larger context (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000). Encouraging participants to share autobiographical memories could enhance greater access to their self-perceptions, which would yield data that contain valuable information. Singer (2004) describes self-defining memories as powerful references in people's lives that provide information on what they desire and avoid in life.

4.5.2 Initial contact with participants

Establishing rapport and trust between the researcher and participant is vital to ensure that participants feel comfortable to reveal their stories (Josselson, 2006). To study lived experiences, it is necessary to establish a relational understanding between researcher and participant (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Ponterotto, 2005). I approached the initial telephonic contact with participants as the first opportunity to establish rapport. Not all the participants expected to be contacted, and I started the conversation by introducing myself, and then informed them of the research I intended to conduct. I was sensitive to their desire to understand my research, and I provided adequate information on the study, while showing appreciation for their willingness to participate. Furthermore, efforts were made to accommodate the participants as far as possible with regard to arranging a meeting. The interviews took place in private areas at the university, a hospital, and a restaurant. I sent follow-up text messages to remind the participants of the place and expected duration of the interview. I also phoned each participant the day before the interview, to remind him or her of our appointment.

On the day of the interview, each participant had the opportunity to read and sign an information document (Appendix C) to indicate informed consent. As an introduction to the research, Josselson (2013) suggests a general overview of the aim of the interview, instead of providing all the specifics, as this could set limitations to the holistic expression of participants' narratives. Willig (2013) highlights the ambiguity, often present in semi-structured interviews, of an informal conversation and the formal role of the researcher. I ensured a balance by using the protocol to keep the interview focused on the research objective while building rapport with the participant.

4.5.3 Interviews

During the interviews, I continued to maintain rapport by showing interest and encouraging the participants to recall and share their lived experiences, with the aim of obtaining authentic descriptions. Pinnegar and Daynes (2007) refer to this as the researcher being fully present in the interaction. As recommended by Caine et al. (2013), I bore my research aim and interview protocol in mind, but made a concerted effort to be mindful of both the verbal and non-verbal communications of each participant. I allowed myself to step into the participants' shoes and enter their world of experience as their stories unfolded.

The interviews were approached as a collaborative effort. In narrative research, the humanistic focus on the person allows the narrator to be viewed as a co-researcher (Josselson & Lieblich, 2015). In the same way that the participant becomes a co-researcher, the researcher becomes the co-author of the narrative. The participants selected events that they viewed as important, and arranged and connected the events to form a story that they thought would carry meaning for me as the audience (Riessman, 2008). In return, I listened to the story and asked follow-up questions about pertinent issues, guided by personal interpretations. This approach prompts further responses from the participants, enriching the data (Bold, 2013). Sharing control and enhancing collaboration improves understanding of the narratives and the meanings that participants relay (Mishler, 1986).

At the start of the interviews, participants were requested to share their stories of studying, graduating, and being unemployed. They were asked to share how it started, evolved, and changed, and how they were able to handle every phase (Josselson, 2013). The participants responded to the initial question by sharing the highlights of their narratives, and I had to direct further inquiry. White and Epston (1990) caution that, even though people

have lived many rich experiences, they express only a small part at one point in time, and that experiences that fall outside of the told story could be infinitely valuable. The participants' narratives and behaviour contained clues that indicated significant parts of their narratives. When their language use or non-verbal behaviour (e.g., slamming the table, a change in tone of voice, showing emotion, or breaking eye contact) indicated an important part of the narrative, I asked questions to probe that specific event.

I asked the participants to reflect on meanings they might not have considered before, to avoid gathering only superficial, factual accounts. The aim with this approach is to understand what lies beneath the manner in which a narrative is expressed (Mishler, 1991), and assists the researcher to determine how the shared information is interpreted by the narrator (Lucas, 2014) and, ultimately, how and why the narratives were created (Riessman, 2008). The interviews were, therefore, facilitated in a way that would encourage the expression of, not only the contents of events, but also the participants' related interpretations and perceptions. To elicit further detail, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) suggest probing unities and discontinuities in the storyline. Events that indicated a change in the plot and, therefore, progression in the narrative were regarded as noteworthy areas for further investigation. By exploring the connection between entwined storylines, I was able to draw holistic perceptions from the participants as they relayed various events.

The interviews continued to the point when themes shared by the participants became repetitive and I had a sense that their momentum in conversing on the topic was declining. To prevent the discussions from ending prematurely, I asked whether they had more thoughts to share on the topic. I also allowed the participants the opportunity to ask me questions towards the end of the interview, to reinforce the sense of collaboration. The duration of the interviews varied between 32 and 67 minutes.

4.5.4 Post-interview data gathering and management

A short debrief followed each interview, during which participants had the opportunity to reflect on and share their experience of the interview. None of the participants appeared distressed or reported any negative emotions. Although the participants shared times of distress in their narratives, they also reported the ways they had discovered to manage or work through their challenges. All the narratives took a turn indicating hope, despite the participants' continuing unemployment. Moreover, after the interviews, some of

the participants shared a feeling of relief due to having been able to share their experience of unemployment and realising that they were not alone in this position.

Increased reflection could bring about awareness of new meaning themes as they relate to memories. When planning the interview process, I entertained the possibility that the interviews could stimulate further contemplation in the participants, which might bring them to new insights on the topic. As part of the informed consent, participants also gave permission to be contacted again within two weeks after the interview. At that point, they were invited to either send an e-mail or text message, or attend a second interview, to share any further contributions. Only one participant had further reflections to share, and preferred to send a text message; the contents were included in the analysis.

With regard to data management, Riessman (2008) recommends the use of a recording device to ensure representational accuracy and increase the persuasiveness of subsequent interpretations. In the present study, the interviews were audio-recorded, with the participants' permission, and saved on a password-protected device, whereafter they were transcribed. The language used by participants during interviews is an important consideration in narrative research (Riessman, 2008). I first edited the transcripts by removing repeated words and irrelevant asides, to improve readability. I then analysed the cleaned data by implementing a narrative analysis.

4.6 Narrative Analysis

McAdams (2006) posits that, in creating a comprehensive perception of a shared narrative, both form and content require due consideration. Consideration of the form of a story is a distinguishing feature of the narrative approach. In the current study, form was viewed as the narrative elements that provided structure and context to the story, while content was the surrounding information and details, as well as emotions, that the participants had shared in their narratives. I identified meaning themes by searching for elements that shaped the story (form) and verbal and non-verbal communications (content) by implementing a thematic analysis.

Ponterotto (2005) further distinguishes between nomothetic and idiographic modes of inquiry, where nomothetic refers to the normative patterns of behaviour, and idiographic emphasises the individual as complex and unique. Similarly, Ricoeur (1992) distinguished between ipse-identity, which refers to the uniqueness of the self, and idem-identity, which

refers to a uniformity that is shared with others in the same context. When interpreting the data, I experienced tension between attending to the uniqueness of in-depth personal experiences and highlighting common themes. To ensure rigour, I conducted a thematic analysis on two levels. First, I conducted a separate analysis for each transcript, in order to identify the significant meaning themes, and I reported these findings in, what I refer to as, individual meaning narratives. Secondly, I combined prominent themes from each individual meaning narrative to create a narrative structure that would point towards shared themes from the data.

4.6.1 Narrative elements

In narrative research, the conveyed information should be regarded as it is situated within the greater story's structure, as structural elements may contribute to insight (Phoenix et al, 2010). The data should therefore also be interpreted within the context of the greater narrative. According to Phoenix et al. (2010), narratives reveal what exists for participants, evident in references to characters, a plot of events unfolding over time, relations with others, and descriptions of consequences. The following discussion demonstrates how these and other considerations were borne in mind in analysing the participants' narratives to identify meaning themes. During the initial reading of the transcripts, I used colour codes to distinguish sections pertaining to the plot, the main character's position, other characters, and the backdrop.

4.6.1.1 Plot

The temporal quality of narratives implies that stories follow a trajectory from past, to present, to future (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007; Elliot, 2005). A plot can be defined as an organising theme that corroborates the role and importance of every event, and, therefore, meaning can be attached to every occurrence (Polkinghorne, 1988). The plot can be referred to as 'the golden thread' that, upon reflection, ties together and gives meaning to experiences. A chronological listing of events can yield a holistic impression as the contributions of individual events to themes (Polkinghorne, 2015). In the present study, I ordered the events in the meaning narrative chronologically to gain a temporal perspective of the unfolding plot. The significance of a plot is that it often involves a disruption of the state of equilibrium, changing the main character's direction in the storyline (Elliot, 2005). During analysis, determining the sequence of events may enable identification of events that instigated the

plot, ones that were significant for continuation of the plot, and events that indicate future directions (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). These sections in the transcripts were also highlighted with a different colour code for further analysis.

The development of plots elucidates the genre of the story. Gergen and Gergen (1986) distinguish three types of development, namely progressive narratives, where actions are directed towards a goal, regressive narratives, in which actions indicate movement away from the goal, and stable narratives, in which there is little progress. While reading through the transcripts, I paid attention to progressive and regressive plots related to the goals that the participants pursued to achieve their purpose. The strategies the participants used to change regressive plots into progressive plots had special significance.

4.6.1.2 Positioning of the main character

Understanding how people express themselves through stories can facilitate a more nuanced understanding of the contents of a narrative (De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2015). While analysing the data, I considered how the participants relayed their approach to the plot that unfolded in their narratives. I gained insight into how the participants had negotiated stumbling blocks by employing personal strengths and strategies to remain focused on realising their aspirations. The narrator's emotional position also plays a role in determining the genre of the narrative; the story could be, for example, tragic or comical (Polkinghorne, 1988). In analysing the data, I considered the tone of the participants during narration, and reflected this in the individual meaning narratives.

Squire et al. (2008) highlight the effect of the narrator's agency or lack thereof as a factor to be considered in narrative research, as it influences the position and tone of the narrator, and, therefore, the research findings. The two constructs that are relevant in this regard are learned helplessness and self-determination, which can be viewed as opposing sides on a continuum. Maier and Seligman (1976) developed the theory of learned helplessness, which holds that, when exposed to uncontrollable events, people may conclude that appropriate behaviour does not result in valued outcomes. R. M. Ryan and Deci's (2000) self-determination theory postulates that some people choose to be engaged and proactive, rather than becoming isolated and passive. When considering meaning as something that needs to be explored and obtained, re-establishing lost meaning would require self-determination. During the analysis, I noted themes related to agency as evidenced by

independence, status, impact, personal mastery, achievement, and power (Bauer et al., 2018). This is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5.

4.6.1.3 Characters

During the analysis of the narratives, I paid attention to participants' descriptions of other characters who seemed to have influenced their lives within the context of the research topic. Some of these interactions represented greater implications than others in shaping the participants' perceptions of meaning as it related to their career journeys. The participants, in their interactions with people, had also been exposed to societal norms. I therefore considered the way in which participants had been influenced by their greater social context, as it could, in turn, also offer insights pertinent to the larger community (Hiles & Čermák, 2008; Squire, 2008).

4.6.1.4 Backdrop

The social embeddedness of narratives was discussed as a dual process in Section 4.3.4, where it was noted that narratives shape, and are shaped by, social norms, agendas, relations, ideologies and belief systems (De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2015). The cultural and time-specific context formed the backdrop to the stories that were told by the participants, as context is viewed as important in analysing narratives (Josselson & Lieblich, 2015; Riessman, 2012). The backdrop clarifies subjective statements by offering a template for interpretation. Instead of a one-dimensional focus on narratives as complete products, the influence of the backdrop on developments in the narratives has to be considered (De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2015; Phoenix et al., 2010). I drew inferences from the data to note the effect of the participants' different contexts on what they considered meaningful. I also considered whether the values they mentioned were in conflict with those of their culture and society, as recommended by Daiute (2014).

4.6.2 Thematic analysis

I employed thematic analysis to identify themes related to meaning. Braun and Clarke (2006) recommend that thematic analysis start with a decision on what constitutes a theme. In the definition of Willig (2013), "a theme refers to a particular, recognisable configuration of meanings which co-occur in a way that is meaningful and systematic rather

than random and arbitrary" (p.181). Themes were identified according to whether they related to meaning and offered a possible answer to the research question.

Themes are generated inductively (arising from the data set) or deductively (brought by the researcher and based on literature) (Joffe, 2012). In inductive analysis, the researcher employs previous engagement with theory, the aim of the inquiry, and the line of questioning (Joffe, 2012). I cannot claim ignorance of extant theories relating to the research topic, and, therefore, it would have been impossible to identify themes through a purely inductive process. However, a deductive approach alone could result in hasty conclusions and jeopardise novel insights into the participants' experiences (Yin, 2011). It would therefore have been against the spirit of existential-humanistic and narrative research to neglect a single novel insight that arose from the data. Therefore, I included inductive and deductive themes during the analysis.

Themes can further be distinguished as either latent, when meaning is deduced from the language used, or manifest — themes that require some interpretation to uncover the meaning (Joffe, 2012). In order to integrate the gathered data and make valuable deductions, I focused on both latent and manifest themes. The meaning themes that emerged from the participants' explanations of events and experiences were considered latent. The previously discussed narrative elements were considered manifest themes together with non-verbal communication that gave further sustenance to the manifest themes.

Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest starting the data analysis by becoming immersed in the data through repeated reading, while searching for patterns and meanings. After an initial reading of the transcripts, I used different colour codes to distinguish between themes related purpose, significance, and coherence. Different colours were also used to highlight the narrative elements (discussed Section 4.6.1), as well as specific memories or parts of the narrative that instigated a change in the plot. As it is important to capture significant patterns of meaning in narrative analysis (Willig, 2013), I considered themes of conceptual significance, even if they were mentioned only once (Joffe & Yardley, 2004). In deducing the themes, I considered themes that appeared frequently, as well as themes I considered noteworthy in addressing the research question. I then considered the highlighted parts of each narrative to identify the most significant conceptualisations of meaning. I relied on my judgement, as informed by the literature, my interactions with the participants, and a

comparison of the different narratives. The highlighted sections were then summarised and combined into the individual meaning narratives and a narrative structure.

4.6.3 Individual meaning narratives and narrative structure

In staying true to the existential-humanistic nature and honouring the uniqueness of each participant, I first wrote a synopsis of the transcriptions to illustrate the meaning themes that each participant conveyed. These individual meaning narratives were assembled by joining, what I considered, the most powerful meaning themes shared by the participants to create a meaning narrative. An added motive for portraying individual narratives is the fact that each story could be appreciated as a whole instead of revealing a narrow emphasis on small separate sections (Josselson & Lieblich, 2015). Furthermore, in generating unique meaning narratives, I could introduce each participant and instill an appreciation for their distinctive experiences. I also considered my field notes on my reflections during and after every interview, to create an accurate portrayal of individual participants as they had revealed themselves to me. By then comparing the individual narratives, I was also able to perform a negative case analysis — the search for opposing themes that offer a more holistic impression of the data, a strategy that increases the credibility of a study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Squire, 2008). This approach allowed me to acknowledge the participants' different conceptualisations, and to avoid premature conclusions and a narrow focus on similarities.

Although the particularity of narratives was emphasised before, it is important to recognise that specifics are usually situated in a more generic narrative structure (Bruner, 1991). In the present study, each narrator had a unique context with individual experiences, but considering commonalities enabled me to identify shared themes. In this regard, a topic being repeated in narratives is useful in discerning commonalities among seemingly varying perspectives (Phoenix et al., 2010). To inform the narrative structure, I linked the related themes to form greater, more comprehensive themes (Willig, 2013). This then enabled me to identify themes that were common amongst participants, from which I could determine the narrative structure in a chronological form. The resulting narrative structure provided a way to organise and summarise the data.

4.7 Ethical Considerations

Although guidelines are provided by the Health Professionals Council of South Africa (HPCSA, 2006) and other authors to ensure ethical research, a novel research project might

bring unforeseen dilemmas. Adherence to a predetermined set of ethical rules may not be sufficient in dealing ethically with the various situations that could emerge in research involving humans (Aluwihare-Samanayaka, 2012). Allan (2008) advises the anticipation of potential complications and minimising risks that might compromise the ideal of conducting ethical research. In this light, Josselson (2006) argues for an ethical attitude, rather than simply adhering to rules, in conducting narrative research. While having taken steps to design an ethical study, I remained watchful of ethical conflicts appearing while conducting the research, as recommended by Willig, Stainton-Rogers, Brinkmann, and Kvale (2011). To avoid any ethical blind spots, a committee affiliated with the University of Pretoria's Faculty of Humanities reviewed the proposed research and gave clearance for the study to continue (Appendix D). The ethics adhered to are discussed in the following sections.

4.7.1 Non-maleficence

Participants are all burdened by partaking in research in some way, even if it is only through a sacrifice of their time (Goodwin & Goodwin, 2016). I made every effort to protect participants from possible harm and discomfort. Participants were treated with respect, kindness, and appreciation for their contribution to the research. I handled the participants' expression of emotional difficulty with compassion, and probed further sensitively. Both in the consent form and after the interview, participants were given the opportunity to consult an independent psychologist if they felt distressed by the interview. The participants did not seem to be upset by the interview, and none indicated the need for counselling.

Another potential ethical pitfall is the inevitable power differentiation between the researcher and that participant, as the interview is designed around the researcher's agenda (Willig et al., 2011). To avoid participants feeling exploited, and to manage their expectations, I clearly communicated all relevant information on the study from the start of the sampling. To establish an open and co-operative relationship, I initiated a dialogue during the process of obtaining participants' consent, at which time they also had the opportunity to ask questions. This approach continued throughout the co-construction of the narrative and the debriefing that followed each interview.

It is the researcher's responsibility to, where possible, ensure that participants benefit from participation in the study (Allan, 2008). While the intention in the present study was not for the interview to be therapeutic, I was hopeful that reflecting on concerns with

someone who showed an interest would leave the participants feeling accepted and understood. Giving them insight into the research topic made the participants aware of the fact that they were not alone in the struggle to find employment. Sharing their career narratives further helped the participants to appreciate their journeys and realise how many obstacles they had already overcome. The participants were also informed that the insights they shared would be utilised to benefit the greater population of unemployed graduates.

Having an interview in an environment where participants feel exposed, might evoke unpleasant reactions (Hammersley & Traianou, 2012). I thus took care to ensure that the interviews took place in a private space. Three interviews were conducted at private residences, three in a private office at my workplace, five in a private location on the university grounds, and one in a private section of a restaurant.

4.7.2 Confidentiality

The fact that qualitative research is often conducted with the aim of eliciting an in-depth version of personal experiences increases the risk of infringing on participants' privacy (Hammersley & Traianou, 2012). Wiles, Crow, Heath, and Charles (2008) highlight the difficulty faced by qualitative researchers in maintaining confidentiality, as the objective of any qualitative study is to gain knowledge from participants. I received the names and contact details of possible participants from individuals outside of the study, which, strictly speaking, posed a risk to the participants' anonymity. However, the names of the final participants were not shared with any of the gatekeepers at the organisation or acquaintances who had suggested possible participants. In this regard, Doyle and Buckley (2017) suggest viewing anonymity on a continuum, acknowledging that absolute anonymity is impractical.

Participants can be at risk of embarrassment or feeling exposed if other people are aware of the interview or recognise them as narrators in future publications (Hammersley & Traianou, 2012). I implemented strategies to protect the dignity of participants, such as safeguarding their identities when the research is made public. Firstly, participants were informed of the limits to confidentiality, and how their stories would become public through future publication. The transcripts were edited to remove identifying information, to ensure that the stories could not be connected to the narrators. Pseudonyms were used in the transcripts and all subsequent reporting, to avoid participants being recognised. I chose pseudonyms that corresponded with the participants' race and home language. Biographical

information that could result in recognition (e.g., residential area or university of study) is not mentioned in any documents, and, upon completion of the study, the audio recordings were deleted.

4.7.3 Informed consent

Informed consent is established by informing participants on the aim and purpose of a study, and assuring them that participation is voluntary. This gives them autonomy in choosing if and how they want to contribute to the study (Hammersley & Traianou, 2012). In accordance with the HPCSA's (2006) ethical rules of conduct, I provided participants with an information document (Appendix C) that stipulated the aim of the research and the required extent of participation. Participants were also assured that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any point. I also offered explanations on how the information would be used in publications, audiences who would have access to the publications, and the storage of the transcripts. Participants were encouraged to clarify any matters about which they were uncertain before signing the consent form, which form would indicate agreement to participate.

4.7.4 Faithfulness

A significant aim of narrative research is to give voice to the experiences of participants and present the interview in a manner that is faithful to the narrator's story (Josselson, 2006). The faithfulness of research is reliant on the findings being an accurate reflection of the participants' experience. With regard to the researcher's position, tension might oscillate between not being involved enough to explore the experiences of participants and the risk of compromising objectivity by becoming too involved in the narrative (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). I tried to maintain a balanced co-construction of the narrative.

Morse (2015) warns against the bias caused by only focusing on what is anticipated to be found in the data. With regard to the narrative paradigm, White and Epston (1990) also emphasise the importance of staying true to the narrator's interpretation and sense-making process, as objective reality is unattainable. I adopted a receptive attitude towards the participants' narrative constructions, instead of relying on literary perceptions to explain what they had experienced. In this regard, Suzuki (2010) refers to 'a beginner's mind,' which implies an openness to possibilities, as opposed to 'an expert mind,' which holds pre-conceived notions. Reflection after each interview helped me to consider how my

expectations compared to what the participants had shared. Furthermore, continuous interaction with my research supervisor made it possible to review each research step and ensure accurate reflection of the participants' conceptualisations (Allan, 2008). Faithful representation also contributes to the rigour of a study, which is discussed in the next section.

4.8 Quality Assurance

Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton (2012) point out the tension between establishing rigour while preserving the innovation and creativity necessary to produce the kind of novel ideas expected from qualitative studies. While some authors argue for specific criteria to ensure quality research, others hold that unique steps should be designed for the specific context and aim of the study (Meyrick, 2006). Notably, Lincoln and Guba (1985) adapted the criteria used to evaluate the rigour of quantitative processes for application in qualitative studies, and suggested the terms *dependability*, *credibility*, *transferability*, and *confirmability* to represent these criteria. Dodge, Ospina, and Foldy (2005) recommend that the multiple theoretical assumptions used in the diverse purposes of qualitative research adhere to an internal logic, and that researchers heed the rich literature on quality assurance in research. The following sections provide details on how transparency, reflexivity, and transferability were ensured, to improve the rigour of the study.

4.8.1 Transparency to achieve authenticity

To ensure credibility, the researcher has to ensure the truthfulness of the findings — that the findings are grounded in the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility is further enhanced by the researcher transparently reporting the research process and the methods used to reach the conclusions (Pickering & Kara, 2017; Riessman, 2008). This includes detailed descriptions of the collection, selection, and analysis of data (Darawsheh, 2014; Joffe, 2012). With regard to the data analysis, this chapter earlier provided descriptions of how I chose themes and reached conclusions. Ultimately, the aim is to ensure that readers are able to judge the findings as coherent and fair (Dodge et al., 2005). Furthermore, Mishler (1986) noted that the quality of narrative study relies on detailed transcripts. Large sections of the original transcripts were thus included in the thesis, giving the reader insight into the data how the data had been analysed. I considered it important to portray large portions of the gathered data, both to avoid an overly selective representation (Joffe, 2012), and to further

enhance the credibility of the study. I also acknowledged my subjective position in the research.

4.8.2 Reflexivity

While I recognise the unfeasibility of objectivity in this research, practising reflexivity, as recommended by Willig (2013), ensured that I remained aware of my contribution to the participants' construction of meaning. I constantly questioned my assumptions, and considered alternatives. To aid reflection, I made notes in a journal throughout the study. Continuous conversations with my supervisor also assisted me in evaluating the viability of the decisions regarding the study.

Willig (2013) further distinguished between personal reflexivity, which refers to personal views, beliefs, experiences, and interests, and epistemological reflexivity, which pertains to the research aim and the chosen method. I followed consecutive steps in practising both types of reflexivity, with the aim of personal reflexivity giving rise to epistemological reflexivity. Figure 2 illustrates the process followed.

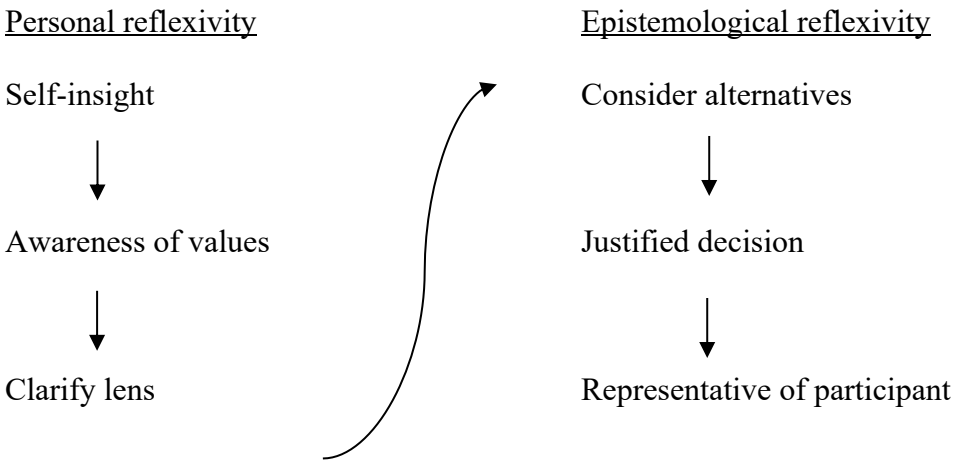

Figure 2. Illustration of the process of reflexivity as subsequent steps that ranged from personal reflexivity to epistemological reflexivity.

Self-insight made it possible for me to pay attention to the impact I had on the study in my role as researcher, an awareness that enhances the credibility and congruency of research (Darawsheh, 2014). Inquiring about the lives of others reminded me of similar

experiences in my own past. It is a known fact that researchers choose topics because of personal experiences, which holds the benefit of self-insight into their own personal values and beliefs. This self-knowledge aids the researcher in avoiding bias (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). To enhance transparency, the personal experiences that had led me to this research were explored at the beginning of this chapter. My cultural and socio-economic background differed from that of many of the participants, which placed inevitable limitations on my understanding. I also had to accept that I had no control over the participants' perception of me and how this would impact their communication.

To remain open to participants' perceptions of events, Symonette (2013) recommends refining of the researcher's "sociocultural antennae" (p. 187). Acknowledging my position and the values I honour helped me to be curious about perspectives that differed from mine. Instead of relying on my personal outlooks alone, I engaged with the participants on their experiences, as recommended by Berger (2015). Acknowledging my lens eased my understanding and acceptance of the participants' conceptualisations.

The interactive and dynamic character of qualitative research design further necessitates epistemological reflexivity to guide the constant decision-making required of the researcher (Lloyd-Jones, 2003). Reflexivity made it possible to pay attention to available alternatives, instead of prematurely committing to one course of action in making methodological decisions. I was therefore able to justify the methodological decisions made during the research. By being reflexive and constantly questioning how I made deductions, I minimised the influence of pre-conceived ideas, in order to truthfully represent the experiences of participants (Berger, 2015; Elliot, 2005; Jootun, 2009; Symonette, 2013).

4.8.3 Transferability

Due to the small sample size, generalising findings from the current study to the larger population would be unwarranted. However, completing a research project with no possibility of transferring knowledge would be pointless (Gioia et al., 2012). Due to the nature of in-depth interviews, research questions are studied from the participants' vantage point, yet a single person's perspective could also offer an entry point to exploring a greater phenomenon (Lucas, 2014). Lincoln and Guba (1985) used the term *transferability* to indicate the similarity between two contexts, where hypotheses formed in one could be applicable to the other. Elliot (2005) argues that a common-sense view should be adopted

with regard to generalisability, leaving the reader to decide whether and how the findings of a study could be applied to other situations or people.

While it would be unfeasible to consider every context to which the findings of a study could be applied, transferability can be enhanced through a detailed description of the context of a study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and the conditions in which the data were collected (Koch, 2006). To enhance the transferability of the present study, I provided detailed descriptions of the methodology followed, and the findings reported in Chapter 5 are supported with verbatim quotes from the interview transcripts. If notions and principles are identified that might be true in other contexts, the findings have relevance to a greater audience (Gioia et al., 2012). The final chapter includes comments on the relevance of the findings for specific people or situations. Additionally, Chapter 6 provides a discussion of the link between the findings and extant literature, which may stimulate further research on the topic (Yin, 2011).

From a more empathetic stance, reading the narratives of other people may awaken readers to realities of which they might otherwise have remained unaware. Because narratives are relatable, people find familiarity and applicability to the lives of others in the participants' stories. Hearing a story allows the researcher and the audience to place themselves in the position of another, thereby creating a greater sense of empathy. Narratives can bring greater understanding and inform new practices in other contexts (De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2015). Understanding another person's narrative also creates the possibility of reconsidering personal assumptions. Therefore, representing people's stories and advocating their interests could lead to positive social change (Shuman, 2015).

4.9 Conclusion

An existential-humanistic paradigm with a focus on holistic, subjective, self-actualising perceptions of human experience guided the design and implementation of the research methodology. The unique merits of a narrative framework were considered aligned with the research intent, and was utilised to yield rich, personal insights. To ensure a useful yet manageable amount of data, 12 interviews were conducted. Gathering data through the narrative method entailed a co-constructive effort through the researcher eliciting and the participant sharing memories relevant to the topic under study. By considering the presence of various narrative elements in each story, I was able to situate the narrative contents the

participants had shared within individual meaning narratives and then a narrative structure. The research procedures were designed to protect the participants, ensuring their dignity. Through reflexivity, I remained aware of alternative methods and interpretations, and the choices I made were reported in a transparent manner. This will enable readers to evaluate whether the findings of the current study are relevant to other contexts. The findings of the presents study are reported in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5: Narrative Findings

The findings yielded by the implemented research method will be discussed in this chapter. During data analysis, a tension arose between the need to give a comprehensive account of the participants' narratives and the desire to offer in-depth insights. To address this dilemma, I first present a synopsis of each narrative (individual meaning narratives), to introduce the reader to the participants and their unique contexts and experiences. The second part of the chapter illustrates the narrative structure drawn from the connections between the different stories. Whereas the individual narratives illustrate the uniqueness of each participant's experiences, the shared structure shows the commonalities that emerged from the narratives.

5.1 Individual Meaning Narratives

Each synopsis is in the form of a meaning narrative, highlighting the most significant meaning themes shared by the participant. Although the participants shared their experiences by moving between different periods of time, the meaning narratives were written to embrace the temporal quality of narrative analysis by portraying events chronologically. Following the story from past to future clarifies the progression of each story.

5.1.1 Phatu: Coming from rural Limpopo to seek independence (and more)

Phatu was raised in rural Limpopo, a district characterised by smaller towns and farmlands. This region is known for widespread poverty, and Phatu made it clear that she associated her home town with uninformed and outdated thinking:

> *It's always a sense of, "You're a woman, you should get married, have kids, you don't really have a career," and stuff like that. So, for a long time, I believed in that notion, like, being a woman, your sole purpose in life is to just serve the man.*

However, she aspired to be more: *"From back home, from Limpopo, I want to be better than my parents, you understand? So, I cannot be the same or below my parents. I have to be better."* Phatu had held the aspiration to make a living for herself, but had no specific career in mind. Although she expressed a desire to escape prevalent ideas in her community, her decision to enrol for a law degree had been influenced by societal beliefs regarding careers:

The truth is, where I come from, from Limpopo, you're always told that you should only study courses that will give you money in the end. So, your dreams, they sort of disappear, and you start looking for something that can give you money at the end of it… It's, either you become a doctor, an engineer of some sorts, a lawyer, or, yeah, something like that. So, if you don't study either of these careers, you will not succeed in life.

Phatu had enjoyed the freedom of being away from home and the novelty of student life in a city. Yet, she admitted to a lack of focus on her academic work, because she had had no passion for law. This was the start of tension between a career that would offer financial security and one that would lead to happiness. After failing her first year, Phatu explored other options and recognised an interest in geography. Despite her mother's caution, she embarked on a geography programme, and completed a postgraduate certificate in geographic information system and remote sensing. Pursuing a career that she was interested in brought great relief to Phatu, and she explained feeling as if someone had removed the blinkers from her eyes so that she could finally see clearly.

In her final year, Phatu performed work on a contract basis and received a taste of the independence she desired: *"I felt like I'm grown. I mean, I'm 'adulting.' I'm doing this day, you know. I can take over the world now."* She shared what it meant to her to have independence: *"You just automatically gain confidence when you know that, in your mind, that, 'You know what? I have something of my own'"*. She further elaborated: *"Because it's so fulfilling, you know, to feel that I can stand on my own two feet... Like, 'Look! I can do this by myself, on my own, without any help from anybody.'"* When her contract was not renewed, Phatu felt unvalued. Not finding other employment opportunities reminded Phatu of her mother's apprehensions, which cast doubt on her choice to study geography.

At the time of the interview, Phatu, her husband, and their two children lived in Johannesburg, the biggest city in South Africa. She recognised that neither she nor her children wanted for anything. Although she appeared calm and resolved about being unemployed, she admitted to feelings of anxiety:

So, unemployment is, yeah, it's stressful. I literally cannot sleep at night, because I'm constantly stressing about getting a job. And you're doing applications on a daily

basis, and you're sending in post with money, and you're not getting replies back, not even interviews.

Previously, Phatu had viewed financial independence as the means to freeing herself from the trap of becoming a man's servant. Now, independence was no longer about supporting herself, but about a contribution to providing for her children:

I look at those little faces and I go, "You know, I have to do this for you." So, yeah, that's what fills my life at the moment. I don't know, like, I swear, if they were — didn't exist, I think I would've lost my mind by now.

As we were talking, she conversed about her unemployment in a very rational manner. Perhaps her resilient mindset made it possible for Phatu to realise that having a happy and fulfilling life is more important than being employed, which might explain her serenity. She recognised that unemployment made it possible for her to spend more time with her children, which brought a different significance to her life. Her previous employment had not made Phatu happy, which is why she did not regret the loss of the job that gave her independence. She had also gained the insight that she was evolving, and that work was just one part of her life. Phatu also subsequently expressed the desire to become an advocate for needy children, to give back to her community:

My main concern, really, is kids from underprivileged backgrounds, because that's where I come from, and I know how I used to think. I know how I used to see the world. So, I feel fortunate that I was able to be exposed to this other side of the world. So, I feel like it's — I should be able to give that back to somebody.

5.1.2 Ian: Mattering through solving problems

When Ian had to make a career choice, it was important to him to find something that would give him lifelong significance:

Most people have this mentality where they just work for a salary so that they can do whatever afterward, but they actually have no passion towards doing a good job or even working at all. And, I think, that's one of the things that frustrates me the most, because, for me, a job is not only a job. It's not just about the salary. It's about doing the best that I can, challenging myself, learning more, doing more, and I think

that's what it should be about, because, I mean — or whatever makes you happy, because, I mean, 80% of your life is going to be freakin' work. You've got to find something enjoyable about it.

It had been possible for Ian to nurture this mindset, because his family was able to provide his basic needs, and his survival had not been dependent on an income. After completing high school, Ian worked at a call centre for a year. He then made the choice to study informatics through a Bachelor's degree in commerce, but the excitement of student life was distracting, and he failed his first year at university. Ian returned to the labour market, and worked for a cellular company, where he found the significance he sought in employment:

I actually had the job, and I saw the fruits of my labour in terms of the salary and in terms of seeing the reaction on people's face when I help them out with contracts and solving their problems... I mean, that was a lot of fun [chuckles].

Yet, Ian was hoping for more. He longed for the challenge he experienced while studying, and envisioned how a degree would give him access to greater opportunities and exposure. Returning to his studies with a different mindset gave Ian a new enthusiasm: *"I think, when I was studying my degree, I had a sense of what I felt I was working towards."*

Except for the fulfilment that Ian associated with being employed, he also believed that this would signal his ability to move towards the next step in life. After a year of applying for positions without success, Ian was unable to achieve the milestones he associated with adulthood: *"I literally, I want to work, buy a house* [chuckles]*, you know, just live my own life, instead of being stuck at my parents' place."* The disappointment was most powerful when he compared himself with more successful peers: *"I haven't earned my own, per se. Because, I mean, I'm 28. I'm looking at my friends buying houses, buying cars, getting married, making families, and growing up."* Although Ian was keen to find work, he acknowledged that he was in a more fortunate position than many others, because he could rely on his parents to support him.

Ian described the void left by unemployment: *"I miss having a routine and a proper sense of purpose* [chuckles]*."* Not having something meaningful to occupy his day made it difficult for Ian to be productive: *"I'm a very lazy person, unless I have something to keep me in check. So, I ended up playing computer games and, like, just doing nothing productive."*

Ian explained that he often felt bored and depressed, which made it difficult for him to find the drive to initiate meaningful activities.

Nonetheless, Ian, at the time of the interview, attempted to fill each day by doing something worthwhile. He tried to maintain a measure of routine by doing favours for his family and searching for work opportunities in the morning, and allowing himself time to watch television or play video games in the afternoon. From the little feedback that he received after previous applications and interviews, he was trying to change his image to one more fitting to the corporate world. Although Ian was not solving complex problems for clients yet, he felt that he mattered when he could be helpful to the people whom he cared about:

> *I help out with family errands. The past while, I've been helping my mom renovate her place. So, I still get opportunities to help out where I can and help solve problems. I think the — it's just the problems aren't really challenging* [chuckles].

Ian considered this a way of showing appreciation for their support, both socially and financially. Ian found the fact that he had family and friends who gave him advice and help him seek employment opportunities very encouraging:

> *I think, if I didn't have the support I have, I probably would have given up a long time ago* [chuckles]. *So, yeah. Suicide isn't an option, ever, but, I think, if I didn't have the friends now that I have — thinking about primary school days — I think it wouldn't have been too much to ask of me to just go, "Well,* [chuckles] *what if I could end it and see what would happen at the end?"*

He described himself as a fighter, and said that giving up on finding employment was not an option:

> *I don't know if I ever really had a purpose, except for the ones that I make. I kind of feel that I set my own purpose, I set my own goals… Fundamentally, what I work for is to have good friends, good family, a roof over my head, and food in my stomach.*

5.1.3 Funani: The practicalities of having a dream

"My dream was to become an actor… So, whenever I see a soapy or something, I told myself that I want to be an actor." When asked what it was about an acting career that

she had found alluring, Funani answered: *"I like fame, and those people have got money."* The glamour associated with show business is in stark contrast to Funani's reality: *"We are seven at my family. So, my father has the other wife, so he doesn't support the other kids, my mother's kids. So, my mother depends on the grants. She's also selling mealie meal."* The fame and fortune that Funani was dreaming of would not have benefitted only her. As the firstborn in her family, she expressed feeling a strong responsibility to provide financial support to her mother and siblings. More than anything, she wanted to help them create a comfortable home.

When Funani was in Grade 12, she had to choose a university programme. Her father insisted that she study nursing, a profession in which employment after graduation is guaranteed. With two families to support, an extra income would ease the burden Funani's father carried. Funani, however, was set on her aspiration of becoming an actress, and registered for media studies instead. She did not see the need to give up on her dream in order to provide for her family. After registering for the programme, she lied to her father and told him that her marks were not good enough to study nursing.

Unfortunately, her studies did not progress without challenges. Funani failed two modules, which extended her three-year course by a full year. Funani had believed that the worst was over once she had graduated: *"Like, when I graduated, I told myself that I'm done with the studying, the tests, the assignment, the presentation and what-what. So, for me, I was happy, so that now I can get my job."* Funani saw her degree as the answer to finding employment, and her expectation was to secure a job within one or two months. She started enthusiastically applying for positions:

> *So, at first, I was trying, trying, trying, looking for jobs, sending e-mails, delivered by hand and everything. So, I had no luck. So, and, for me, it was upsetting. There's this month that I had to give up and stop searching for jobs, because I told myself that I'm submitting my CVs, but they don't respond. So, I have to give up and stop searching for jobs.*

Funani refused to entertain the possibility of not finding a job and fulfilling her purpose of becoming an actress. She found having spent time away from home to study and returning without the success had she anticipated hard:

At past, I used to go and visit friends, but, now, I don't usually go to visit them, because they will be asking me a lot of questions: "What are doing in life? Why are you not working? What's wrong with your degree, and what-what?"

While trying to find work, Funani had a desire to experience meaning in another way. On her pastor's recommendation, she started a project with her friends, assisting learners with their homework and raising donations to buy their school necessities:

It was good. I felt good, because I was helping, especially the kids, because some of them, they just go home, put their bags, and go and play. They don't study, and some of the parents neglect their children, so we have to help them.

She explained how this venture kept her busy, and that she pondered less about being unemployed. In fact, it informed how she would advise other graduates:

My advice is to, when they are done with graduating, they have to focus on other things, or they have to do part-time modules while searching for jobs. They don't have to be focusing on getting jobs only, because that will depress them. They have to do something or else, they're going to schools or something, or volunteering in anything, so that they get a job.

Funani came to terms with the harshness of the South African labour market. She recognised the importance of having a job to earn a living, even if the job was unrelated to her initial dream of becoming an actress. Funani admitted that, in retrospect, she should have chosen to study education, because she noticed that those graduates easily secured a job. While she had wanted to give up on searching for work before, she experienced renewed vigour when she realised that she was not alone. People who studied with her were also struggling to find work, which made her feel less insignificant. Funani also believed in a higher power guarding over her: *"I keep telling myself that God will answer something. God will give me the thing that I want. Something."*

5.1.4 Zanele: From hero to zero and then something in-between

Zanele considered it a great accomplishment that she had perform well in her final school exams and received university exemption. However, her family could not afford to send her to a university, and she was forced to take a *"gap year."* Receiving a bursary for

the following academic year made it possible for Zanele to commence her studies. Coming from what she called *"a village"* (referring to her small community, situated in a rural area), she was fully aware of the privilege she enjoyed in being able to further her studies.

Zanele had pictured herself in the health industry, and initially planned to study pharmaceutics. However, the programme was full when she applied, and she opted for a degree in dietetics instead, which aligned with another desire she had — to educate people. Processing the payment of her bursary took time, and Zanele had to seek accommodation at her aunt's house, as it was closer to campus. While staying there, Zanele had to endure her aunt's rudeness, and often went to bed without having eaten. Out of desperation, she had to live with her brother for two weeks, who was also not able to provide a welcoming home. The first few months at university were difficult. Without the payment from her bursary, she could not afford textbooks, and failed modules as a result. Acknowledging that she was the first in her family to study at a university, dropping out was never an option for Zanele:

> *So, I just told myself that, okay, since when I am the first, I can't quit. I'll just struggle up until I get my degree. Actually, I wanted to hold that paper and say, "Today, it's mine. The degree is mine."*

After three months of instability, Zanele was granted accommodation on campus. Only in her second year at university did Zanele have sufficient funds for food, accommodation, and textbooks. Finally, she could focus all her attention on her studies. After prevailing through many trials, completing her degree was a victory for Zanele.

> *When the results came out and say, "Yeah, you are finally done," I was so happy. I sent everyone, my friends, my family, the, like, WhatsApp messages, saying, "You know what? The course is done, and I'm graduating." And then, 2016, when I was graduating, I was so happy. Yeah, I was over the moon.*

News of her graduation spread quickly in Zanele's community, and people sought her guidance for learners who wanted to follow in her footsteps and go to university. She was aware that her experience held significance for others: *"After that time, I felt so special. You see, okay, I'm important to other people. Other people are seeing the light through me. Yes."* Zanele also realised that she had paved the way for her younger sister:

Yes, and I was alone, all alone. And then, a year after, my younger sister came to Gauteng to study. Yes, everything, for her, it was smooth. And then I always told her that, if it was not for me, my struggle, you were not going to be here. Yes, you are here because of me.

When Zanele could not find employment after her compulsory community service year, the people in her village started seeing the previous success in a different light: *"So, they will feel like, 'okay, going to school, what's the use? Because, now she's graduated, she's from the best universities, but now, why is she not working?'"* Zanele had left her village for university with idealism, and had returned shamed by her lack of employment. She felt insignificant.

Further contributing to the challenge of unemployment was the added responsibility of Zanele bearing a child during the time she was unemployed. No longer being in a relationship with the child's father, the best she could expect from him was sporadic financial contributions. When Zanele later found work, she had to take her child to a day-care facility, as she received little support from her family. Most of her income went to childcare and travelling costs. It no longer made sense for Zanele to continue with the work, and she quit. In retrospect, she recognised that this was when she developed feelings of depression.

Seeing her friends' progress left Zanele discomfited, and she found it increasingly difficult to be around her successful peers. She felt as if people were avoiding her because she had not accomplished financial independence. This led to a growing tendency to isolate herself. It was during this time that Zanele realised who had her best interests at heart — people who offered their company and support at any time. She found comfort in fellow unemployed people's company, and appreciated their empathy with her situation. She also sought spiritual guidance from her pastor at church. These conversations gave Zanele new hope and direction, which enabled her to again engage her driven self:

Personally, I think I'm just a motivated person…. If I want something, I want it. I will just try my best at any time… because I always tell myself that I can't pray and say, "God, give me the job," while I'm sitting down and doing nothing.

After the interview, Zanele shared the following:

But, after today, I feel like I must just be motivated and never give up, because I went through a lot, and I never give up for that. So, even today, I must not lose hope, and still apply for the job and have faith that, one day, it will be okay. Take into consideration what I went through, the stresses that I had, yes.

5.1.5 Miriam: Coming to a standstill after driving in the fast lane

Miriam always looked up to her older sister, whom she viewed as very intelligent. When her sister was awarded a bursary for further studies, Miriam imagined that her sister would pave the way, and that she would follow in her footsteps. Unfortunately, her sister did not take the study opportunity seriously, and, after she dropped out, Miriam could not apply for the same bursary, which compelled her parents (whom she describes as *"not well-off"*) to make a substantial investment in her university education. Viewing herself as less intelligent, but more hardworking, than her sister, Miriam believed that her parents were not convinced that she would succeed where her sister had failed.

Miriam noted a curiosity in herself to understand how and why people act in certain ways, especially with regard to behaviour outside of the norm. In her community, she observed the stigma attached to mental health problems, and she was interested to understand the person behind the disorder. The desire to help people (and help herself, as she later noted) persuaded Miriam to opt for a career in psychology, which, unfortunately, only increased her family's scepticism about her prospects of success. Aside from demonstrating her academic ability, Miriam was also driven to pursue a university qualification in order to be self-reliant. She came to equate a degree with a life of accomplishment: *"To me, the slogan, you know: The key to success is education, was strongly ingrained in my mind. So, I was like, 'Get the education, then you will eventually get the job.'"*

During her first year at university, Miriam realised that only a handful of students would be chosen to complete a Master's degree and become a psychologist. She realised that she would need to outperform her fellow students to be selected for the course, and to prove to herself and her family that she could be successful. With this motivation, Miriam's career as a student followed a very successful trajectory. In describing herself as a student, Miriam said:

She was very driven, determined, and, gosh, she had a goal. That goal was to get to the finish line, you know… I'm going to get there, because I believe I'm just as good

as they are… And, for me, you know, I had to show that there's more to me, and they're [referring to fellow students] *going to see that. They're going to see me as competition…. and when I got there that sense of achievement it was like wow, I've worked hard, I've worked bloody hard to get here and here I am.*

Miriam did indeed present herself as a dynamic and well-articulated individual with good self-insight, and she had no trouble being selected to continue with her Honour's and then a Master's degree in psychology. Yet, these achievements did not happen without significant sacrifices:

If I could look back, a lot of sleepless nights and, ja, just a lot of sacrifice. When I think of that time, it's like a lot of sacrifice, and — I don't know how to put it, but it felt as though, when I was studying, I was also kind of asleep, for me, because I was in this bubble, this academic bubble, and I wasn't really living. For me, it was, "You need to get this to get to the next step."

Miriam completed her internship and community service year, which is required by the HPCSA to register as a psychologist. During this time, she received more practical exposure, and also started earning a salary. Without the constant competition, Miriam felt free and at peace. She enjoyed her independence, and started thinking about other goals she associated with adulthood, such as private accommodation, a driver's licence, and even buying a car. Miriam also mentioned her parents' relief, knowing that their daughter could take care of herself. She, in turn, enjoyed offering them financial support.

She had the opportunity to stay on in a sessional position at the hospital where she had completed her community service. Unfortunately, the physical conditions at the hospital affected Miriam's health, and she repeatedly became seriously ill, until a doctor advised her to seek an alternative work environment. She made the difficult choice to resign, perhaps hoping that, with her track record, she would easily find alternative employment. From her speedy progress to this point, Miriam was suddenly faced with a disheartening and frustrating period of unemployment that stretched over two years. Miriam became tearful when she spoke about her anxiety and the doubt regarding her choice of career, her competence, and her aspirations to become a psychologist:

I feel more vulnerable now than I've ever felt before, if I may say that. Ja, and that kind of crushes you in a way. So, I don't seem as strong. This has slowly but surely chipped away at me in a way.

She shared the following analogy:

I had a full tank of gas, and now I'm just at a stop sign, and I just can't seem to move. And you see things happening around you, drivers everywhere, and you just can't seem to move from this stop sign. That's how I feel, that I'm at a dead-end stop sign. My car is dead, but I have gas. I don't know what to do.

However, towards the end of the interview, Miriam recognised that, although she had not progressed in the way she would have liked to, she had not been stagnant either. She stated her intent for the journey ahead:

So, if it means my car being stuck at that stop sign, I'll have to get out of the car, start walking amongst the cars. It's fine, but I just can't stay put. So, that's what I see. It's, when those tough times are here, get out of the car. You know where your car is. But you need to get out of the car and start doing something different, it's not moving. So, that's what I do, and that kind of keeps me going. It is tough, but I'm going to fake it until I make it.

5.1.6 Akani: Fighting to educate

Akani always imagined herself as an educator: *"As I am in a classroom, I'm happy, and, yeah, I just love books. So, I knew I had to do something in education."* She continued to elaborate on why working with children was so important to her: *"It was my dream to be part of their worlds, to be, maybe, their parent in some way."* Akani's parents did not encourage her to continue with university after finishing Grade 12:

So, for them, when you go into school, it's like, you know, with Black people, when you are done with your matric[1], you are done. They'll just even hang it in the wall like, "My child has completed her studies." Like the journey, they didn't see the need for all that.

[1] Commonly used term in South Africa to describe the last year of school, i.e. Grade 12.

Nonetheless, her passion to educate drove Akani to pursue a diploma. The education programme was already full, and, as a second option, she chose to undertake management studies. Akani acknowledged that she had not been very dedicated to her studies, and consequently failed her first year. She had to return home, and eventually found temporary promotional work. Her love of education remained, however, and even her customers noted her proclivity for teaching. She discussed the option of resuming her studies with her parents, and they convinced her to first finish her management diploma. When she returned to university to continue with her studies, Akani had a different mindset: *"I knew that I had to work hard. I knew that I have to put in the effort, because, remember, I was doing this so I can do my education course."* Despite her new-found vigour, Akani struggled to manage the workload, and she missed the involvement of a teacher to offer guidance in the manner to which she had become accustomed at school. Obtaining sufficient funds to buy textbooks was also challenging, and commuting from home to university every day was time-consuming.

However, her efforts to be more organised and prepared bore fruit, and Akani became the first person in her family to graduate. When she introduced the possibility of a post-graduate diploma in education, her parents were enthusiastic about the prospect. While studying education, Akani realised how her work gave her a sense of meaning: *"When I was doing my practicals, it was like, 'Okay, I'm one step closer.' I'm already doing my dream, even though I wasn't getting paid, but I was happy."*

Akani envisioned how a university qualification would lead to her attaining the milestones of adulthood:

> *In your head, it's like, "I'm going to get my matric. I'm going to study for three years, and then going to get a job, and then I'm going to buy a car. A few years down the line, I'm going to get married, have a house, start my own businesses..." You just see life, like, as soon as you have a diploma, a degree, like, it's easier to get a job.*

Unfortunately, Akani entered a competitive labour market, and soon realised that she could not rely on favours, but that she had to *"fight for that job like everyone else."* Her disappointment was aggravated by the fact that she could not provide for her family. Akani's father received a pension, while her mother was unemployed, and her younger brother had no sponsor to help him further his studies. Thinking back on all the times her father had helped

her, she felt obligated to return the favour: *"So, when all these disappointments come, I feel like, you know, … I'm that one ticket. I should be saving my family. I should be the one providing now."*

Not being employed was also impacting Akani's interaction with her peers, and she felt ashamed for not achieving what she had expected to:

> *And then they're asking you, "Akani, how is it going?" You know, you have to pretend: "No, it's fine. No, everything's coming together." And then, sometimes, when we're taking pictures, you don't even want to be in the picture. You'd be like, "Everyone is happy, their life is going well, and you can't always complain to people I'm not working, this and this." You have to pretend that everything is fine. You know, just put on some powder, some lipstick, and smile, and then just take a picture, post on Facebook, and everyone would be like, "Oh, wow! This is how she looks now!"*

There was a point when Akani's efforts to keep up appearances and act strong reached a breaking point, and she had to consult with a psychologist. However, the challenges brought on by unemployment did not side-track her from her ambition to become a teacher. In retrospect, she realised how her recent hardships had shaped her character:

> *They say the shell of a tortoise, it's never too heavy for a tortoise. It's never too heavy. So, you have to keep moving. Even if it's at a slow pace, like a tortoise, like, at a slow — you have to keep moving. You can't say, "This is too heavy." No, you can't. You have to keep moving. It's part of you, it's part of your journey. It's part of learning of growing… Yes, so, this thing, it's just making me strong.*

5.1.7 Tanya: Back to Plan A

> *I didn't really have a dream… I was very young when I started studying. I didn't really know what I was doing, who I was. I just knew I wanted to be a wife one day and have kids, and I need to have a degree behind my name to be able to, at least, support myself until I can be a wife and mother."*

With these words, Tanya indicated what her most significant purpose in life had always been, even before she enrolled at university. Studying and pursuing a career had

always been her second choice. While waiting for her dream of having a husband and children to realise, Tanya decided on a career that would be an outlet for her creativity. She felt that, with a degree in consumer sciences, she would be assured of employment and, therefore, enjoy the security of being able to support herself.

Tanya had been in the privileged position of living with doting parents who provided a stable home during her time at university. They also financed her studies until she received a bursary. Without the pressure of financing her education and maintaining herself, it was possible for Tanya to turn her university experience into an opportunity for self-discovery and growth. She was raised to use her talents to the best of her ability, and this informed her approach to studying. Tanya was motivated not to disappoint her parents. Being the best was something she strived towards, and she noted having worked very hard to be accepted and avoid failure. This, coupled with a competitive nature and the desire to do things perfectly, resulted in a diligent student who graduated top of her class.

Despite succeeding admirably as a student, Tanya declined offers to continue with a Master's degree. In her final year of study, she came to the realisation that she did not want to work in the consumer science industry. The fulfilment of her desire to have a family would be in conflict with the time demands of such work. Yet, after graduating, Tanya started to apply for positions to accomplish this second choice, but met with disillusionment. She hoped that, as a new but committed person in the industry, she would be embraced by employers. Instead, she was met with an unfriendly work environment and harsh judgement. She considered herself a sensitive person who easily became anxious, and she became fearful of further interviews:

> *I was devastated. I was so scared. I was thinking, "I'm a failure. How am I ever going to get a job? How am I ever going to take care of myself? I don't want to sponge of my parents forever"... So, it was stressful. I was very anxious. I cried a lot. I prayed a lot. It was really, really hard taking that, especially when you come back from an interview and you're crying because the lady was so rude.*

Fortunately, Tanya's cousin needed an au pair, and she agreed to take up the responsibility. She also volunteered for a prison ministry, where she was later appointed to perform administrative work. In the meanwhile, Tanya met the person with whom she wanted to spend the rest of her life. She continued to work at the prison ministry after they

married, but, when they moved to a smaller town, driving the long distance to work every day became too cumbersome. Tanya and her husband were eager to start a family, and she finally had the opportunity to become a full-time housewife, and, hopefully soon, a mother. They were fortunate that her husband's salary could maintain a middle-class life. Yet, as a person who had always taken up tasks with diligence and determination, Tanya had difficulty adapting to the role of housewife, and she realised that it wasn't as "glamorous" as she had imagined:

> *Because, if you work, you're working towards something, you're achieving something. At least you're not just sitting at home. For me, now, not that I'm not working, sometimes, I feel a bit useless… You're scared you're not doing something, whereas, at least, at university, you were constantly busy with something to achieve some kind of goal.*

She kept herself busy with volunteer work, searching for a job, and even making quilts to sell, but she also learned to relax more often. Tanya started appreciating the fact that she could ensure a calm atmosphere when her husband returned from work, something with which she had had difficulty while working. At the time of our conversation, Tanya was pregnant, and she believed that this was only possible because she had learned to take things slower. After her disappointments in the labour market, Tanya chose to shape her occupational identity into that of housewife and mother. In a strict sense, Tanya was no longer unemployed at this point.

She further recognised that experiencing adversity had taught her about herself and life. For this reason, Tanya does not regret the time she had spent at university. She also indicated that it was a continuing journey for her to embrace her identity as wife and mother:

> *It's still a process… I have to accept it that it is a privilege to actually be a stay-at-home wife, and it's not a shame. Sometimes, I still feel like I should be doing more. I can be doing more... I need to stop judging myself for being in this situation and the way that it is. It's actually a privilege.*

5.1.8 Tsepiso: Story of a champion

Tsepiso had been convinced that a university qualification is the way to create a prosperous life for himself. He embarked on a Bachelor's degree, but admitted that he had

not been ready for the demands of university at the time. He described himself as naïve and unfocused then, and, having come from a rural area, had been excited by the thrill of living in a big city. In his second year of study, Tsepiso was academically excluded, and had to return home. His mother consoled him, and encouraged him to re-apply and further his studies. Back home, Tsepiso did freelance work for a non-profit organisation, where he learned about his passion to assist and guide people. Tsepiso said: *"So, for me, what really drove me was to get up in the morning, go, and make a difference."* He developed a new purpose — to obtain a qualification, and, after two years of volunteering, had the opportunity to return to university and study human resource management.

In the meanwhile, Tsepiso's mother and stepfather divorced, and his stepfather sold most of their belongings. He admitted to experiencing pressure to step in to provide for his mother and two younger brothers:

> *So, now, when I had to come back the second time, now there was more reason to push. There was an area of focus, to say, "This is the situation. You have to push harder, because now… I'm the firstborn." I have two little brothers. So, naturally, they are looking up to me to say, "Okay, fine, we need to get out of this situation." Now I had more reason.*

Tsepiso chose to view this pressure in a positive light. He reminded himself that attaining a university qualification would not only be for the sake of achieving his own aspirations, but also to ensure the survival of his family. On days when he felt less motivated, he reminded himself, *"'I just have to make it work.' My family was my motivation. Every time when I was lazy to study, I remembered my situation at home, and I woke up from my sleep."* Tsepiso was proud to note that, once he had completed his qualification, he changed for the better and became a well-rounded graduate. The graduation ceremony was a highlight for him:

> *You know, I remember the morning of my graduation. I was alone in my flat, and, you know, it was the afternoon session... So, my mom and other family persons were coming later today, during that day. So, I was alone, and, during that morning — I remember very clearly — it was a time for reflection for me, how the journey was. All the sleepless nights. Sometimes, I would not even have food. It was amazing for me.*

Tsepiso added:

> *I felt like a champion. I really did, and I said, "You know what? One day I will write a book titled The Story of a Champion." I felt like one. I felt like, even though, you know, it was not an easy journey for me — I had my faults, I failed a bit here and there — but, like a champion, I managed to rise victoriously. So, it was amazing.*

The sense of success he felt from graduating made the disappointment of the unemployment that followed more acute. When meeting successful peers, Tsepiso would be reminded of the aspirations he had held. Sending out application after application, only to be rejected, became the norm for Tsepiso. However, he cultivated resilience, and regularly reminded himself of his ability to handle challenging situations:

> *Because, there are moments where I felt like I'm done, but I would remember that I have been in worse places than I am now. So, yeah, it gives me a different perspective, to say, "Okay, fine, even though things are not yet okay, but you are far better than you were yesterday."*

Tsepiso also found comfort in the fact that he was used to living in poverty and making plans to get by: *"In terms of lifestyle, I've always ... not had a lot of money. So, for me, it's just businesses as usual* [chuckles]*."*

Tsepiso had recently learned that he would soon become a father, which made him reconsider his life. More than ever, he was hopeful and determined to achieve his goals:

> *You know, I'm one person who doesn't give up. I don't believe in giving up. ...and I have a saying, ... "As long as there's breath in our bodies, we are not supposed to be — we are not even allowed to give up." The only time that we are allowed to give up is when we are six feet down. So, I don't give up in life. I am still hopeful. I'm still praying that I'll get the job that I studied for. So, yeah, for me, it's hope. I'm very hopeful.*

5.1.9 Dimpho: Gardening for her family

Dimpho fondly remembers how she used to watch her mother plant flowers and grass to create a garden. When she had to decide on a career, Dimpho was introduced to the field of horticulture, and the prospect of making a living through gardening excited her. The

choice to further her studies was based mainly on ensuring her capacity as a provider for her parents and four younger siblings. Dimpho explained the obligation she felt to financially support her family as she matured:

> *Even though people, they call it Black tax, but, like, I don't think there is such a thing because, with us Black people, it's been difficult. Imagine if your parents took their last cents to teach, help you go to varsity, and then, like, after you graduate, you expect to just focus on your own life. Like, knowing exactly how the situation was back then, or like how the situation is currently.*

Funding from the NSFAS had made it possible for Dimpho to study at a university. Her father was providing for a wife and five children on only his income, but he had managed to provide Dimpho with travel- and pocket money. Initially, she stayed with her aunt, who had a house closer to the university, but restrictions on food and electricity made it unbearable. Her parents stepped in, and found her a place to rent near the university.

For Dimpho, studying opened her mind, and she learned to *"think outside the box."* She believed that a degree would ensure her passage into the labour market. When this did not happen immediately, Dimpho was grappling with difficult questions: *"'Why am I in this difficult situation? Like, this was, like, since I was born, and now I'm still struggling. Like, this is too much.' Eish, I will cry, cry, cry."* Her dream of saving up to start her own business suddenly seemed impossible. Unemployment also prevented Dimpho from achieving what she had expected to be as an adult:

> *This stage of life, I saw that, you know, like now, I am an adult. I am matured. I have to do my own things. I can't keep on asking my — for my parents, you know. I have to build my own life. So, like, it's important for me to have a job, so that I can build my own house, be able to buy my own roll-on, my own Dawn[2], instead of asking, and, … as I'm in this age, … my parents are getting older.*

While Dimpho was studying, her father went on early pension, and used the pay-out he received to buy a house. Her family was surviving on child grants of R420 per child per month, which is offered to families who would otherwise be unable to maintain their

[2] Brand of body lotion.

children. The pressure on Dimpho to become a provider for her family increased, but unemployment prevented her from fulfilling this purpose:

> *I have four younger sisters. So, like, I just feel like I am that parent, hey. I am that parent who's failing her own children. I just feel the pressure of finding a job and being able to help my sisters, because, like, my younger sister, the other one she's doing matric, and then the other one is in Grade 11. And then, you see, like, next year, the other one must be able to go to college and university, and then, like, there's this other one who will be doing matric … must be able to help them, since my parents are now elders.*

Dimpho remembered how her father would sacrifice and scrape together his last cents whenever she needed something. For this reason, it pained her to imagine that she could not yet do the same for him. Dimpho might easily have given up at this point, but she expressed a strong sense of self-determination:

> *I can say, like, it helped me to achieve, like, some of my goals, even if I'm not there. But, like, that thing that — I do not just give up — it helped me to achieve my goals, yeah. Or maybe because, like, most of the times, I exercise, you know, like, I jog. So, like, when you're running, … maybe, if you're running ten kilometres or maybe five kilometres per day, you know that this is my starting point and my ending point is there, like every day. Even if, like, you're tired on the way, just keep on pushing, because, like, you know that point is my finishing point, and I must not stop until I get there.*

5.1.10 Danai: How a seven-year mistake led to self-discovery

Danai, who was originally from Zimbabwe, a poverty-stricken neighbouring country, explained the choices her peers were facing: *"Some because of the Zim situation, they are furthering their studies, not because they want to, but because they have no option. There are no jobs, so they just have to go on with their studies."* She was also the first in her family to attend university, a significant privilege for Danai. Initially, she wanted to study medicine, but her revulsion of blood compelled her to find an alternative. Danai was set on finding a challenging field to study, and chemical engineering seemed appropriate. She admitted that she had had no idea of what she was embarking on:

You start something with so much passion. You're excited about it. You're like, 'I'm going to do this, and then, first year, it's nice, second year, you know. And then, when you start getting into the deep stuff, you start wondering, "Why am I here?" But, already, you're knee-deep, so you just have to push.

As a person used to aiming for distinctions, Danai was very disappointed when she had to repeat a year. Despite the amount of time and energy she had invested in her studies, Danai realised that she was *"not built for chemical engineering."* While other students might have changed course, Danai wanted to finish what she had started and avoid disappointing her parents. Although she described her studies as *"an emotional roller coaster,"* completing her degree gave her new confidence in her ability to persevere:

I think, because I didn't give up, I actually have that thing to say I can actually do more if I put my heart and mind to it… So, now I think, even in general, my life in general, it has told me that, no matter how long it takes, it doesn't matter, as long as you get to the end.

Graduation brought relief, but also new questions: *"So, when I eventually got it, I was like, 'Okay, now we've stopped running. What should happen now?'"* She referred to her studies in chemical engineering as *"a seven-year mistake,"* and consequently realised that she had a desire to be at peace with the occupation she chose for herself: *"The hope that I have, you know — that I'm going to do something, and it's going to be better, and I'm going to enjoy it. That hope of looking forward to something…"* Danai wanted to earn an income while she considered her options, and started applying for various positions. When she failed to secure employment in chemical engineering, she performed administrative work for a company for a few months, but the long work hours and commuting left her frustrated and uninspired.

When the contract ended, unemployment made it possible for Danai to reflect and answer important questions that she might otherwise have delayed considering: *"Because, many times, I think, we start at an older age to start thinking what is more important. 'What is important? What should I value? What should I learn from what I'm being told?'"* Seeking counselling and gaining an outside perspective on her career choice and life were very helpful to Danai, as it inspired a journey of self-discovery.

At the time of the interview, Danai was not yet sure about the direction in which her life would head in the following years. Her aim was to find something that she would enjoy, and her narrative yielded a few clues to consider. Danai's relationship with God had always been important to her, and being involved in church activities brought a lot of meaning to her life. Danai further realised that she enjoyed working with children, even though she found the thought of facing a class for an entire day daunting. She had recently started expanding her cooking skills, an activity she found very pleasurable. When asked how she felt about pursuing a new career direction, Danai said: *"It's scary and exciting at the same time."* She also shared: *"This whole life thing has no formula. It's like you don't know if you're going to get it right or not, but, I think, what matters is, you actually have some peace of mind."*

Danai was able to turn the difficult experience of unemployment into a lesson for the future:

> *So, now, when I start thinking about things, I don't think about the now. I think about how that will impact my life in the next coming few years — two years, three years, four years down the line. So, I need to be sure that, whatever I'm doing now, whatever I'm putting my mind to now, should actually reap fruits for me in the next four years, that I actually enjoy the process.*

5.1.11 Hlanganani: Persevering in the face of disappointment

As a learner at school, Hlanganani had chosen tourism as a subject, and his teacher had prompted a passion in him that convinced him to take up further studies in this field. Hlanganani had also been told that tourism contributes greatly to the South African GDP, and that there would be many job opportunities. His mother had made significant sacrifices to enable him to enrol at university, as she was the only breadwinner of a family of six:

> *We're living in two* rondawels[3]. *Like, it's me and my brother, my niece, like, we were sleeping in a one-room with my mom… She pop up like R4 000 for registration. She had to borrow the money still; she didn't have it.*

Hlanganani implored his mother to rather use the money to improve their living conditions, but she would not hear of it. When he received a NSFAS bursary, Hlanganani did

[3] A native hut found in South Africa, which is usually has round walls of mud and a thatched roof.

not have to worry about financing his class fees, textbooks, and daily meals. However, he faced other challenges. The subjects he took during high school had not prepared him for university modules that required mathematical and accounting skills. It was only in his fourth year that, with the help of friends, Hlanganani was able to pass a difficult module he had previously failed.

Early in his studies, Hlanganani became alarmed when his class was confronted with the realities of the South African labour market:

> *Then there was this lecture when I was doing the first year. He asked us, "Where are you going to work after you're done with your studies?" No one answered. He asked again, "Where are you going to work?"*

For the first time, Hlanganani had to consider the possibility that employment might not be guaranteed after graduation. By the time he graduated, this caution was drowned out by the excitement he felt as a result of having completed his studies. Hlanganani described his mother as being *"over the moon"* at his graduation ceremony. For her, a degree meant that Hlanganani would get a job and start taking care of her, as she was getting old.

Like many others, Hlanganani quickly learned about the anxiety and disenchantment that go along with applying for a job. His greatest disappointment was that he had to borrow money to travel to a different province for an interview for a learnership, because his mother could not afford to help him. Hlanganani was very hopeful that he would be appointed to this learnership, because a contact at the company, who was also an acquaintance, had informed him of this opportunity. However, during the interview, he was told that the company only had vacancies for students. His difficulty obtaining permanent employment in tourism continued for more than three years:

> *The stress arrived when … you have to be by yourself. You no longer have friends that you are busy with at university. You're on your own. You're applying, applying; then life becomes stressful, like, "Why did I even waste my four years' time studying for something that I won't even find a job for it?" It's very stressful. And then you have to look at the government — what are they doing? They're just chowing the money… They're not doing anything.*

Hlanganani continued to apply for positions in other areas, such as communication and marketing. He found a few *"piece jobs[4]"* that made it possible for him to pay for food and shelter, but he felt unfulfilled, because he could not follow his passion for tourism. He was also disheartened that he was performing menial activities to earn an income while he had a university qualification. Often ruminating on his lack of good fortune resulted in despondence:

> *Whenever this stress comes, like, I have, like, this thing of overthinking. "What's happening? … most of my friends are working … why is it only me who's not working? Some of my friends are driving, why … it's only me who's not driving?" I ask myself, overthinking. Like, sometimes, I even think,* hai*, even if I could die, it's fine, because I'm useless.*

Yet, Hlanganani would not give up hope, because there were people depending on him to improve their lives. His younger brother and sister were relying on him to support them in completing their school careers. Hlanganani had also promised his girlfriend that he would help take care of their daughter once he finished his studies, but, unfortunately, he had not been in a position to honour this promise. His daughter became a strong motivation to fight suicidal thinking:

> *But then the picture of my daughter come, they call me. Then I said, "Ha! What will people tell her, what happened to your father?" So, they'll tell her that, "Your father killed himself or what." Then I just think, like, ok, it's fine, one day is one day. Just keep on believing, one day is one day.*

5.1.12 Melinda: A journey of highs and lows

For the longest time, Melinda had wanted to become a doctor. When she was not selected to study medicine, she settled for a Bachelor's degree in psychology, with the intention of re-applying until she could attend medical school. Because Melinda's relatives practise in fields considered prestigious by society, her Bachelor's degree seemed less impressive in comparison.

[4] A colloquial term used to describe temporary work that usually refers to a form of manual labour.

After completing an Honour's degree, Melinda was not selected to continue with her Master's degree in psychology. Fortunately, her father was able to arrange a position for her in his telecommunications company until she could apply again. Performing administrative tasks and not being able to practise what she had studied caused Melinda great frustration. The following year, she was selected to complete a Master's degree at another university, a highlight for Melinda. Once she had completed the theoretical year, Melinda was appointed as an intern in counselling psychologist at a university, but felt unequipped to deal with the socio-economic challenges that most of the students raised during therapy.

She could not picture herself as a counselling psychologist after her internship experience. Towards the end of her internship year, Melinda learned that she had been selected to study medicine, and finally had the opportunity to pursue her dream of being a doctor. Yet, a week into the programme, she realised that her approach to medicine was informed by a psychological perspective, which brought her to the conclusion that psychology was a better fit after all. She was also faced with the reality of the time and costs involved in studying medicine. Dropping out and giving up her long-term dream had a detrimental effect on Melinda's self-esteem. Knowing that she had declined the opportunity to become a doctor propelled her to succeed in psychology:

> *Well, this is going to be super honest, but the fact that I gave up on medicine motivated me, because I was like, I gave up on this big thing, so I have to do the next thing, because, otherwise, I'm just going to be a nobody, and I don't want to be a nobody.*

With no other options available, she was left unemployed for the rest of the year: *"Just managing that complete fear of not knowing what's happening next, that was really tough. And then, obviously making peace with my decisions, because medicine wasn't a small thing for me. It was a big thing."* Fortunately, Melinda's father offered her a loan so that she and her husband did not have to compromise their comfortable standard of living. The rich experiences she had as a student emphasised the emptiness of unemployment:

> *I think I really felt a bit like a loser this year. Really, like, I felt lame. ...I don't feel smart. I didn't feel like I contributed to society, and I felt disappointed in myself for the choices that I made. And, I think, while you're a student, you kind of have this idea that, "I'm a student, so I'm still learning..." But, I think, this year, it just felt like*

I did all of this, but still I'm not really something. So, I really think it played into my identity a lot.

She decided to apply for an internship in clinical psychology, hoping that it would be more in line with her interest in the medical field. Melinda described her career journey as follows: *"So, I think it was a lot of highs and a lot of lows, but it wasn't normal. Like it was really almost bipolar."* In facing many obstacles in her journey to obtain a professional qualification, Melinda had come to an important insight:

Because, I think, I had unrealistic expectations from life. So, this process of not, I almost want to say not getting what I wanted, forced me to re-evaluate and see, oh, but I have too high expectations with regards to myself and the world and everything. So, and that's making me really unhappy.

Although Melinda was not employed at the time of the interview, she later learned that she had been accepted for an internship at a large psychiatric hospital in the new year. Perhaps this made it easier for her to, in retrospect, appreciate the hardships in her journey. Melinda recognised how this journey had shaped her:

I think hard times makes things actually more rewarding when you actually get to the endpoint. So, I don't think I'll look back on the journey and not like it. I think there will be parts of it that I would like to forget, that I think, overall, I think it was a nice journey… So, I think it's almost like when you read a book and you don't look at the book just by chapter, by chapter, but you look at the whole book, and there's a lot of books that I've read that's like that, like, you hate one chapter, you want to skip it, but, at the end of the book, you're like, "Oh no, it was kind of a really nice book."

5.2 Narrative Structure

After considering the uniqueness of every story, the focus now turns to the narrative structure, illustrated in Figure 3, which provided a way of connecting all the participants' stories. When comparing the individual meaning narratives, common focal points emerged that were relayed by all the participants. I plotted these focal points on a graph to indicate how it signifies progression and regression towards the participants' intended careers. Lines that curve upwards symbolise progressive plotlines while downward curves suggest regressive plotlines. The unemployment plotline, for instance, indicates a steep regression,

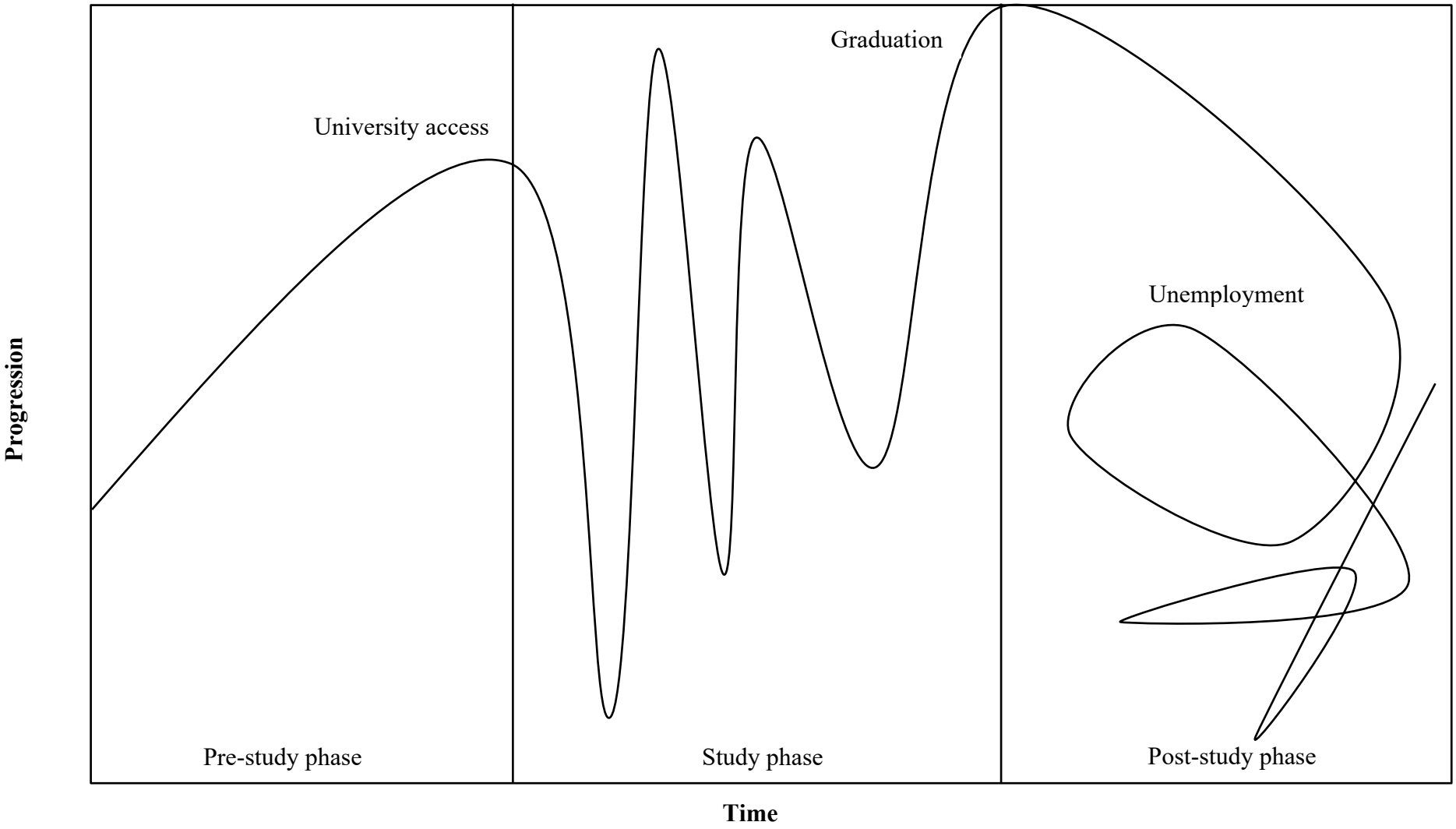

Figure 3. An illustration of the progression and regression that is a common narrative structure of the various stories.

followed by a spiral of progression and regression as the participants dealt with disappointments but also searched for new opportunities to achieve their career aspirations. Temporally, the structure is divided into three phases, namely pre-study, study, and post-study. Each story starts with the decision to pursue a specific career, then continues with participants entering university to complete their qualifications, and concludes with how they had to negotiate unemployment until the time of the research interview. Each of these phases includes various narrative elements (described in Section 4.6.1) that create context and show how they perceived meaning.

5.2.1 Pre-study phase

Even though the research focus was on unemployment, the career narrative starts from the time when the participants first made the choice to further their studies at a university. Exploring how the participants came to a career choice yielded valuable information on what they found significant, which shaped how they expected their lives to be enriched. The reason for choosing to further their studies had been influenced by a specific context, which was informed by family values and needs, but also perceptions of greater society. The value they had hoped to achieve can contribute insights into the sense of being insignificant they experienced during unemployment. For the participants, their contexts framed the purpose that propelled them to further their studies.

5.2.1.1 Backdrops

The backdrops that featured in the participants' lives provided the information that informed their decision to enter university. They emphasised the significant role their families had played in their choice to pursue a university qualification, as well as the field of study. When keeping in mind that they had to make a career choice that would influence the rest of their lives around the age of 18, the participants having asked for guidance from family seems sensible. Family members' opinions were also influenced by beliefs commonly held by the community and socio-economic realities.

For many of the participants, furthering their education was, first and foremost, about the economic prosperity they had hoped would follow on a university qualification. Funani, Akani, Tsepiso, Dimpho, and Hlanganani shared the dire living circumstances of their families, which made them feel a strong responsibility to work in order to provide for them financially. Funani's narrative illustrated the tension between interest in a particular field and

choosing a career that will ensure financial stability. Whereas Funani chose to follow her passion, Phatu was convinced by the belief of her community that studying to become a lawyer was one of the few jobs that would secure financial prosperity. Even the participants with more affluent families recognised the desire not to be a burden, and to earn their own income.

Further informing the backdrop is the fact that many of the participants were first-generation students. These participants were the first in their families to have access to university, and consequently felt a strong obligation to seize the opportunity and achieve what had been unattainable before. For example, Phatu desired to achieve more in her life than her parents had been able to do. In a context where it is rare to go to university, Zanele recognised her good fortune:

> *For me, it was a privilege… It's like I'm unique to come to university, yes. But then, it was the happiest moment for me to come here… because of most people wanted to be at this university, but they couldn't.*

In contrast, because she came from a more privileged background, going to university was the obvious next step for Melinda. Albeit in a different manner, her choice of career was also influenced by her context: *"Because I come from a family that's — everyone's in really tense careers like engineering and medicine and financial actuarial sciences. So, I think there was always this thing, almost this narrative in my family."* Melinda's initial choice to become a doctor was better aligned with the prestigious careers of her family members than a degree in humanities. She also acknowledged how her family's success had reinforced her expectations:

> *Say you come from a really, really rich family, and then you go to work and you only get paid — just going to make something up — R5 000 a month, you will be like, "I'm better than this, I'm not doing this." So, and you will be unhappy about that opportunity that you got, because you're used to something more, and you expected more, and, actually, world of work — our families didn't prepare us that well, I think, because, when you start working, you don't get a lot of money.*

5.2.1.2 Decision of study field

All the participants could offer a memory or narrative of how they had chosen their careers. This choice is a significant point in the narrative, because a career plot could have a substantial influence on the direction of a person's life narrative. Some participants had had a clear idea of the career they wanted to pursue. For instance, even while doing promotional work, Akani realised that she could not resist acting in an educational capacity. Other participants' narratives took a few unexpected turns before ending with a fulfilling career choice. In the case of Phatu, it was only after she had failed her first year in law that she started exploring other options and discovered her interest in geography. Tsepiso gained practical experience, and then realised that he wanted a job through which he could invest in others.

The participants chose to view their chosen professions as a calling, not just a means to earn a living. Giving up on the idea of studying medicine made it possible for Melinda to express her career intent: *"It gives me purpose to help empower people … to help people that really can't do a lot for themselves, help them to get to a place where they can. I like that."* Ian also emphasised the importance of having a fulfilling occupation: *"Well, work, besides salary, should be something that fulfils you, mentally or physically, or whichever type of person you are."* Miriam's curious and investigative nature was the driving force behind her choice to become a psychologist. She indicated a desire to understand human behaviour, and felt an obligation to become more knowledgeable and advocate realistic perceptions about mental health. Due to differences in personalities, interests, and values, the significance related to their choices was unique for every participant. What would add significance to the participants' lives was not limited to their career interests, but included the progression they expected once they earned a salary.

5.2.1.3 Purpose

The participants shared how they had expected that completing their chosen qualification and working in their field of choice would allow them to realise a greater purpose. It was this purpose that drove them to seek opportunities to enter university. The goals connected to their purpose were either self-focused or others-focused, but all the participants mentioned both. Self-focused pursuits revolved around the theme of independence and creating a better life for themselves through greater financial stability.

However, the participants also reported more eudemonic goals. The prospect of performing stimulating work compelled Melinda to pursue her dream:

> *So, maybe it's just a drive thing … but, I think the thing that I'm doing this for a reason. It's not just a degree that you do and then it's, like, "Urgh, now I'm going to sit behind a computer and I'm going to do the same thing in and out every day." It's really something different, and it's something stimulating. It's something that can change the world if you do it, you know, if you really put your heart and soul into it.*

Others-focused goals were influenced by context, and the participants who were from poorer socio-economic backgrounds viewed providing for their families as an important purpose. However, their goals also included the greater community. Ian, Miriam, Akani, Danai, Zanele, Melinda, and Tsepiso all entered professions aimed at offering help to others in some manner. Like Phatu, Dimpho mentioned the objective of educating the people in her neighbourhood with the knowledge she would gain from her studies:

> *My dream in studying horticulture was to, maybe, one day, have my own garden, a garden centre… Like, from where I come from, these things of botanical gardens, I've never seen one, and, like, I think it will be a great thing if, like, we have such things, so that the learners will just come — or anyone will just come — and learn about plants.*

5.2.2 Study phase

While studying, the participants had had the purpose of completing their degrees and then securing a job. The narratives reflected times when they moved closer or further from their objectives. To remain focused on their purpose, the participants had to believe in their ability to overcome the stumbling blocks they encountered. Family members and other characters were described as significant support structures during their student years. After studying hard, overcoming challenges, and making sacrifices, graduation was a highlight for all the participants.

5.2.2.1 Progressive and regressive plots

The participants shared the challenges they had faced while studying that had turned into regressive plots, taking them further away from their aim of graduating. Dealing with

practical challenges like securing food, accommodation, and funding for class fees, textbooks, and transport interrupted their focus on their studies. Akani shared some of the stressors she had had to deal with:

> *And then, with the university, you stress a lot. You stress a lot. Sometimes, they need this certain book, and then you go to Van Schaik's[5], you think, "Oh, maybe it's R100," and they're like, "Oh, this book is 450." You're like, "450?" "Yes, 450." And then you're like, "Okay, maybe I'll get a used one, a second-hand book, somewhere at the gate."*

Six of the participants mentioned having failed modules, which lengthened their studies. Ian and Tsepiso, having failed the year, entered the labour market, and later returned to their studies with greater focus. Not having an interest in the programmes they were initially enrolled in caused Akani and Phatu to fail. While Phatu changed course, Akani finished her management diploma, only to enrol for qualification in education after that. Failing modules indicates a regressive plot, but the participants were able to initiate progressive plots and gain momentum towards achieving their goals. Having had a taste of what his work life might entail motivated Dimpho. She shared the following memory:

> *And then again, during the practicals, during the in-service training, there was this garden show where the young landscapers and the experienced landscapers will come together, and then we'll design your own gardens, and then you compete. So, like during that time, we were able to win the best water-wise garden, yeah.*

The intersecting progressive and regressive plots indicate that the participants' narratives did not always unfold in a linear or coherent way. University studies also offered surprising benefits that contributed to propelling participants on progressive plots. Dimpho stated: *"I was so inspired to see that, like, this thing, it's not only about learning, it's about, like, exploring your mind, taking — just thinking out of the box…"* Tanya described her time at university as a *"learning curve"*: *"It's fun. It's a time of exploration…. And it's also a great time to… experience who you are, what you're capable of challenging yourself."*

[5] Name of store that sells text books on campus.

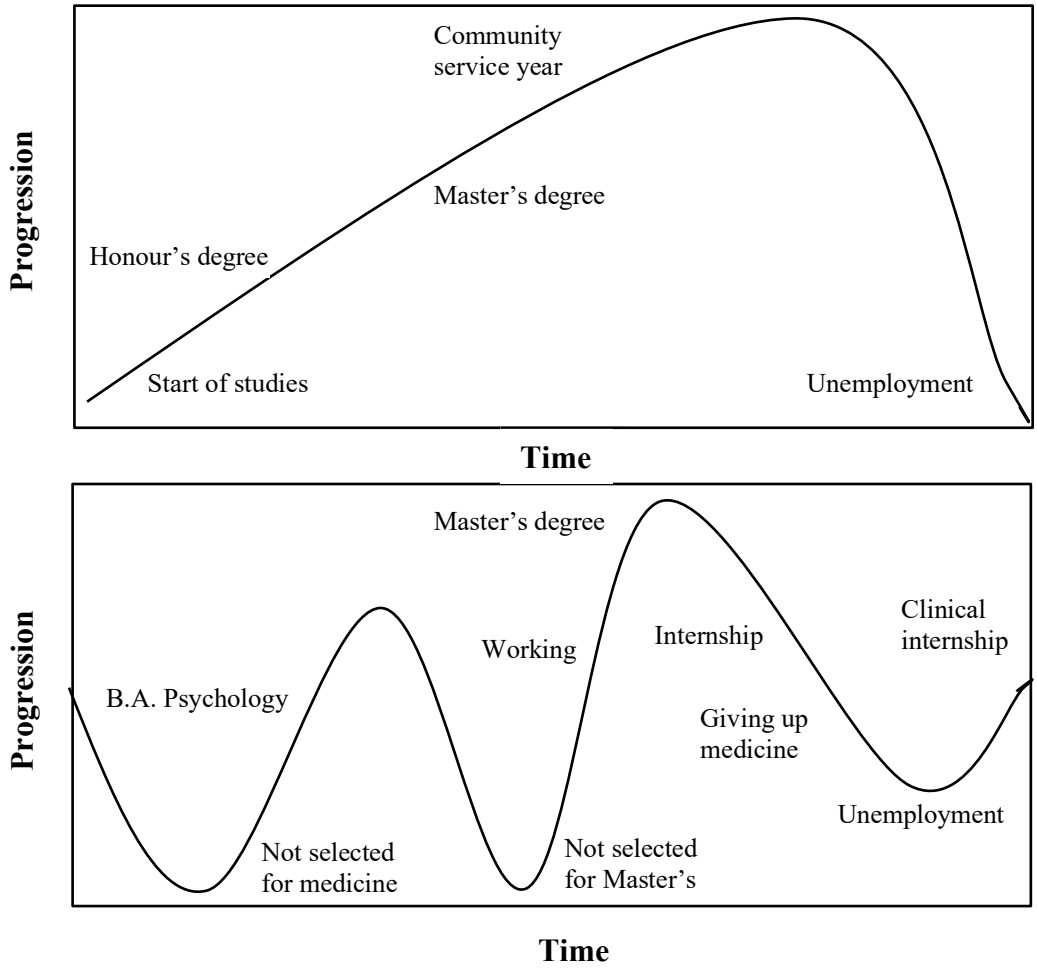

Figure 7. Miriam's plot is illustrated in the top figure while Melinda's plot is indicated below.

Tsepiso enjoyed being exposed to people from different backgrounds and learning how to work with them.

Miriam and Melinda both qualified as psychologists; however, their plots are significantly different (see Figure 4). For Miriam, the journey to becoming a psychologist followed a steady progression up to completion of her Master's degree and working as a psychologist. Melinda's journey in psychology, however, started only because she was not selected for medical school, and continued in a *"bipolar"* way. Being accepted into a Master's degree programme after she had not been selected the year before was a high point for Melinda. Experiencing more regressive plots might have equipped Melinda to handle the disappointment of unemployment better than Miriam did.

5.2.2.2 Agency of main characters to maintain their purpose

With multiple regressive plots present, it is easy to imagine that participants could have given up on their goals. However, they showed agency and dedication towards their studies, and successfully graduated in the end. After realising that she had no interest in chemical engineering and that she had to work extremely hard just to pass, Danai had to find greater motivation to continue working towards her goal:

> *There was a moment I thought I'm not built for chemical engineering, but I just had to do it, that's all I can say really. I just had to do it. So, I gave it my best. Sometimes, I felt like this is not for me, I can't do this. I'm not strong enough to be able to do this. I'm not capable to do this. Then I was like, well, I'm here. Even if I land in the fifties* [referring to academic marks between 50% and 60%]*, it's fine.*

Many of the participants described character strengths that had made them persevere. Ian referred to a past event that he believed had made him a more determined person:

> *The only thing I can think of is that I was born, not prematurely, but... I was born really, really small, and I had a few complications. And because of that, I've been told that I've always been a fighter, where I just carried on. And it's not something that I think about. It's just that I just do it because, what's the other option?"*

The participants had developed strategies to improve their focus. Having the purpose of becoming a teacher drove Akani to implement new strategies to achieve her goal:

> *Even though it wasn't fun, but I had to, I had to. I knew that I had to work hard to pass these modules. So, I bought my calendar, put it on my wall, just put my dates. This — my assignments were due on these dates, and then my exams… Whenever I'm free, I won't sit at home, because I end up maybe being on social media or watching TV, or just maybe being outside. So, I decided, you know, when I'm free, I just woke up, like, I'm going to work, take my books, and then go to the library.*

Working hard to achieve their goals meant that the participants had to make sacrifices. Miriam explained: *"I sacrificed a lot of things, being social life and seeing family, because I thought to myself, the end goal, it will all be worth it in the end. If I just get to this point."* Zanele also shared how she had avoided romantic relationships: *"Like, I didn't want anything*

to disturb me or disrupt me to study here. Like, also with the cut of relationships and so forth. I didn't want that. I only wanted to be single and focus on my studies." Dedication such as this made it possible for the participants to succeed.

5.2.2.3 Supportive characters

Even though the participants became more independent while at university, other characters continued to have a significant influence on their lives. In fact, these characters not only informed the purpose of their studies, but also urged them to persist in achieving their goals. Participants' parents played an especially important role in encouraging them. Some of the participants were motivated by the need to protect their parents against disappointment. For this reason, Akani complied with her parents' request to finish a management diploma before moving on to her desired diploma in education. Even when Danai realised that she did not enjoy her field of study, it was still important to her to not let her parents down:

> *And you can't go back home and tell your parents that, four years later, … "I haven't got my degree, but I want to change." After paying so much money, you don't want to break that news to anyone.*

Not all the participants' family members were equally supportive. For the sake of saving on traveling expenses, both Zanele and Dimpho had stayed with their aunts. For families with limited means to accommodate their children elsewhere, this arrangement would seem ideal. However, the burden of an extra person on household expenses resulted in hostility. Dimpho shared her experience:

> *I was staying with my aunt and her child, so, like, it was tough, because, like, sometimes, when I was busy studying at night, she will say, like, I'm using too much electricity. So, like, I must just switch off the lights and then use candles, like, and then, like, I'll go to library and then came back late, and then still find that nobody cooks. So, like, I had to start and cook. Yeah, it was really challenging.*

Aside from their families, some participants also had others who encouraged them. Some participants mentioned receiving help from fellow students to improve their academic work. Knowing that her mentor trusted her gave Akani confidence in her competence as an

educator. On a spiritual level, some of the participants were also inspired by their belief in a higher power, as Danai indicated:

> *There's someone high above you who's there to help you through things more. So, I think that was my comfort, you know, to say, "Okay, He's there, He won't leave me." And reading the Word helped me each time. It helped. Because, even, sometimes, it was the only thing I had to hold onto, because family is not always there, and you can't always be calling people that — when you're depressed, and, sometimes, all they can do for you is see and pray.*

5.2.2.4 The high point of graduation

Graduation was the last part of the study phase, and was considered a high point by the participants. This marked the achievement of their goal of completing a qualification that would get them closer to fulfilling the purpose that brought them to university in the first place. Furthermore, the graduation ceremony was a public acknowledgment of their achievement. For Phatu, graduating meant she had proven herself to her family:

> *When you grow up in a house with siblings and your siblings seem to make it, you know, they don't have struggles, so to say. And you're the one that struggles, and everybody's always saying, "Maybe she's not smart enough. Maybe this is what's wrong with her…" So, I felt like, yes, I finally proved the point that I can do it as well.*

When Danai thought back on her graduation, she remembered feeling great relief and enjoying the moment for which she had worked so hard:

> *Because, when you think that you're actually not going to make it, when you're just there and it's all dark, you don't see any light. I thought I will never make it, but when I did, I was so relieved. I felt like a burden had been lifted off my shoulders, and, you know, when you see your family is happy. They even had a party for me, and I was like, "No, I don't need it." They were like, "No, no, no, we're going to do it." So, everyone was happy and excited about it. So, I was also happy, and I was touched.*

Graduation was an opportunity for the participants to share their achievements with their families and the people who had supported and encouraged them to complete their

studies. When Tsepiso told the story of his graduation, it was clear how much joy it had brought to his life: *"It was worth all the hassle that I went through for the three years. It was worth it. It was quite an experience for me. I can't even begin to explain it."*

5.2.3 Post-study phase

The highlight of graduation made the disappointment of not finding work more acute. A regressive turn in the narratives followed when unemployment interfered with the purpose the participants had anticipated to fulfil after graduation. The purpose and significance they had while studying were replaced by incoherence as they faced a loss of meaning. The participants responded differently, but they all made efforts to establish meaning in a different manner.

5.2.3.1 The disappointment of unemployment

The participants started applying for positions in the labour market with great optimism. They all indicated that they had expected to find work after graduation. Tsepiso stated: *"Well, I expected to get at least a good-paying job. That is what I expected, yeah. That is the whole reason behind me actually going to school."* In their minds, completing the degree was the challenge, and employment would be the reward for their hard work. In this regard, Zanele said: *"I can imagine the struggle that I went through during my studies, and I thought that, after graduating, things would be much easier; it would be fine."* Tanya had also had optimistic expectations: *"I thought it was going to be a friendlier work environment, where people are more accommodating towards people that have just finished their studies, understanding that they still need experience."* Miriam told of her disappointment when her expectations were not met: *"We become so discouraged, because we think it is linear that the hard times are before the education, or the hard times is during the education, but after the education?"* With regard to expectations, Melinda made the following observation:

> *And I know we all are like super unrealistic when we're younger: "I'm going to be a billionaire when I'm 30 years old. I'm going to have a Ph.D. when I'm that age," and so on. So, you have these big dreams… So, I think I thought I would have had children by now, for example, or I would have liked to have a baby, or would have liked to buy a new car, or, you know, small things and big things. Not having an income actually just pushes you to think, "Oh, crap, I'm not really where I thought I would be ten years ago, because, ten years ago, I thought I would be a, b, c, d, e, and*

now I'm not." Now I'm unemployed and sitting at home and watching TV and going to the gym.

Some participants offered insights into the origin of their expectations. Melinda believed that older generations had contributed to the build-up of these expectations. The older people she referred to were white South Africans who, during apartheid, entered a less competitive labour market, at a time when it was more viable for a household to survive a single income. Melinda also implicated educational systems:

I think the school system does that as well. I think university does that as well. You know that day when you go to your graduation and they're like, 'Go out there and make money, be amazing'… So, I think it is something, it's a narrative out there. Like, if you have a degree, you're going to get a job, or you're going to do well for yourself… Like, you have this thing where, if you study and you do well, you will be rewarded… If you fail, you will never get a job. And that's not true. I know a lot of people who never went to university and they have jobs.

Tanya believed that young adults' exposure to the media was another cause of unrealistic expectations:

Something that also warps our expectations is all of the media. I think, because we have so much more series about people in certain professions, you get a really warped idea of what it should be like. The media is definitely not necessarily helping us realise what it's like.

5.2.3.2 Lack of purpose

After the fullness of their student experiences, the participants experienced the feeling of emptiness accompanying unemployment very intensely. Commitment to her profession and the joy she experienced while working made the loss of purpose especially difficult for Miriam:

And, as much as I want to convince myself, of course I'm not my career, I'm my own person, and I'm still my own person apart from it, but it's been a big part of my life, you know, and especially from where I come from, and… now, yes, I have the degrees, but I feel as though it's not enough … if I can't do what I always wanted to do…

Looking back on her year of unemployment, Melinda recognised how difficult it had been for her not to be able to work towards substantial goals: *"It was really depressing. It was really bad for me. Like, this year was really hard. I think it was the most useless I felt, ever…"* The lack of progression the participants felt during unemployment resulted in a sense of purposelessness. Ian described this feeling as follows: *"I'm just doing my own thing, looking for work, helping out where I can with family errands and what not, but I miss having a routine and a proper sense of purpose."* Without a specific purpose as a drive, Ian mentioned the difficulty he experienced in initiating and finishing daily goals:

> *It gets a bit boring. You feel like, okay, life's getting a bit down and stuff, and I don't have energy for exercising and stuff, so, then going, "Cool, you know. I want to get back in shape, and I want to do this and that", and then the second I'm actually like, "Cool, I'm going to go exercise" and — no,* [chuckles] *not going to happen.*

When considering the drive that all the participants displayed to finish their qualification, the hopelessness they felt during unemployment is especially concerning. Melinda shared how the hope she had had while employed in an administrative position had faded over the last year:

> *There's still something, maybe bigger, that's going to happen in the future, but, this year, I kind of felt like this is my life now* [chuckles]. *So, I just think — and still, even though that was a bad or not a nice job, it was still something to do. Like, there was something that kept me busy. I had stuff to do, and it took time. So, I think, this year, what made it really hard, is that I had so much time and nothing to do that occupied my mind almost.*

5.2.3.3 Insignificance and failing as an adult

Their failure to achieve the milestones they had envisioned became especially prominent when the participants compared themselves to others. Ian's confidence was affected when he thought about his peers' lives:

> *I guess it's just a sense of pride that I don't have at the moment. Besides, getting my degree, I haven't earned my own, per se. Because, I mean, I'm 28. I'm looking at my friends buying houses, buying cars, getting married, making families, and growing up, where I'm still stuck living under my dad's roof.*

Even simple things like not being able to pay their own way when socialising with friends or a romantic partner caused frustration. Dimpho explained:

> *If I'm around my friends, they'll be like, "Dimpho, let's go out. Like, let's go out for a movie on a Friday." And then I'm, like, "The money is not enough." And, basically, you need popcorn, drinks. It means, yo, I can't make it. So, I get tired of just preparing to be alone.*

Even though she knew her friends would not mind paying for her, Akani would rather make up an excuse and not attend. Funani explained that she became tired of explaining why she is still not financially independent after graduating. To avoid being faced with embarrassment and failure, many of the participants started avoiding certain social settings. Ironically, it was during a time when they could have benefitted from support that they spent more time alone. Melinda shared how her bruised occupational identity influenced how she compared herself to others:

> *And it really influenced my relationship with other people as well, because I saw — I put people on these pedestals… So, I think I really compared myself a lot this year, and I don't feel like I really did that before. I think that was — it was the first time I did that.*

5.2.3.4 Finding a new purpose and re-establishing hope

The participants shared how they had learned to focus on new areas of purpose during their time of unemployment. Melinda explained that she invested more energy in relational roles: *"But, I think, my family, my friends, like, we're more than just our jobs. So, I think I was a really, really good housewife this year."* Fulfilling the role of housewife substituted Tanya's career aspirations, and she shared that falling pregnant had marked a new purpose:

> *If I wasn't pregnant right now, I might still have more issues with what is my purpose, what am I doing every day? Challenging myself more. I probably would have gotten some kind of job, trying to be more involved somehow.*

Except for Tanya, none of the participants gave up on applying for positions, which suggests continued motivation. Miriam proffered an analogy to illustrate her sense of being lost, but also having the desire to continue looking for employment:

At times, I feel as though I'm just in this dark tunnel, and I'm just walking forward. I know where I came from, I don't know what's there, but I know I came from just walking forward, and there needs to be a light somewhere. So, that's where I'm walking, basically, of just walking, and, to me, that's better than doing nothing, better than just sitting still.

The discomfort accompanying the meaning loss the participants experienced pushed them to reconsider previous dreams and establish a new purpose. Here, new storylines unfolded as the participants shared how they had regained focus and established new goals. In Miriam's analogy, surprising opportunities gave her the sense that she was still progressing toward something meaningful:

I would say, from my tunnel, there happened to be odd doors there. So, I've been feeling my way around. "Oh, my goodness! There's a door within this tunnel!" And you'd open the door and, you know, there would be a sense of just to keep yourself updated. Maybe you could do this, that could assist you more in applying for a job or moving forward, or just getting connections and people who know something.

The hopelessness the participants experienced from time to time did not make them lose sight of the purpose that had propelled them to continue with further studies. In fact, this became the purpose that drove them to continue applying for employment. Hlanganani explained:

What keep me motivated, it's like, it's the situation at home. That's what. They keep me going, and then this: I have a little daughter, she's four years old. She's going to school next year. So, you know, it's a big responsibility. So, that's why I, like, I don't give up. Whenever they don't even give me feedback, I don't give up, I keep on applying.

The participants continued to find new ways of obtaining employment. Ian explained that he was trying to learn and improve from the feedback he received from failed applications, and that he wanted to appear more professional. Akani was attending courses that would improve her teaching skills, and also show recruiters that she was not lazy. Social media platforms were also often used to receive communication about new positions. Phatu discussed her plans to develop a blog to showcase and market her skills. Setting new goals to

guide their daily actions contributed to a greater sense of purpose, which helped the participants to feel hopeful again. Tsepiso explained the meaning of hope in his life:

> *Hope tells me that there's a second time. ... Hope tells me that, if you didn't get it, it was not meant for you. Hope tells me that there's a better tomorrow. Hope tells me that, as long as you're breathing, you can still make it.*

5.2.3.5 Restoring significance

A strategy that all the participants followed was to find new activities to occupy their time, which served a dual purpose. First, having a new focus distracted them from the anxiety and hopelessness associated with unemployment. Funani illustrated this when she referred to the volunteering project she and her friends had initiated at schools:

> *It was keeping my mind out of this thing of becoming unemployed… So, we have to take those kids and teach them, and, when we see that this kid doesn't have shoes, we have to go to town and ask for the donations so that we can buy him or her shoes. So, it kept me busy.*

Second, the participants restored their sense of significance through activities that made them feel like they mattered in some way. To feel valued, the participants invested in other people. In fact, many of the participants came to appreciate that being unemployed provided them with an opportunity to spend more time with other people. For instance, Phatu recognised that she had more time with her children because she was not working:

> *Going back to my kids, I'm thinking, I wouldn't be able to spend this much time with them if I was at work, you know. So, I'm here, I'm available, I'm able to do some of the things that I wouldn't do with them if I had to work.*

Melinda tried to prove her value as a wife by taking on more of the household responsibilities:

> *I felt like I had to make him see that I still count, that I still contribute in a way that's not necessarily with money, but in the house, which is really sad that it happens. But, I think it happens to a lot of people that stay at home, especially women, because you want to show your husband, okay, I'm still valuable, I still contribute.*

Another way in which the participants restored their sense of significance was through the support of the people in their lives. Similar to the support they sought while studying, the participants reached out to people who would comfort and encourage them. Akani's mentor continued to make her feel valued:

> *Okay, that means I'm on the right track. That means I'm doing well. So, whenever I come to the school to visit her, she would just go tell everyone … "One day, one day, you will say, 'I told you so'. This girl, she's going to be a great teacher." So, it's like, that means she really, really, really believes in me. So, I have to push.*

Ian shared the support he received from his friends, who were very encouraging and optimistic about his prospects of finding work. Zanele found that others who were unemployed were most sympathetic to her situation, and she found comfort in spending time with them. Similarly, Funani felt less inconsequential knowing that her friends were also struggling to find employment.

5.2.3.6 Reflecting to obtain coherence

In an attempt to make sense of their unemployment, the participants looked for ways to re-establish coherence. Reflection was required to consider their expectations and how these compared to the reality of unemployment. Their reflection processes took place with varying intensity. Miriam, Phatu, Zanele, and Tsepiso indicated that they had gained significant new insights during the research interview. Melinda and Tanya mentioned considerable previous reflection, and indicated that they had not gained new insights during the interview. Danai indicated how being focused on completing her degree had not allowed her much time for reflection, and that it was only after completing her degree that she took the time to pause and reconsider:

> *My life was on hold until I got the paper. So, the minute I got my degree, that's when I started thinking, "What now?"* [chuckles]*... So, when I eventually got it, I was like, "Okay, now we've stopped running. What should happen now?" So that's when I decided, okay fine, let me sit down and start thinking about what I want to do.*

Reflection assisted the participants to re-examine and adjust previously held expectations, which is an effective way to experience greater coherence. With the new information they received during unemployment, many of the participants reconsidered their

beliefs about a university qualification and the labour market. Miriam had to rethink her initial perceptions of education: *"So, the slogan of the key to success is education, to me, now … doesn't make sense anymore, because it's not."* New insights also made the participants aware of gaps in their employability. Phatu shared: *"University doesn't teach you practicality. Yeah, they just teach you what's written in the textbooks, and when you're thrown outside in the world, it's completely different to what you were learning at school."*

Another strategy to re-establish coherence was that to which the participants attributed their unemployment. That they may have doubted their own competence is one explanation, a state that could easily turn into hopelessness. Although they did have such thoughts, the participants searched for alternative causes, such as the larger unemployment problem; this protected their self-esteem. For example, Phatu attributed her unemployment to external factors:

> *I didn't look at it as I'm not getting a job because of what I studied. I'm looking at it as I'm not getting a job because of the state of the economy. It's not me. Yeah, it's South Africa, it's the economy, because, instead of sitting down … I do my research, and I check, "Okay, fine, what are the stats saying?" Yeah, so, I am looking around, and I see like, okay, I only have an undergrad and postgraduate certificate. People that have Master's degrees are also unemployed, you know, and there's people that are being offloaded from work. So, really, it's not about what I studied, it's just because people don't have money to pay. That's why they're not hiring anybody right now.*

During the process of reflecting and looking at their whole narrative, the participants also highlighted lessons they had learned. New insights helped them to build new meaning frameworks. The experience of unemployment made Tsepiso realise the importance of recognising and using opportunities:

> *Had I known life the way that I do now, I was going to grab that opportunity with both hands, and I was going to run with it, and I was going to make it happen, but it was a learning curve for me… It was a rare opportunity for me, because a lot of people, after matriculating, they don't get such an opportunity to come and study, but I played with it, that opportunity, even though I got my second chance. But I definitely would have done things different.*

The participants showed a tendency to make positive meaning from the hardships they had suffered. Melinda admitted that she had a need to find reason and purpose in her unemployment, which she found in taking care of people who needed her assistance:

> *And, I felt like, I know that it's just looking for meaning as well, like telling myself that, maybe this had to happen, this year had to happen, so that I could help them, because I really don't know what they would have done if I wasn't around.*

The greater coherence they found could further inform how they approach future situations. Many of them said they felt stronger and more prepared for challenges as a result of creating coherence from being unemployed. Danai stated:

> *And I thought if, maybe if it was a smooth ride with a good academic record without any bruises or scars on my ego, I would probably want to go further and further, but, not that failing is a bad thing — though it's horrible — but I learned things. I learned something from the failures I experienced in my life.*

5.3 Conclusion

Meaning is subjective, and meaning themes can be better appreciated if these are situated within each participant's greater career narrative. This chapter provided the background to the unemployment narratives, providing insight into how the participants derived, maintained, and sought meaning. The similarities between the narratives were also highlighted. Before entering university, the participants' career choices indicated what they and their families deemed significant. The participants were all driven by a purpose in furthering their studies, which motivated them to persevere despite the challenges they faced at university. After the success of graduation with the hopes of a bright future, unemployment was a significant disappointment. The purposelessness of employment was not something that the participants were prepared for after having worked hard to complete their qualifications. They also shared the insignificance they felt in not fulfilling their own expectations or those of their families, peers, and greater society. Due to the discomfort caused by this loss of meaning, all the participants employed strategies to re-establish purpose, significance, and coherence in their lives. Although the participants reverted back to their original purpose through different foci, they all found new sources of meaning. In the next chapter, the most significant themes are discussed with cognisance of the literature review provided in Chapters 2 and 3.

Chapter 6: Integration and Conclusion

In this chapter, the findings are considered in relation to relevant literature. I will discuss the following themes in greater depth: the incoherence of unemployment after graduation, the loss of meaning during unemployment, the meaning of being a young adult during unemployment, and maintaining meaning during unemployment. The value and limitations of the study are outlined, together with suggestions on how the research design can be improved for similar research endeavours in the future. Recommendations are made on how the findings can be used to inform the practices of universities, non-governmental organisations, and psychologists, to ensure the provision of optimal support for unemployed young adults. The convergence of unemployment, young adulthood, and meaning offers a unique contribution to theory on the topic.

6.1 The Incoherence of Unemployment After Graduation

In the following section, I explore how the participants' expectations were shaped through interactions with their external environment. The section concludes with a discussion of whether the incoherence associated with unemployment indicates the need for initiatives aimed at adjusting the expectations of young adult graduates.

6.1.1 Origins of expectations

According to the paradigm of the study, people cannot be understood in a cultural vacuum (Bruner, 1991). To establish a holistic view of people, it is important to consider the role of other characters in their lives. The number of choices faced by young adults can be overwhelming (Skaletz & Seiffge-Krenke, 2010), and the guidance of others to direct their sense of purpose could be helpful (Kashdan & McKnight, 2009). What is regarded as values worth pursuing is also attached to their era, societal beliefs, and adult role models (Twenge & Kasser, 2013). The participants explained how beliefs present in their communities or families contributed to how they pictured their transition to adulthood and employment. Cultural beliefs are nurtured from childhood, which is the beginning of a plot that will shape expectations and choices to come.

An expectation shared by all the participants was the belief that university would be a stepping stone to achieving occupational success, and that it would result in their becoming accomplished adults. This was also the sentiment of the #FeesMustFall movement, which

suggests that it is a widespread conviction (Msila, 2016). The participants' choice of academic programme was also influenced by characters in their lives. In a study amongst black African South African students, Mhlongo and O'Neill (2013) found that families from lower economic statuses pressure young adults to choose academic programmes that provide access to greater career opportunities, and also discourage them from enrolling in programmes that take longer to complete.

Families have varying expectations regarding their children's responsibility to provide the family with financial support. In South Africa, the term *Black tax* refers to the financial contributions that emerging middle-class black adults are expected to make to their families (Mangoma & Wilson-Prangley, 2019). In line with theories regarding emerging adults and Millennials that recognise the impact of changing societies, the South African context has an impact on the expectations associated with young adulthood. University qualifications may therefore be pursued, not only for the benefit of the student, but also that of the student's family. Graduates are expected to honour this social norm in return for the social capital they received to achieve success at university (Magubane, 2016), and to address the effects of persisting racial disadvantages that originated from South Africa's history (Sibiya, 2018). The present study found that the families of black African participants from lower socio-economic circumstances held higher expectations than the other participants' families.

Young adults often rely on their families' guidance, and use their feedback in creating expectations and setting goals (Carlson, 2014). In the present study, multiple references to their parents illustrated the important role these characters continued to play in their lives. However, the participants also came to realise that their parents had grown up in a different era, and could not prepare them for the transitions they had to face. Parents of first-generation students are in a particularly challenging position, as they cannot rely on personal experience to guide their children. As the participants became exposed to more voices outside of their original community and core family, they had to incorporate more and new information, which further influenced what they anticipated. Exposure to university life, other characters, and media can also play a role in shaping expectations (Côté, 1997). The values that had influenced the participants' choice of career included independence, occupational excellence, being of service to others, and financial stability.

6.1.2 Optimistic expectations and the South African labour market

Since they had no first-hand experience of transition to the labour market, the participants' expectations were skewed towards hopefulness. Young adulthood is known as a time of great optimism, especially with regard to entering the labour market (Arnett, 2016; De Hauw & De Vos, 2010; Ng et al., 2010). Janoff-Bulman (1989) refer to a *schema of invulnerability*, which is a belief that the world is mostly just and controllable, without consideration of the possibility of suffering. J. E. Anderson, Kay, and Fitzimons (2013) suggest that people generally hold a positive perception of the world and themselves. However, this optimism could give way to discouragement once graduates endeavour to enter the South African labour market.

The participants' incoherence became stronger as the time of unemployment prolonged, and they had to acknowledge that their previously held expectations had been unrealistic. According to the literature, people will feel compelled to adjust meaning frameworks when faced with incoherence (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; C. L. Park, 2010; Proulx & Heine, 2006). Unfortunately, many of the participants started doubting their competence, in an attempt to explain their failure to find employment despite holding a degree. While some research is concerned with the values that attract Millennials to the workplace (Lyons et al., 2012; Ng et al., 2010; Twenge & Kasser, 2013), South African young adults might not have the luxury of considering an ideal work environment. Instead, the desperation to find work could result in unsatisfactory employment choices.

Although the participants mentioned times of doubt and hopelessness, they noted that they had made attempts to re-establish confidence in themselves by finding alternative explanations for their lack of unemployment. The participants recognised the role of the downturn of the South African economy and the high unemployment rate as part of the reason why they were struggling to secure employment. Understanding that unemployment is a fate suffered by many young adults could provide consolation to those who are in a similar position. The participants also changed their perception of a university education being the key to career success. When considering the investments and consequent expectations of graduates, there is a risk of growing disillusionment about the worth of a university qualification (Pauw et al., 2008). The participants acknowledged that, in retrospect, they had not been sufficiently prepared for the realities of the labour market and

the world of work during their studies. This indicates that the discomfort of new realisations about contextual realities can be beneficial if it results in improved self-esteem.

6.1.3 The benefits and risks of optimistic expectations

Creating more realistic or pessimistic expectations is one way to avoid the disappointment and incoherence associated with unmet expectations. However, there appears to be an important benefit to optimistic expectations. A study by Van Tilburg and Igou (2018) found that people who anticipate a positive future attach greater meaning to present behaviour that increases the likelihood of achieving greater happiness later on. The foreseen future will thus influence the main character's present position in a narrative. The participants in the present study stated that keeping in mind the purpose of their studies had made it easier to endure the challenges associated with university. This finding is aligned with the expectancy theory of Vroom (1964), which holds that the expected outcome of the envisioned goal is the motivation that drives instrumental behaviours. From the above, it can thus be deduced that greater thought to the possibility of unemployment might result in less effort in academic pursuits.

Individuals do not always have sufficient information with which to create realistic expectations, and disillusionment offers them an opportunity to re-examine the perceptions and meanings they hold (O'Hara, 2011). Accommodating new information and expanding on meaning frameworks can pave the way to more realistic perceptions and expectations, ultimately resulting in personal growth (this is discussed further in Section 6.4.3). However, building new meaning frameworks and finding coherence can be a challenging process, and requires reflection. Furthermore, during a time of growing independence, young adults are compelled to expand their resources to manage disillusionment and establish new expectations (Côté, 2002). Learning to adapt could thus have positive effects later in life when new challenges arise.

6.2 The Loss of Meaning During Unemployment

With regard to the meaning trichotomy (purpose, significance, and coherence) (Martela & Steger, 2016), the participants shared that they had experienced a significant decline in meaning in all three facets. The loss of meaning can be particularly disheartening after the fulfilment of achieving academic success. The strong purpose that drove the participants to complete their studies dissipated, and they were confused about which

behaviours would help them achieve their aspirations. Not being able to invest efforts in worthwhile activities resulted in feelings of insignificance in some. This distress could compel unemployed young adult graduates to engage in attempts at re-establish meaning in their lives.

6.2.1 Life coming to a standstill

In negotiating significant challenges to remain dedicated to their studies, the participants had displayed dedication to becoming a professional in their desired careers. However, having taken all possible steps to find employment only to meet with failure caused a loss of their sense of purpose. The most significant twist in the narratives came as a result of unemployment. When circumstances, such as unemployment, prevent the achievement of personal standards, values, and expectations, feelings of insignificance increase (Martela & Steger, 2016). Paul et al. (2016) found that unemployed individuals report lower realisation of life goals, but this does not subtract from the importance placed on life goals. This was evident in the majority of the narratives in the present study. It can therefore be argued that achieving life goals might be limited or delayed by unemployment, but the prominence of such goals is likely to remain similar.

In the present study, unemployment resulted in a loss of purpose and significance for the participants on two levels, aligned with Jahoda's (1981) latent deprivation theory and Fryer's (1986) emphasis on financial loss. The first loss was related to the latent benefits of employment, with the graduates missing out on the meaning they had hoped to experience in a work environment. With regard to latent benefits, Zechmann and Paul (2019) found that the negative effect of unemployment on mental health are mediated most significantly by the lack of a purpose shared with others. Not being part of a community of professionals can leave unemployed young adult graduates feeling out of touch with the world of work, which could have a negative effect on their career identity. Since meaning provides people with the drive to direct their actions (King et al., 2016), they may start perceiving life as aimless. Not being engaged in activities that provide opportunities for self-expression further contributes to a decreased sense of meaning (Baumeister et al., 2013).

The second loss was associated with the financial inability to take the necessary steps to achieve the purpose that drove them to pursue a professional career in the first place. Correspondingly, Ward and King (2017) identified financial resources as a significant

contributor to meaning, while Baumeister et al. (2013) claim that insufficient funds to fulfil basic needs are related to decreased meaning. From the participants' accounts, it became apparent that a lack of financial security had caused them embarrassment in social interactions with their peers. A significant finding of the present study is the distressing void left by the inability to financially provide for family.

One of the main concerns of existentialism is the difference between the freedom that appears to be slavery and slavery that seems like freedom (Killinger, 1961). The freedom to choose a career and gain entrance to university is in stark contrast to the limitations encountered when attempting to enter the labour market. Furthermore, young adults are robbed of the freedom to gain independence and gain a sense of meaning through employment. If it is assumed that people are in a continuous process of seeking growth (Winston, 2015), unemployment may disrupt self-actualisation. This is especially concerning when considering that finding meaning is a key developmental task for young adults undergoing the transition to employment (Mayseless & Keren, 2013). However, as demonstrated by the participants, freedom of choice can be used to determine alternative responses to their frustrated efforts to secure employment.

6.2.2 Psychological distress associated with regressive plots

The participants noted having felt anxious, depressed, and even suicidal as a result of the distress associated with unemployment. This was perhaps the greatest low in the participants' narratives. Shepherd and Williams (2018) used the term *rock bottom* to illustrate this ultimate point of negativity during unemployment, when people start to believe that the status quo will remain unchanged. During this trying time, the participants recognised their need for help, and half of the participants sought professional assistance in the form of counsellors or psychologists. The present study identified three factors that make unemployed young adults susceptible to decreased psychological functioning.

First, there are vulnerabilities associated with young adulthood as a developmental stage. Shifting roles and demands, coupled with neuroanatomical and hormonal changes, heighten the risk of the onset of psychiatric disorders (Leebens & Williamson, 2017). Not being able to realise personally significant adult commitments can result in despondency. Second, authoritative studies have indicated a correlation between unemployment and poor psychological health (Jefferis et al., 2011; McGee & Thompson, 2015; McKee-Ryan et al.,

2005; Paul & Moser, 2009). There is also an increased risk for the development of psychopathology if an individual is prohibited from meeting career-related commitments (Skaletz & Seiffge-Krenke, 2010). Third, the loss of meaning is a significant contributor to the psychological distress associated with unemployment. Previous studies have also suggested that the loss of meaning can contribute to negative psychological outcomes (Shiah et al., 2013; Vehling et al., 2011; Zhang et al., 2018). Furthermore, because affectional states influence meaning (Heintzelman & King, 2014; Hicks et al., 2012; King et al., 2006), it might be more challenging to experience meaning while being distraught by unemployment.

6.2.3 Searching for meaning while seeking job opportunities

According to existential thinking, the lack of meaning experienced by the participants would result in a desire to find new meaning. However, searching for meaning is known to decrease psychological wellness (Dezutter et al., 2014; Kiang & Fuligni, 2010; Steger et al., 2006), a situation that is exacerbated by the absence of meaning (Batthyany & Russo-Netzer, 2014; Cohen & Cairns, 2012; Karasek & Theorell, 1990). Similarly, as identity conceptualisations are tested by unemployment, individuals may find it difficult to engage in further exploration (Schwartz et al., 2009). Focusing on positive personal characteristics and roles may serve as a positive anchor during protracted job-searching.

In searching for meaning, an individual has to consider present realities and possible future directions. Participants found the initial efforts to find coherence after failing to secure employment challenging, and they had to face difficult realities about themselves, their chosen careers, and the labour market. Although reflection can be helpful in establishing greater well-being, a higher intensity of reflection that includes significant rumination may have a negative impact on an individual's psychological well-being (Newman & Nezlek, 2019). Such increased rumination during identity exploration could have the same implications (Seiffge-Krenke et al., 2013). As the young adult graduates in the present study had considerable time available due to being unemployed, they found it difficult to avoid rumination and the consequent self-doubt.

The regressive turn in their narratives caused by unemployment left the unemployed young adult graduates with uncertainty regarding their ability to regain the sense of meaning they had associated with work. With this significant loss of meaning, they found it challenging to direct consistent efforts in an unfriendly labour market, in order to achieve the

purpose they had tied to employment. However, the participants had found or enhanced other sources of meaning (further discussed in Section 6.4), which had enabled them to remain focused on their purpose, despite obstacles. In this regard, Jacob (2008) notes that individuals are more likely to continue their search for employment if their hope of finding an opportunity outweighs the costs of searching.

6.3 The Meaning of Being a Young Adult During Unemployment

Unemployment also had implications for the participants' developmental progress. Not earning an income prevented them from settling into certain adult roles. From their narratives, it became clear that, while studying, the participants had engaged in exploration processes that would aid them in establishing a coherent identity and, consequently, add meaning to their lives. Unemployment can prevent young adult graduates from ceasing their occupational identity explorations in order to make career commitments. Although not having an income prevented the participants from attaining the desired stability of settling into their anticipated adult roles, they did not avoid all commitments. Due to the expectations the participants had of themselves, as well as those they perceived from society, they equated unemployed to failure, which made it difficult for them to be around successful peers. However, while they did shy away from some characters in their narratives, they also found other sources of support.

6.3.1 Identity concerns illustrated by the narratives

A moratorium is usually associated with freedom from responsibility (Arnett, 2004). However, while the participants did not have the responsibilities of work, academic and financial challenges negated this freedom for some. However, spending sufficient time on exploration allowed the participants to clarify their career identities and establish a purpose that would motivate them to complete their studies. The participants' narratives demonstrated initial difficulty in clarifying their careers, and they shared incidences of not feeling fulfilled by their studies, failing modules, and doubting their career choices. At the time of the interviews, the participants had clearer ideas about their future career pathways. Studying had brought new insights that had informed how they regarded themselves. They had also realised what brought significance to their lives, which paved the way for greater self-actualisation.

The participants relayed how fields of study can shape how young adults perceive themselves and inform their identities. While literature suggests that Millennials' have a lower work centrality than previous generations (Lyons & Kuron, 2014; Twenge & Kasser, 2013), the participants expressed the importance they attached to their work identities and their resolve to find employment, emphasising the importance of work in establishing meaning. Due to unemployment, the participants' identities were no longer informed by the narrative of accomplishment they had experienced as graduates. However, a strong career commitment can be present in the absence of employment (Paul & Moser, 2006), which illustrates the value of a vocational identity as a resource during times of unemployment. Dedication to a chosen profession can motivate continuation of the search for employment.

The finding that the participants made commitments while continuing explorations, and that they did not cease explorations once they made commitments, suggests that they experienced these two processes simultaneously. This finding corresponds with literature that suggests a significant overlap between exploration and commitment (Beyers & Luyckx, 2016; Crocetti et al., 2015; Schwartz et al., 2015). For the same reason, it would be difficult (and possibly irrelevant) to place the participants in only one of Marcia's (1966) identity statuses. A significant way for the participants to establish new identity commitments was finding new meaning-giving activities and roles that allowed them to express themselves.

6.3.2 Falling behind in milestone achievement

Meaningfulness is related to the production of culturally valued activities, as people function in a greater social sphere (Baumeister et al., 2013). The participants considered the lives of their peers in determining their own criteria for being significant. Identities are not only developed based on the transitions that young adults make, but also by them comparing these transitions to those of their peers (Panagakis, 2015). There are different aspects that make up an identity. Cheek (1989) described social identity as comprised of reputation, physical appearance, and impressions made on others. Vignoles, Schwartz, and Luyckx (2011) further made the case for a material identity that is determined by features such as residence, financial status, and clothing. When they find it impossible to attain what is deemed meaningful by the community, unemployed young adult graduates can become less confident in their social and material identities, which compromises their sense of significance in society.

To a large extent, finishing their qualifications symbolised the end of career explorations for the participants, and opened up the possibility of finding a niche in society. This might be a time when graduates notice increased societal pressure to make more commitments and end the moratorium (Côté & Levine, 1987). Moreover, graduates might feel compelled to expand on career commitments by finding employment and aligning their work identity with daily activities. In a society where work is increasingly viewed as an important contributor to identity, unemployment could further compromise young adults' sense of their status in society (Reneflot & Evensen, 2014).

Uncertainty in one area of life could prevent young adults from making long-term commitments in others (Mills & Blossfeld, 2009). In line with the contention of Lomasky (2016), young adults' progression in life can be limited by a lack of economic freedom. However, delaying commitments due to unemployment was not the dominant consideration in all cases in the present study. Sharon (2016) suggests that, instead of comparing themselves to traditional markers of adulthood (such as stable employment) and accepting their shortcomings, young adults may initiate the task of choosing personally significant markers and making choices regarding what it means to be an adult. Three of the present study's participants were married, three had children, two were expecting a child, and six lived separately from their families, which illustrated that they had been able to establish other areas of significance in their lives.

6.3.3 Relatedness to others

In a South African study on meaning in life amongst a student population, the findings indicated a desire to contribute to the external world in a pro-social manner (Mason, 2013). Aligned with this finding, many of the participants in the present study had chosen careers that would allow them to assist others. In contrast to the self-focus associated with emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2004), the participants expressed selfless desires and derived substantial meaning from serving others. Being unable to become a member of a community of colleagues through employment deprived them of a sense of belonging, further detracting from the experience of meaning. This is in line with the findings of Heintzelman and King (2014).

The absence of work-related interactions did not, however, always encourage the participants to seek out other close relationships. Feeling disappointed and shamed when

comparing themselves to their peers, caused some participants to reduce their social circle and/or the amount of interaction with their peers. Their awareness of their poor progression became more pronounced when the participants were confronted with the success of their peers. Unemployed young adults might feel that they have failed in meeting society's expectations of them, which could cause an even greater sense of hopelessness (Benjet et al., 2012). Decreased social connection also have a negative effect on meaning (Baumeister et al., 2013; Machell et al., 2015; Ward & King, 2017). While young adulthood is viewed as a time of seeking intimacy, the participants' romantic and friendship relationships might be more fluid and less permanent sources of meaning. Lane and Mathes (2018) suggest that friendships and romantic relationships are associated with more negative affect than family relationships, due to a fear of losing these social ties, as they do not have the permanency of genetic ties. However, all the participants mentioned supportive characters who had encouraged them, even if it was simply by spending time together.

Deci and Ryan (2000) maintain that a secure sense of relatedness can support individuals in developing more intrinsic motivation, thereby increasing their self-determination. The participants in the present study did indicate social support as a motivation in continuing their search for employment. Furthermore, social support is a protective factor against the risk of psychological ill health during unemployment (Milner et al., 2016). Most often, the support the participants in the present study sought came from their families. A study by Lambert et al. (2010) also found that young adults rate their families as making the most important contribution to meaning in their lives. Close ties to parents are also associated with better self-efficacy amongst young adults (Mortimer et al., 2016).

6.4 Maintaining Meaning During Unemployment

The available literature alludes to the subjectivity latent in many definitions of meaning, suggesting that what qualifies a meaningful life depends on whether the individual experiences it as such (King et al., 2016). In accordance, Yalom (1980) postulated that there is no absolute meaning to life and, therefore, no complete set of guidelines to inform one on how to live. Russo-Netzer (2018) highlights the subjective nature of experiencing meaning by stating that reflection and self-awareness are necessary to identify personal values and align daily activities accordingly. Although all the participants in the presents study had made efforts to re-establish meaning, they did so in different ways. They showed self-

determination in seeking meaning, which allowed them to initiate actions to enhance the process. Taking time to reflect on their experiences also opened up the possibility of growth.

6.4.1 Self-determination to find meaning

The participants had initially perceived the completion of their qualifications as the goal to achieve, and employment would follow automatically, enabling them to fulfil their greater purpose. When this did not realise, the participants portrayed themselves as the main character in their narratives with agency. In accordance with humanistic perceptions on self-authorship (Bugental, 1964), the participants showed self-determination to better their lives, despite labour market limitations. During unemployment, finding work opportunities is often considered the first goal in reaching a greater purpose. Purpose is the motivational component of meaning (King et al., 2016), and establishing a new goal can provide direction for future efforts. Subsequently searching for and incorporating different strategies could improve the likelihood of success in the labour market. Additionally, while seeking employment, focusing on other important parts of life could increase an individual's sense of significance and purpose.

Although they experienced times of hopelessness, the participants showed resilience in seeking greater meaning. In this regard, Kashdan and McKnight (2009) distinguish avoidance goals (related to averting punishment or threat) from approach goals (associated with motivation to seek rewards). Approach goals are likely to result in approach behaviours, feelings, and cognitions, and therefore motivation to find purpose (Kashdan & McKnight, 2009). Instead of avoiding the discomfort of searching for work and meaning, the participants showed determination and a proclivity to form approach goals. Furthermore, exploration could uncover additional sources of employment opportunities, support, and activities. The unique value systems of the participants drove them to continue in their pursuit of greater meaning, but in different ways. I found this heartening, as individuals who prioritise finding meaning show greater life satisfaction, gratitude, coherence, happiness, and positive affect (Russo-Netzer, 2019).

Despite their growing awareness of the realities related to their perception of self, their education, and the South African labour market, none of the participants became discouraged work-seekers. J. E. Anderson et al. (2013) suggest that, in responding to loss, people should focus on benefits to uphold their optimistic beliefs about the self and the world.

This was evident in the present study's participants having adjusted their meaning frameworks to include the possibility of unemployment despite a university qualification, yet perceiving unemployment only as a temporary setback. The apparent bent towards optimism prevented the participants from accepting their unemployment as permanent.

6.4.2 Efforts to enhance purpose and significance

The one resource that people have in abundance when they are unemployed is time. None of the participants, however, perceived this free time as leisure time; rather, they described it as contributing to their distress. In line with Jahoda's (1981) theory on latent benefits, not having a structure for spending time decreased their emotional well-being. Engaging in more meaningful activities enhances a person's perception that time is spent purposefully, which could decrease psychological distress (L. E. Waters & Moore, 2002b; Van Hoye & Lootens, 2013), which, in turn, could increase the motivation to seek employment (Wanberg et al., 2012).

The findings of the present study show that searching for work or considering employment alternatives may restore some of the meaning lost due to unemployment. Being occupied with activities such as filling out applications, building networks, and undergoing further training assisted the participants in maintaining a focus on their purpose — finding satisfactory employment. Seeking opportunities for growth can assist unemployed young adult graduates to remain determined, consider alternative options, overcome challenges, and learn a range of helpful behaviours (McKnight & Kashdan, 2009).

Shepherd and Williams (2018) propose that young individuals, while seeking satisfactory employment, should explore options with regard to more immediate goals that may give them the opportunity to explore different identities. None of the participants in the present study had become stagnant. Rather, they sought out activities and environments that would make them feel more involved. This focus on other significant tasks helped the participants to avoid being consumed by anxiety about their future careers. This is in line with the suggestion of Batthyany and Russo-Netzer (2014) that people who make decisions and take action to expose themselves to potentially meaningful situations are more likely to experience increased psychological well-being. L. E. Waters and Moore (2001) suggest also participating in enjoyable leisure activities, as this will provide distraction from thoughts of hopeless about the future. The consequent positive affect could further increase perceptions

of meaning (Hicks et al., 2012). Moreover, when developing a positive affective state, people are less likely to associate income with meaning in life (Ward & King, 2016).

Volunteering was one of the activities the participants had become involved in to enhance their sense of significance. Offering help to people in need is associated with reduced hedonic well-being, and perceiving the self as a giver has shown a positive correlation with eudemonic well-being (Baumeister et al., 2013). Furthermore, in the face of threats to their meaning, people tend to place a stronger emphasis on their pro-sociality, in order to restore their sense of meaning (Van Tongeren, Green, Davis, Hook, & Hulsey, 2016). This was evident in the participants taking up more responsibilities in their households or assisting family members with tasks, in an effort to add value.

6.4.3 Growth through finding new meaning

When expectations are disappointed, revising beliefs, goals, and values can assist in creating a more holistic conceptualisation of one's life (Reker & Wong, 2012). While reflecting, the participants realised the need to adjust the expectations they had held of themselves and adopted from their social backdrop. In a study by Wanberg et al. (2012), individuals looking for employment indicated that they enhanced their motivation through positive cognitions. Engaging in reflection that results in awareness of opportunities, and not only despair, can reduce distress. Realising that unemployment is not a sign of incompetence, but may be result of factors such as the macro-economic climate or educational limitations, could protect unemployed young adult graduates from negative self-perceptions.

The present study's participants noted that, as the initial distress of unemployment decreased and they found greater coherence, they had more appreciation for their journey. This led to personal development and greater certainty regarding their identity. Dealing with challenging events can be an opportunity for identity development, and may result in transformation (Bauer et al., 2018). From the narratives, it is clear that the search processes that the participants undertook to find employment resulted in greater meaning. It also increased their self-insight and strengthened their sense of identity. Côté's (1997) theory of identity capital holds that the greater certainty the participants then had about themselves would also benefit them in future situations. Establishing greater meaning is further

associated with increased hope and, ultimately, psychological wellbeing (Burrow et al., 2010; Mascaro & Rosen, 2006).

The participants developed new perceptions of employment and of themselves, enabling them to experience greater meaning. Bauer et al. (2018) indicate that the growth after the resolution of a negative event can be enhanced if the individual is able to digest the negative experience into a coherent narrative and accommodate new truths. The retrospective aspects of participants' narratives illustrated the coherence they had found as a result of searching and finding new meaning. However, it should be noted that the participants' coherence might be disrupted again during the challenging journey ahead to seek employment. From the discussions on identity and meaning, it is clear that the search process is rarely easy, but can be very rewarding.

6.5 Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

The study was broad in its focus, and while some might consider this a point of critique, the inclusivity of the research made it possible to express the expansive impact of unemployment. The findings show how unemployment impacts meaning, identity, social interaction, employability, and goal-directedness, leaving a lasting impression on young adult graduates. Themes around meaning should be further explored as a way to assist this population to remain committed to achieving their career purpose and remain flexible despite labour market deterrents. A possible way to expand insights on enhancing meaning during unemployment is through empirical testing to determine which behaviours resulted in the greatest increases in meaning.

Due to challenges in obtaining participants, convenience sampling became the most viable method. Asking participants to volunteer in the absence of any reward could have created bias through the attraction of a concentration of more diligent, altruistic, and/or zealous participants. Access to graduation records may yield larger samples, which would increase the rigour of future research on the topic.

Having described my subjectivity in the study, I acknowledge that the findings offer truths as these became apparent to me. Future research could incorporate input on a greater number of constructs from a larger number of participants, to improve the credibility and applicability of the findings. Furthermore, only one participant responded to the invitation to provide further thoughts after the interview. Employing additional methods of data

gathering, such as participants keeping a diary or creating a visual lifeline, could enable triangulation of the data. The rigour of future narrative studies could also be improved by asking the participants to validate that the individual meaning narrative provides an accurate reflection of them.

In humanistic thinking, the emphasis is on subjective perceptions, rather than what applies to everybody (Davidson, 1992), an approach that has been criticised for lack of generalisability of the findings. While I discussed earlier that narratives offer a way of relating to personal experiences, the particularity of a narrative does bring relevance into question. To combat the singularity of qualitative inquiries, future researchers could consider incorporating additional theoretical constructs, concepts, or hypothesised events to expand on the applicability of the current findings in other contexts.

A growing body of research indicates the value of perceiving work as meaningful (Ward & King, 2017), as well as individuals entering the labour market having a desire to perform meaningful work (Burger et al., 2013; Pryor & Bright, 2011). However, what a person would experience as meaningful is difficult to predict, as meaning is based on subjective perceptions. The retrospective capacity of the narrative approach was helpful in investigating this construct in the present study, and is recommended for similar future studies.

Previous research has demonstrated that the experience of meaning in work is influenced by individual beliefs, motivations, and values (Rosso, Dekas, & Wrzesniewski, 2010). Research on methods to accurately evaluate individual meaning could therefore be worthwhile, and could make a notable contribution to the field of career guidance. Additionally, more qualitative investigation is required on how to promote the most adaptive cognitions and behaviours in the face of disappointment.

6.6 Recommendations for Practice

Young adult job seekers need formalised support to assist and encourage them to secure employment (Yu, 2013). This is particularly pertinent when considering South Africa's high unemployment rate. Marock (2008) notes that, despite considerable literature on the topic of youth unemployment, there is little data that explicate "how best to engage, efficiently, pragmatically, and strategically, in concrete actions to increase youth employability in South Africa" (p. 4). The findings of the current research can be

implemented to improve the guidance provided to unemployed young adults. Furthermore, the findings may inform efforts of universities, NGOs, and psychologists in supporting graduates' transition into the labour market.

While the focus of the present study was the experiences of unemployed graduates, several considerations regarding the cause of their unemployment emerged from the data. Considering that the participants' unemployment was the culmination of a narrative that started many years before they even entered university, I will make some recommendations based on the findings for interventions before and after graduation — initiatives to inform scholars, prepare prospective students, to enable them to make informed career decisions, as well as interventions to combat dropout. These efforts should then be augmented with support for graduates in seeking employment. The recommended initiatives are discussed in greater detail below.

6.6.1 Career guidance

The participants indicated having experienced and been influenced in their decisions by bias in their communities and in the guidance from their parents, who had lived in a different political era. These biases had greatly influenced their conceptualisation of meaning, which, in turn, had been pivotal in in their choice of career and whether remain dedicated to achieving their goals. It would thus be a valuable investment to assist scholars and prospective students to identify and understand the significance they attach to a certain career, as well as the purpose they have identified for themselves. This will enhance congruence between their chosen purpose and their career choice, which will ultimately enhance the likelihood of their success.

Many of the participants noted that they had not been prepared for what higher education studies would entail and require of them, which could be a possible explanation for South Africa's university throughput rate of 40.6% (DHET, 2018). Yet, in a review of the higher training system in South Africa, Maree (2012) illustrated that career counselling is not adequately assisting individuals in preparing for university and a career. The DEHT implemented the Central Application Clearing House (CACH) system in 2016 to streamline the application process (DHET, 2019). Although the main function of CACH is to guide prospective students in considering alternative possibilities if they are denied access to a university, some career advice is also offered. Another example is the recently introduced

Izimbizo, which offers greater awareness of options in higher education, especially to communities who do not have access to this information (DHET, 2018). Such organisations' service offering should place greater emphasis on access to comprehensive career guidance, which should include consideration of the person, his or her conceptualisation of meaning, and opportunities in the labour market. These initiatives should also involve significant others in the student's life, in order to create a more coherent and realistic societal narrative, one where the challenges associated with university and securing employment are understood.

The amount of public spending allocated to universities highlights the need to ensure that graduates' skills are relevant and that they are prepared for the realities of the labour market. A South African study by Oluwajodu, Blaauw, Greyling, and Kleynhans (2015) explored possible causes of graduate unemployment, and found that employers require more experience and skills than what students are able to acquire at university. Wendlandt and Rochlen (2008) suggested introducing programmes through which students can perform work, paid or voluntary, during their studies, to gain practical application skills and experience, thereby enhancing their future appeal to employers. Such practical exposure would also make the career purpose students are pursuing more tangible.

In the context of the university, career guidance counsellors could play an important role by grooming young adults for the world of work through appropriate preparation (Murphy et al., 2010). To avoid incoherence, the expectations of students should be compared with the realities of the labour market, and academic interventions can then be implemented to ensure the outcome of a graduate who is also an attractive prospective employee.

The narratives of the participants in the present study who were first-generation students highlighted the unique vulnerabilities of this group. According to the latest estimates, 70% of individuals entering university institutions in South Africa are first-generation students (Lehohla, 2017). It is known that this population is prone to lower retention rates and academic engagement when compared to non-first-generation students (Soria & Stebleton, 2012). Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, and Covarrubias (2014) showed how a one-hour intervention on overcoming obstacles resulted in increased academic and social engagement and enhanced psychological adaption amongst first-year students. Providing opportunities for senior students to share their narratives of victory could be a

powerful way of inspiring first-year students during university orientation. These narratives should be focused on sharing themes related to establishing a new meaning framework after incoherence, working towards a greater purpose, and finding significance.

6.6.2 Organisations supporting unemployed young adults

Available South African programmes aimed at decreasing youth unemployment could incorporate the insights into meaning gained in the current study. Unemployed young adults could benefit from other purposeful activities. In this regard, Mancini et al. (2015) found that a more practical approach — active participation in an intended career — correlates with higher commitment, by affirming vocational choices. Young adults should take initiative by visiting organisations, job-shadowing, and performing on-the-job tasks. Government organisations and the private sector should collaborate to make available and widely communicate such opportunities. Such experiences may enhance students' sense of significance while preparing them for their future careers. Volunteering initiatives could help unemployed young adults use the time they have available in a purposeful manner, to increase their sense of significance. Konstam, Tomek, Celen-Demirtas, and Sweeney (2015) found that young adults who volunteer even as little as two hours a week are more likely to find employment, which may, in part, be ascribable to the practical skillset they acquire during these activities.

6.6.3 Psychological interventions

Programmes and initiatives aimed at assisting unemployed young adults should contract the services of psychologists to reduce the risk of poor psychological outcomes. These psychologists should understand the complexities that unemployed graduates face, and ensure the provision of comprehensive support by taking all relevant concerns into consideration. Workshops could be an effective way to assist students and unemployed graduates to construct and analyse their own conceptualisation of meaning, with an emphasis on personal growth and direction in the face of temporary obstacles, especially with regard to unemployed graduates. Special attention could also be paid to the disruption of identity, as this is a considerable risk during unemployment. Participants in the workshop, especially unemployed graduates, should also be encourage to reflect on their career values and aspirations, and to integrate previous experiences into a coherent work identity narrative

(McArdle et al., 2007). Greater clarity regarding their career identity could increase their motivation to continue searching for work.

A repeated theme in the literature and the findings of the current study is the importance of social support. Social support enhances the meaning an individual experiences in life, and is a protective factor against the negative psychological effects of unemployment. A study by Coetzee and Esterhuizen (2010) demonstrated that social connectivity is associated with improved coping amongst unemployed South African young adults. In comparing collective, relational, and intimate connectedness in a longitudinal study, Stavrova and Luhmann (2016) found that collective connectedness makes the greatest contribution to meaning in life. The importance of support and a sense of community points to the benefits of engaging in social activities and practical exposure to work, which will further stimulate affiliation with the collective. Support groups can be initiated, which could be co-ordinated through existing programmes, to assist unemployed young adults to feel less alone and offer one another support. Psychologists involved these initiatives should encourage the young adults to remain engaged in meaningful relationships. The families of the young adults should also be included, in order to enhance their understanding and support.

Psychologists can further assist unemployed young adult graduates to connect with their original purpose and remain resilient despite current deterrents. Negative appraisal of the situation can impede search behaviour, and efforts should be made to assist unemployed individuals to deal with destructive cognitions while they are searching for work (Lin & Leung, 2010). Considering current meaning frameworks and making adjustments to incorporate the reality of their current situations could result in greater coherence. As illustrated by the current participants, significant meaning can be gathered from the unemployment experience. Psychologists can support young adults to turn a challenging period of their lives into an opportunity for growth. Furthermore, psychological interventions aimed at unemployed graduates could include exploration of the purpose they are experiencing despite unemployment (Van Hoye & Lootens, 2013). Engaging students in discussions on meaning can guide them to establish aim, intention, and function, thereby establishing a strong purpose (Yalom, 1980).

6.7 Contribution to Theory and Further areas of Exploration

The present study adds to extant literature on unemployment by elaborating on eudemonic considerations and the unique ways in which these are perceived. Employing a narrative approach made it possible to study unemployment, not just as a singular event, but rather as a life occurrence with a history, present, and implications for the person's future. The findings also illustrated that the desire to secure employment was a plot that had been infiltrated by and influential on many other areas of the participants' lives. Inquiring about autobiographical memories yielded rich descriptions by participants. Relaying episodic memories required of the participants to relive and communicate their experiences, and I regarded these memories as especially powerful, as many aspects of the person could be captured in the narrative. Future narrative research could benefit from including attention to autobiographic memories.

Young adulthood is often equated with identity establishment and a moratorium is granted to allow young adults time to explore who they are. Specifically, in a time of finding a place for themselves in the greater society, more research on identity development during unemployment could be valuable. Unlike the clear distinction between exploration and commitment (Erikson, 1968) as well as the identity statuses suggested by Marcia (1966), current findings aligned with studies that suggest a greater overlap between exploration and commitment (Beyers & Luyckx, 2016; Crocetti et al., 2008; Schwartz et al., 2015). In fact, the belief that commitment is a more mature state than exploration could discourage explorative initiatives that are critical to the person making coherent decisions. However, it is acknowledged that additional research is required to investigate whether dualistic thinking about the processes involved in shaping an identity is appropriate.

Emerging adult and Millennial theories indicate the impact of societal changes on developmental stages. The current findings show that the participants had had similar experiences (e.g., searching for independence, settling in adult roles, discovering themselves), but also different experiences (e.g., the desire to provide to others, not being carefree) than postulated in theories related to young adulthood. This indicates that more knowledge on South African young adults could be valuable. The findings indicate that many of the participants placed great importance on financially supporting their family. This was especially prevalent amongst black African participants. This so-called Black tax could have serious implications for young adults in South Africa, as it could increase their vulnerability

through reduced financial security, limited asset accrual, and restricted mobility (Sibiya, 2018), indicating that construct warrants further research attention.

This study also makes a methodological contribution that could be applied in future studies. While there are many known ways to conduct a narrative study, I compiled an approach that was guided by the research intention and adapted to the contents of the participants' narratives. I first organised the individual narratives around meaning themes that had emerged, and then compiled a common structure to include all the themes. This yielded a comprehensive view of each narrative, and also highlighted shared themes that emerged. Future research could compare this method to other methods of narrative analysis, to determine whether the findings differ.

6.8 Conclusion

By applying a humanistic-existential paradigm, the focus was on the participants as beings seeking meaning and self-actualisation. Meaning played a central role in how the participants made career choices, their motivation to graduate, the loss they experienced during unemployment, as well as their exploration efforts. Many of the losses suffered as a result of unemployment can be interpreted as decreases in their sense of meaning. The disappointment of unemployment resulted in incoherence, due to a loss of meaning in the form of being able to help others, achieve independence, financially support their families, reach a desired social status, and feel fulfilled.

The participants' narratives elucidated a larger and very influential context to the phenomenon, evident in the plots. The findings illustrate that seeking meaning during young adulthood is closely associated with identity development. As students, the participants' chosen careers had been a prominent commitment, but when they were prevented from expanding their occupational identities to the labour market, they experienced declined purpose, significance, and coherence in their identity. This led to shame and social withdrawal.

It is suggested that supportive structures such as families, friends, psychologists and counsellors, and organisational initiatives could offer substantial guidance in order to prevent unemployed young adult graduates from becoming discouraged work-seekers. The findings suggest that certain activities are more helpful than others during unemployment. Although the participants recognised the importance of continuing their search to find employment,

they also shared how spending time on other meaningful activities acted as a buffer against rumination and the psychological distress associated with unemployment. Using their free time to assist family members and others also enhanced their sense of purpose. Overall, this study illustrates that reconnecting with the original purpose that inspired them to study can motivate unemployed young adult graduates to direct their future actions towards success.

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APPENDIX A

UNIVERSITEIT VAN PRETORIA
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Re: Obtaining participants for research study

I am a doctoral student in psychology at the University of Pretoria. I am conducting a research project concerning unemployment amongst students who have graduated. The title of the study is: *The unfolding of meaning in narratives of unemployed young adult graduates.* The aim of this letter is to request that your organisation assist me in approaching individuals who could participate in my study. In this research project, I wish to explore personal perceptions of unemployment amongst graduates in South Africa. Furthermore, I would like to understand how unemployment is experienced within the development stage of young adulthood. Through the sharing of stories, I hope to uncover how unemployed young adults make sense of such experiences.

My hope is to find young adults between the ages of 21 and 30, who obtained a university degree and have been unemployed for at least six months. If (name of organisation) is willing to assist, I would like to suggest that one of your employees access the database and forward invitations (provided by me) to members who fit the previously mentioned criteria. I will initiate contact with members who volunteer, and choose 15 participants to take part in the study. Participation will include an interview, conducted by me, as well as another opportunity to share information, via a second interview or e-mail.

Participation in this study is voluntary, and participants hold the right to withdraw at any point in time. To ensure confidentiality, the participants' real names will not be mentioned.

The use of any other identifying information will be avoided in documents that will become public. There are, however, limitations to confidentiality; some parts of what participants share during the interview will be viewed by members of the public. Counselling services by another psychologist will be available if participants express distress after the interview. Although there are no direct benefits for members who participate, I believe that partaking in the study can be an enriching opportunity, where individuals are provided with a space to share, and therefore, make sense of their experience of unemployment. If any participant experiences distress during the interview, he/she will be referred to a psychologist free of charge.

The information I gather through the interviews will help me to gain a better understanding of the research topic. Hopefully, this awareness will translate into new theoretical insights that might assist the larger community of unemployed graduates. I am looking forward to your response on this matter.

Kind regards

Rinet van Lill
(Doctoral student)

APPENDIX B

Interview schedule

Initial statement

The initial statement will encourage participants to respond to an open-ended invitation to share their narratives as these relate to the focus of the research.

I would like to hear your story of not finding work after graduation. Please tell me about how this journey started, how it evolved, and how you were able to handle everything.

Probing questions

As the narrative is shared, unstructured follow-up questions will be asked to encourage participants to elaborate on parts of the narrative that are deemed significant in answering the research question.

Narrative inquiry

In order to contribute to the narrative focus of the study, the following features of the narrative will be elicited through the suggested questions:

Characters

Can you think of people who contributed to how you think about work?

Are there people in your life who are concerned about whether you have a job?

Did not finding a job after graduation have an impact on the people close to you?

Do you feel supported at present? *Follow up:* From who do you receive this support? Can you share a memory about this?

Temporality

What is the first memory you have of knowing that you would study the course that you completed?

Can you think of any events that had a big impact on how you think about having a career, specifically the career you chose?

What are your thoughts on work in the future?

Place/Context

How is unemployment impacting your living arrangements and lifestyle?

What are your thoughts about the availability of work for graduates in South Africa?

How do you see the impact of unemployment on young South Africans like yourself?

Questions pertaining to unemployment

How long have you been looking for employment?

What motivated you to look for work?

What would it mean to you to have a job?

What were your expectations about work after graduation?

Tell me about a memory that followed when you didn't find a job immediately after graduation?

Did you get any surprises on your way to finding a job? How did you handle these surprises, and how will you continue to handle surprises in the future?

Questions pertaining to young adulthood

Do you see yourself as an adult?

How would you describe this part of your life that started after you matriculated?

What are the enjoyable and challenging parts of this time in your life?

Are there any expectations of what people of your age should be busy with?

How are people your age doing with their first experiences in the labour market?

Can you think of a memory where you were able to handle the disappointment well?

If you had to prepare students who are about to graduate and find work, what would you say to them?

Questions pertaining to meaning in life themes

Do you ever think about something like a purpose in your life?

Can you tell me about things that give you a sense of meaning?

Did you find that these things that give you meaning changed over time?

Since you have been searching for work, have you tried to make sense of what is happening in your life?

What do you think would increase your sense of purpose?

APPENDIX C

Dear participant

RE: <u>Informed consent</u>

My name is Rinet and I am a doctoral student in psychology at the University of Pretoria. I am conducting a research project concerning unemployment amongst students who have graduated. The title of the study is: *The unfolding of meaning in narratives of unemployed young adult graduates*. The aim of this document is to inform you about the extent of your involvement in the study, should you agree to participate. Please take your time to read through the document in order to make an informed decision on whether you would like to participate. If any questions arise while you are reading the document, please feel free to inquire from me.

Research purpose

In this research project, I want to explore personal perceptions of unemployment amongst graduates in South Africa. Furthermore, I would like to understand how unemployment is experienced within the development stage that you are currently in. Through the sharing of memories and stories, I hope to uncover how unemployed young adults experience meaning.

Extent of participation

Your participation in this study will consist of an interview with me, as well as an opportunity to share further reflections through an e-mail or second interview. There is no time limit to our interview, but it is unlikely that the interview will last longer than two hours. During the interview, I will ask you to tell me about memories and experiences that had an impact on your career journey. Our communication will be recorded on an audio device and transcribed (typed out) for me to use when writing up my thesis. Two weeks after the interview, I will enquire whether you have any more reflections that you would like to share.

You will then have an option to either e-mail me your reflections in written format, or join me for a second interview. Your participation in this study is voluntary, and you have the right to withdraw at any point. All the information I receive from you will be destroyed if you choose to withdraw.

Risks and benefits

During the interview, sensitive topics might be elicited that can be distressing to you. Please note that you do not have to answer questions that you feel uncomfortable with. After the interview, you will get an opportunity to reflect on the process and ask any questions that you might still have. It is unlikely that you will be distressed, but if, after our interview, you are upset in any way, free counselling services will be made available to you. You will have the option to see another psychologist, situated at a private location in Randburg, who will phone you within the next week to arrange an appointment.

On the other hand, the interview could also be an enriching experience, where you are provided with the space to share and, therefore, make sense of your experience of unemployment. You might gain awareness of some concerns and the impact thereof, which might translate into new ways of dealing with challenges. Also note that, through the information that you offer, you are helping me to form a better understanding. This will, hopefully, translate into new theoretical insights that might assist the larger community of unemployed graduates.

Efforts to maintain confidentiality

In order to protect your privacy, care will be taken to ensure the highest possible levels of confidentiality. During the transcription of the recorded interview, your real name will not be mentioned. The use of any other identifying information will be avoided in documents that will become public. The recorded interview will be safeguarded on a password-protected device that only I have access to. There are limitations to confidentiality, and it is important that you understand that some parts of what you share with me will be viewed by members of the public.

Storage of information

The transcript of our interview will be stored, anonymously, on transcription tables in the Department of Psychology at the University of Pretoria for archiving purposes over the next 15 years. Please note that other researchers will have access to the transcripts of our interviews for future research projects.

The public life of information

The results will be written up as part of my thesis within the following three years, which will be uploaded on the University of Pretoria's website, with unlimited access. It is, furthermore, the intention to publish scientific articles from the thesis, which will be directed at the psychology research community, but will be accessible to any member of the public. A summary of the main findings might also be provided to (name of organisation) to share on public platforms that the organisation has access to.

Regards,

Researcher:

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I, _____ (name and surname) hereby give consent to be interviewed by Rinet van Lill as part of a research project.

1. I give permission for the information in this interview to be used in writings that will become public.
2. I understand that my identity will be kept confidential.
3. I understand my right to withdraw participation from this study at any point in time.

_____ _____

Signature Date

APPENDIX D

UNIVERSITEIT VAN PRETORIA
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Faculty of
Humanities

10 February 2017

Dear Prof Maree

Project: The unfolding of meaning in narratives of unemployed young adult graduates

Researcher: R van Lill

Supervisor: Prof T Bakker

Department: Psychology

Reference number: 16397313(GW20170203HS)

Thank you for the application that was submitted for ethical consideration.

I am pleased to inform you that the above application was approved by the Research Ethics Committee on 9 February 2017. Data collection may therefore commence.

Please note that this approval is based on the assumption that the research will be carried out along the lines laid out in the proposal. Should the actual research depart significantly from the proposed research, it will be necessary to apply for a new research approval and ethical clearance.

The Committee requests you to convey this approval to the researcher.

We wish you success with the project.

Sincerely

Prof Maxi Schoeman

Deputy Dean: Postgraduate Studies and Ethics

Faculty of Humanities

UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA

e-mail:tracey.andrew@up.ac.za

Kindly note that your original signed approval certificate will be sent to your supervisor via the Head of Department. Please liaise with your supervisor.