# Phil's Story. An Ethnographic Drama Relating one Man's Experience of Australian Workplace Professional Age Discrimination

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## Abstract

Phil's story is based on one respondent's interview which is embedded within my autoethnographic PhD thesis on Australian workplace age-discrimination. In using ethnographic convention to amplify this real-life drama, the paper uses first-person voice to extract and highlight the damage that workplace age discrimination is doing to the older professional Australian man. The paper focuses on 'Phil', a 58 year old indigenous Australian, former high level Government employee whose high-flying executive career is traumatically cut short. The downward spiral of his life resulted in him becoming just another run-of-the-mill contract worker. This story relates Phil's anguish, shock, and disbelief at the treatment he received when he turned 50 and was made excess to current work requirements. His story is compelling and his voice essential to bring cognizance to the narrative of this ever present real-life workplace tragedy that has the potential to affect all Australians and all world inhabitants.

**Keywords:** Autoethnography, ethics, discrimination

# La Historia de Phil. Un Relato Etnográfico sobre la Experiencia de Discriminación por Edad de un Trabajador Australiano

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**Resumen**

La historia de Phil se basa en las respuestas de un entrevistado que se articula en el marco de mi tesis doctoral que tiene un carácter autoenográfico y que se concreta en un puesto de trabajo de Australia donde se manifestó una situación de discriminación por razón de edad. Usando el planteamiento etnográfico para ampliar esta situación en la vida real, el artículo utiliza la primera persona para subrayar el daño que está haciendo la discrminación por edad a los hombres trabajadores australianos con edad avanzada. El artíuclo se centra en Phil, un hombre índegena australiano de 58 años, antiguo trabajador de alta cualificación del Gobierno cuya trayectoria ejecutiva de éxito ha sido traumáticamente cortada. Este espiral descendente en su vida le supuso convertirse en un trabajador con un contrato precario. Esta historia relata la angustia, el shock y la incredulidad de Phil ante el tratamiento que recibió cuando cumplió 50 años y empezó a ver los excesos laborales que se cometían con él. Su historia es convincente y su voz esencial para dar a conocer la narrativa de esta tragedia real en el ámbito laboral que puede afectar a todos los australianos y todos los habitantes del mundo.

**Palabras clave:** Autoetnografía, ética, discriminación

**B**efore leading into Phil's story, I will relate why I undertook my PhD research. My study was partly born out of my own frustration at not being able to locate work at any level commensurate with my qualifications, skills and experience and I perceived entrenched societal discrimination against the aged. My subsequent research presented me with the opportunity to interview Phil, an indigenous, former high ranking Australian government department executive. Phil related his story in my Brisbane hotel room and during the course of the interview, his voice cracked; he covered his face and fought back his tears.

Phil's story traces five-and-a-half years of his recent employment history. It started when in 2004 his government department was disbanded and reconvened under the umbrella of another government department. This new department threw open all the positions within his Indigenous Policy Division, declaring it a necessary policy to formally fill and reallocate the positions. Phil was told he needed only to reapply and that his re-employment was merely a formality. Shock, anger and disbelief hit "like a brick" when Phil was advised that other "younger applicants" were better skilled and better qualified and that as he was close to retirement he was no longer required and should accept a voluntary redundancy package.

Phil's work and financial future were seriously in jeopardy and his domestic life soon followed and flew into turmoil. His ego and self-esteem were destroyed and his ability to cope severely impeded. A subsequent marriage breakup, interstate move, unsuccessful suicide attempt and on-going counselling brought Phil to a position where he has needed to make many life re-evaluations and re-adjustments.

### Introduction

This paper is essentially an analysis of an ethnographic narrative on the damaging effects of age-discrimination on both the individual and the family. It draws on both older research, which has stood the test of time, and contemporary studies which have duplicated and replicated the earlier work. This method broadens the scope of the study and thereby indicates that this is not just a contemporary issue but an issue which has attracted research attention over many years (Ozdowski 2002; Hassell and Perrewe

1993; Ryan in Raine, 2012). What is quite new and certainly under-utilised in relation to the age phenomenon, is the ethnographic research methodology, a relatively modern approach specific to narrative research (Atkinson, Coffey & Delamont, 2003; Atkinson & Hammersley, 1998; Chang, 2008; Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

Phil's story is full of emotion and pain and demonstrates the case of a man at the top of his game and the height of his career who is suddenly propelled down the spiral of life when suddenly confronted with what appears to be age-discrimination. This paper looks at the male ego and the many associated aspects of the trauma, depression and loss of self-esteem that can occur in job loss with older Australian men and then looks at both the theoretical and real-life aspects of the impact on family.

## The employment role

Meaningful and valued employment is important to the very being of man. It reflects his position in life, his manhood, brotherhood and worldly status and incorporates his values, psyche and self-esteem. To rationalise the importance of employment and the part employment plays on the psyche and self-identity of man, Peretti, Butcher and Cherry (1986) claimed that meaningful employment is essential for the welfare and well-being of the individual. They state that personal identity, self-image, and integrity are inextricably associated with a man's occupational role. In citing Berg (1979) they state that by virtue of playing these roles, people adopt the norms, values, means, and ends of such roles and through work develop a work personality relating to cognitions, motivations, affect and behaviours and that within the framework of one's workgroup, the individual is constantly being judged on occupational, promotional and social skills. This judgment is important to a person's self-regard and self-evaluation.

Peretti et al (1986, quoting Baskin 1975) also claim that people who cannot find suitable work feel useless and inadequate and suffer from increased physiological and psychological stress leading to increased psycho-physiological disorders. They add that hopes, desires, dreams, and personal ambitions are often destroyed by unemployment and the loss of affiliation with the workgroup damages the individual's personality displayed through the collective judgments of colleagues and associates.

The effects of job loss according to Shelton (1985 citing Amundson and Borgen) can be compared with the grieving process and may result in depression, withdrawal, retreat, suicide and homicide. Zawada (1980, in Shelton 1985) and Guindon and Smith (2002) claim that the stress reactions associated with job loss and the consequent emotional and psychological influences may directly impede the subsequent job search and inhibit one's ability to search and secure suitable future employment.

Phil had previously been very secure in his job, and very reassured in the belief that subsequent to his division's job spill, he would be reappointed to his previous executive level position. Along with his disqualification from interview came an array of emotions including disbelief and the sudden realisation that his life was entering a new uncertain phase with a new unmapped future that he had never before envisaged possible. In the space of an eye-blink Phil's world had dramatically changed. He said:

> I couldn't believe I didn't get the job, let alone an interview. I rang the recruiting agency and they tried to fob me off, as if I wasn't worthy of any respect, let alone a proper answer. They told me that obviously there were people with more experience; so I related my history of managerial positions where I'd negotiated inter-government contracts and agreements on justice between the various state governments and a number of Commonwealth Federal governments. They flippantly said – 'Oh well perhaps they were better qualified?' Although my qualifications weren't exactly amazing, I did have a Bachelor of Business degree and told them so, but they weren't even listening and really weren't able to give me anything resembling a satisfactory answer - and all I was getting was silence, excuses and bullshit and so they came to a bumbling halt. I then realised that it was discrimination, because I looked at the names of the people who got the jobs, they were all people I knew and none had my skills or experience. Some of them were my previous subordinates - I'd trained them for heaven's sake, some were still wet behind the ears, inexperienced and unqualified. All were considerably younger than me - in their 30s maybe early 40s and some were quite new to indigenous affairs. As a manager and indigenous person I felt insulted and very much degraded.

Phil's fall in stature and consequent dilemma is highly visible in his own words and is possibly a desperate appeal for help.  In telling his story he appeared to me, to be both outwardly reaching for support (in the flickering hope that some force with suddenly rescue him) and gaining solace in that there is someone who will listen and will share his story. This is significantly supported by the comment: "I don't know how to get out of this hole … I don't know who to turn to for help?"

Phil claimed that the impact of this workplace dislocation was visible for a number of years and carried forward into his future employs. He continued:

> Before, I feared nothing; I was full of confidence and approached all new projects positively and with a sense of adventure.  I knew no-one else could do the job any better and I displayed this outward enthusiasm and positive approach to everyone … But after all this happened, well, you can only take so much kicking and then you collapse.  You feel empty inside and this emptiness is with you all the time.  I now get anxious because I think I'm going to fail again and get sacked 'again'… My self-worth and self-esteem have been shot to pieces and I start to panic over little things.  I feel as if I'm being watched over all the time, as if they are hoping that I'm going to fail.  I feel useless and of no value or consequence to anyone.  To top it all off my health has suffered quite seriously and I now have atrial fibrillation… and I think it's all related.

### Masculinity, personal identity and self-esteem

It is important for this paper's existence to analyse the effects job loss and unemployment have on a man's masculinity and personal identity and why the effects to his manhood and his behaviour and interaction with others are so devastating. Sluss and Ashforth (2007) studied relational identity and the work relationship and looked at the impact of relationships on one's own development, performance and well-being. They claim there are three levels of identity: the individual (personal); interpersonal (group); and collective (social) and a person acts and reacts according to each varying setting, situation and environment.

Sluss and Ashforth (2007) citing others (Brickson, 2000; Brickson & Brewer, 2001; Lord, Brown & Freiberg, 1999; Sedikides & Brewer, 2001)

claim self-interest to be a basic motivation whereby the individual focuses on oneself as unique and where self-esteem derives from interpersonal comparisons of traits, abilities, goals and performance. They further claim that self-esteem actually derives from inter-group comparisons. Sluss and Ashforth (2007) further cite Brewer and Gardner (1996) and state that changes in the level of self-categorisation reflect not only differences in views of the self but also different world views including values, goals and norms. They generalise that we position ourselves in norms within society, whether it's a subordinate role, a supervisor role, or an unemployed role. A person learns from their surroundings and environment and develops an identity associated with role and position. Individuals are therefore implicitly implicated within the collective of these socially constructed roles.

This was certainly the case with Phil who as an educated man, an executive and husband had multiple responsibilities and roles. Specifically as a man, Phil's socially constructed male 'role' and pride is echoed in the following:

> As a man and breadwinner I had the responsibility to look after my wife and family. It might be the traditional perspective but that is why I was put on this earth. And for 'heaven's sake' that is why I am a man. I couldn't have this taken away from me – no-one had the right to destroy my manhood. I believe in equal opportunity and the best person for the job etc, but what is all this bullshit about being a female, so they must have the job? Being young so they must have the job? Being an Aboriginal, so they must have the job etc? This is bullshit. I was the best and I'd proven it time and time again. So why didn't I get it? Not only were my abilities being questioned, so was my manhood. How could I have a beer at the pub with my mates and not feel shame and look for the closest rock to crawl under?

With job loss, "manhood" identity is under attack and is manifested in a wide range of unhealthy and health threatening behaviours. In analysing the range of traumas presented by our case-study, Phil's depression was very much due to his decline in status and the fear of the effects of this on his future employment and life prospects and his ability to support family.

Linn, Sandifer and Stein (1985) claim that not only does loss of work affect self-esteem, but not having work could also limit a person's chances for feelings of achievement, accomplishment and satisfaction and increase feelings of guilt relating to failure to support other family members. Linn et al. (1985) continue that some men have the ability to cope better than others and this is significantly related to self-esteem issues.  In a cross-sectional, cross-longitudinal comparison of Israeli employed and unemployed adults, Shamir (1986) discovered that there were depressive effect, morale and anxiety issues which were affected by employment status; however these were moderated by self-esteem. Of significant relevance was the finding that the unemployed with low self-esteem were considerably more flexible when considering new job offers.

   Although Phil, by his own admission, claimed that his self-esteem was 'shot to pieces' (quoted above), he didn't exactly fit into the above categorisation. Phil in fact reacted to his new situation by undertaking counselling and further study to improve his employment prospects and certainly wasn't going to take the first job that came along or a job that offered him little or no challenge and self-esteem.

   Phil's stance is supported by a study on efficacy and resilience by Liam and Liam (1988), who indicated that workers do not simply experience the hardship imposed by unemployment, but actively contest their displacement and the conditions it creates. They claim that one doesn't just take injustice and the consequences that it creates without fighting back and that an important correlation to the level of unemployment depression, is the link to the level of reward one placed on their previous employ. This indicates that depression would be greater if one's job had been intrinsically rewarding rather than boring and monotonous.  As a director of a variety of indigenous policy in four Australian States, Phil's employment history was certainly far from boring and monotonous.

**Relevance of level**

Guindon and Smith (2002) signify Phil's situation distinctively by stating that feeling of isolation, rejection and shame are common. When identity is strongly connected to the job, loss is even more painful because the person measures his sense of self by what he does for a living.  If career is in crisis; then stress is high, self-esteem plummets and very often leads to

depression. The authors continue that a depressed victim may move further into stagnation, frustration and eventually into apathy and burnout. With involuntary job loss, a person's perceived stress may exceed their ability to cope with the demands of the environment and may be unable to muster the internal and personal resources necessary to mount an effective job search campaign. This is quite significant to Phil as he had suddenly been thrust down to a level that he'd never before experienced and regaining prestige, status and position were paramount. His desire to rapidly climb back up the executive ladder was quite intense. Phil stated: "I fell a long way in a very short space of time. I was devastated. What had I done that was so wrong, how could this be happening?"

Also of considerable relevance to Phil's case is the comparative level of his previous position to now. Peretti et al (1986) studied self-image, insecurity, attrition, withdrawal and inferiority on four categories of unemployed men, ranging from professional managerial executive (PME) to unskilled manual workers (UNS). They discovered severe effects of unemployment in all the groups however the most severely affected were those who, like Phil, were previously held in the highest esteem because of their professional standings. Significant was the self-blaming which resulted in depression, self-doubt, self-pity and guilt; they felt a sense of failure to family and friends, or anyone dependent on them for support. In contrast was the significant finding that the unemployed unskilled manual worker (UNS) who suffered chronic unemployment, freely self-perceived minimal negative psychological effect due to the fact that many had expectations of unemployment status. This was because many lacked skills, abilities, potential and opportunities and had been out of work for much of their lives. It was suggested that they had little understanding of the quality of life experienced by the other higher level groups, as per Phil, and that loss of income - with very little significant psychological effect - was the most notable stated effect on this group. These findings clearly indicate that the social status and level of social acceptance within society has a significant impact on the effects of chronic unemployment on displaced workers therefore indicating that the further one falls the harder the impact.

Of further relevance to Phil's case is the research of Sightler, Tudor, Brush and Roebuck (1996) who tested self-esteem, anxiety, depression, irritation, aggression, social support, resentment, burden, and life

satisfaction in recently unemployed managers and professionals.  They claim that while the psychological effects on blue collar workers are fairly well-established, relatively little is known about the effects of unemployment on professionals and middle managers. They claim that these managers and professionals, such as Phil, may differ from non-professionals and many non-managers in regard to education and training at an organisational level, therefore their psychological reactions may be different as well.  It is further stated that their adjustment to unemployment might in turn negatively affect their subsequent job search behaviours, coping skills, family relationships and their felt stress.

A highly relevant study by Kessler, Turner and House (1988, in Creed, 2001) determined that unemployed workers did not suffer the same level of unemployment stress when the consequences of financial strain were removed. Further to this, psychological distress was not reported from countries which provided generous social security benefits to the unemployed, as in the case of the Netherlands, thereby suggesting that the financial loss and the uncertain financial future is a catalyst for depression. In this regard, financial stress was certainly an issue with Phil.  He stated:

> When I was first told that I had to accept a 'voluntary' redundancy package I dug my heels in.  As an older Aboriginal I did have some health problems common to my people, such as diabetes.  I thought that I should accrue as much retirement benefit as I could, so I told them I wasn't going.  When it became obvious that they wouldn't take no for an answer, and that 'voluntary' wasn't really on the table,  I weighed up my options and got out of there, it wasn't a healthy place to be; very depressing and very demoralizing. … And the redundancy package didn't last long either.  I spent it on booze and gambling and trying to work my way out of this position.  But things only got worse.  My marriage was stuffed and I lost my house and much of my superannuation.  My future was stuffed.

## Residual problems with re-employment

Of particular relevance to Phil's case is the manner in which he approached and achieved re-employment. Kessler, Turner and House (1989) studied the impact of distress after job-loss and the recovery associated with re-

employment. They claim that unemployment causes poor health and that re-employment reverses this effect.

However, this projected recovery scenario certainly didn't ring true as Phil continually felt marginalised and degraded in his new job, and the above findings in reality are a considerable over-simplification. The study sampled stable employed workers, currently unemployed workers and recently re-employed workers and found significant elevation of depressed mood, anxious mood, somatisation and self-reported physical illness for those unemployed. The study did also caution however, that we should not interpret the high distress of the unemployed as evidence that current unemployment causes emotional reactions which are totally resolved and reversed with re-employment. They furthered the theme from Guindon and Smith (2002), Sightler et al (1996) and Zawada (1980, in Shelton 1985), that it is plausible that poor emotional functioning subsequent to, or in the face of unemployment also interfered with job search activities.

Phil stated that the culture in his new employ disturbed him and made him even more aware of his practical workplace contribution.

> The organisation culture isn't known until you get into the actual organisation itself and I should have thought twice when at interview they questioned my age. It's probably not just the organisation that's at fault but society as a whole. Society seems to think that once you've reached a certain age, you don't have anything more to contribute and this makes me so angry. I've always assessed my self-worth and what contribution I make to my organisation, and I certainly do now I'm in my new job, feel more on display and more obliged to question my value … and of course try to raise my profile. However, more so now than ever before I'm not being noticed for my value and my contribution and guess I won't ever again because no-one my age gets promoted. It is obvious that there is no encouragement for promotion, which you'd normally see in a progressive, forward visioned organisation and you hear people say that if you haven't made it by now, then you never will. It doesn't matter a fig that I had made it, and it certainly wouldn't matter now whatever I did, or to whatever heights I scale, it doesn't count anymore, in the younger ones' eyes I'm old and useless."

**New job problems**

Phil's new employment certainly didn't resolve his dilemma or distress. The job was at a far lower level, with less pay and no security. He told me that he wanted to be relocated at the same level with the same respect as his previous positions, but could never see this happening.

Kessler et al (1989) study also examined job quality, therefore earnings and job security to determine whether re-employment into the first job that came along would provide satisfaction. This study found that the very high levels of distress amongst the unemployed were, if anything, an under-estimate of the emotional damage created by job loss rather than the over-estimated which they initially suspected. Not surprisingly this study did hypothesise that the function of those who found work improved more than those who remained unemployed. However they believed that there may have been other residual effects, one of these being that the re-employed may not have returned completely to their emotional state prior to their previous job loss. There was also significant evidence that many re-employed feared that they would involuntarily lose their new job within a year. This job insecurity was associated with the earlier depression and somatisation among the re-employed. It was also identified that these re-employed people who held these insecure jobs were significantly more depressed than the stably employed respondents, suggesting that re-employment does not fully relieve unemployed related distress if future unemployment is anticipated.

In support of these findings, Fineman (1983) found psychological and 'legacy' effects in approximately half of the re-employed people in his study. Feelings of personal failure and doubts about abilities to perform adequately in their new jobs were particularly common among the recently re-employed. Kaufman (1982) supported this by claiming that feelings of low self-esteem were particularly persistent after re-employment and even suggested that some of these emotional residuals may be permanent. This was supported by Fagin (1979) who suggested that the personality changes as a result of prolonged unemployment could be permanent although other researchers found that the extent of emotional recovery following re-employment varied, depending on the nature of the new job.

Also of particular relevance to Phil's case were findings by Shamir (1985) who found that emotional recovery after re-employment required that the new job be seen at least as favourably as the old one, and Fineman (1983) who reported that re-employed people who felt inadequate to the tasks of the new job were even more distressed than when they had been unemployed.

Phil made the following statement, which in itself is quite astounding given that in previous positions he'd been in control of 30 staff and a $20 million budget:

> I thought that my new job was going to fix my self-confidence; instead I felt that whatever I did wasn't good enough and constantly sought out feedback about how I was doing. I worried about things so much I was almost paralysed because I was too frightened to make a decision in case it was the wrong one and my contract would be terminated.

The above indicates the relevance in which the new job and the new environment are perceived and Phil certainly had concerns regarding the people in his new work environment. His comfort zone, status and esteem levels had all dramatically changed and his perception of and evaluation of both himself and others had undergone considerable transformation. He stated:

> It never seemed to worry me before even though I knew it existed, but now in my new job it is really very noticeable. It is obvious that the young people deliberately exclude us oldies. We, in our 50s - and even 40s - aren't encouraged to mix with the 20-somethings, and it is as if we are singled out and certainly not part of the younger in-crowd. You really aren't made to feel like you have anything in common with them and certainly nothing to offer. The attitude of the young is that we've passed our 'use-by-date'. But, when you're sitting on the outside looking in you realise that the whole work psyche depends on a number of requirements being met, one of which is socialization … and I think that is very absent from this place and has been absent for a while. I've really noticed it more and more since I reached 50.

Phil made another observation regarding his new employment, which related to the recruitment process and the younger workers' attitude to older employees.

> I find it rather amazing that organisations aren't allowed to discriminate on age but at interview they always want to know how old you are … Then when I got this job it became obvious that the young people viewed us oldies as idiots.  I had always noticed that when young graduates come in to the workplace, that they had the academic knowledge but no real life experience to back up their degrees.  It was commonly stated that the new ones can't hit the ground running.

## Mental health and the relationship to work

The evidence that job-loss leads to despair and depression is undeniable. Phil's health and future are intertwined.  He stated:

> Now I'm still getting counselling once a fortnight, and I'm feeling a little better.  It eases the anguish and my lack of self-worth.  I realise though that I need to grow my self-esteem and I'm the only one that can do that.   I'm constantly looking inside at my self-worth and my value to my workplace and I figure that if no-one's going to recognise me for what I've contributed, then why should I bother?...But I also have no doubt that this attitude would be to my own detriment so I fight it and keep doing my best regardless.  I'm on a contract now until 2010 and after that I don't know.  I'll be 58 then and don't like my prospects.

The journal - American Family Physician (2006, p.1395) presents evidence that mental depression is 'a medical illness'.  It states

> An individual with major depression has symptoms such as feeling sad or empty, crying easily, restlessness, and thoughts about death or suicide.  Mental depression is caused by a chemical imbalance in the brain that makes it hard for the cells to communicate with each other.  It can be linked to events in life, such as death of a loved one, a divorce or job loss.

Thayer and Bruce (2006) studied major depressive disorder (MDD) and claim that it can be mistaken for, or masked by reactive sadness of a comorbid condition. Citing the Global Burden of Disease Study, they claim that depression is the fourth leading cause of global disease burden in the 1990s and is projected to be second by 2020. The effects of MDD can include job loss, personality advancement failure and decline in functions. Although it is also undeniable that one does not have to lose their job to become depressed, Dragano, He, Moebus, Jöckel and Siegrist (2008) claim evidence that suggests that an adverse psychosocial work environment also can significantly contribute to the explanation of depressive symptoms.

**Coping behaviour**

Phil indicated that he went through a range of behaviours in order to cope, and did attempt to deal with his dilemma head-on in a very positive manner by actively seeking to correct the possible labelling inadequacies bestowed upon him when he obtained feedback on why others were preferred for a position. Believing their claim that maybe he didn't have enough qualifications, he enrolled in a Master's degree at University. He told me that he considered that if he was not competitive in the labour market then he would make himself more competitive.

> I only had a Bachelor's degree and so I thought, well maybe they are right, these young kids coming through with qualifications coming out of their ears. Maybe I did need to catch up. I enrolled in my MBA and finished in record time. I thought 'now you bastards try and tell me that I'm under-qualified' … Didn't do me any good though, I'd expected doors to open and opportunities to come flying my way, but nothing happened. I won't be holding my breath in anticipation.

**When all else fails**

Regardless of the futile attempts to drag himself up from the depths of despair, Phil did reach a stage in his mental state that brought him to attempt suicide. Phil's words echoed this reflection.

> I wasn't coping at all.  I'd lost my job, my livelihood, my home, my wife.  I didn't have any future, I was drinking myself to death and I was sinking in my own despair.  I'd had enough, I didn't want to suffer any more of this pain and have these constant feelings of worthlessness! … I was in a hotel room and was absolutely falling over drunk.  I don't remember much only that I awoke in the morning with my belt around my neck and the broken curtain rod dangling over my head.

Brown, Vinocur and Amiram (2003) draw a correlation between suicide and the feelings of self-esteem whereby the victim descends to such a low level that they actually feel a burden on society.  In bringing this life terminating action into its full perspective, a study by Platt (in Winton, 1986) established that men who are unemployed less than six months are six times more likely to attempt suicide than those in work, whilst those unemployed for over a year are 19 times more likely to try to kill themselves. Platt concludes that the loss of employment can be a blow to identity and create an imbalance of the proportions between love and work which has implications for the mental health of the community as a whole.

### The value of support

Phil's marriage break-up and consequent interstate move in effect also meant that he no longer had the spousal social support necessary to enable him to cope with his new situation. Linn, Sandifer and Stein (1985) claim that social support is a potential mediator of stress, in citing Gore (1978) they found that the unsupported unemployed, as per Phil, demonstrated significantly higher elevations and more changes in cholesterol levels, illness symptoms and affective responses than did the supported unemployed.  In citing Kasl (1982) they claim that a higher level of social support did produce a buffering influence when the unemployment status remained uncertain over a more prolonged time period and in citing Kasl and Cobb (1980) they also found that job loss increased the use of medical care. This is also supported by Kessler et al (1976, in Linn et al., 1985) who found a correlation between psychological distress and the use of primary health care services. Those depressed persons who viewed their health as poor sought medical advice and in this respect the medical practitioners and institutions

often fulfilled the social and emotional needs of the patients. As reported earlier Phil now suffers atrial fibrillation and believes it to be a consequence of his current stressful environment. He now also regularly attends a psychologist and believes the support offered in these sessions help him with life coping mechanisms.

**The consequences of job-loss on wife and family**

It is obvious that unemployment cannot be treated as a personal event as it affects all in the family unit. Subsequent partner stress following job loss is particularly relevant in Phil's instance as the job loss was very much the catalyst for the eventual marriage breakdown. Although all cases being individual are therefore different, it is interesting to note (although on a personal level and no-doubt totally unrepresentative of a full and comprehensive study), that three of the six cases, undertaken in my ethnography, have suffered severe and total loss of spouse support and subsequent marriage breakdown after job-loss. The breakdown factor has had a profound effect on Phil's post job-loss life, demise, recovery, health and day–to-day functioning.

Ferman and Blehar (1981) state that tradition has given special attention to the problem of job-loss for male heads of household. This was based on the assumption that men were responsible not just for themselves but also for dependents. They state that unemployment for a married man was not just a personal crisis; it was a family crisis as well. Kasl and Cobb (1982) present a similar rationale for including only men in their study claiming that men are, in the dominant US culture, presumed to be the primary breadwinners in the family hence job loss in men should have more of an impact than in women.

Although men and women certainly both suffer the indignity of age-discrimination and the consequences, they handle the situation through different eyes. Locked in the breadwinner tradition of having to provide for family, the effect on man was initially deemed to be far more serious than women. However this view has recently been contested by Vogt Yuan (2007) who claims that the consequences of age-discrimination are far greater for women than for men. This is supported by an earlier study by Targ (1983) who claims that women have been discounted as workers and

have been regarded as simply the people who have to deal with the effects of male unemployment. Additionally, Howe, Levy, and Caplan (2004) also claim that women are more likely to take on the burden of other family members and that when a man loses his job the associated stresses of unemployment and financial strain are taken on as a common burden by both partners, however when the female partner loses her job she is more likely to face this crisis on her own.

The level of stress on Phil's wife remain undetermined, however Phil's acceptance of the situation is reflected in the following:  Phil stated:

> Our marriage had been in trouble for a while.  We lived together but most of what we had in the earlier years had long gone.  My job-loss created a situation that brought the inevitable to the fore and to be honest I couldn't wait to get out of there.  Not only was I terribly embarrassed at losing my job, but knowing that she really didn't care anyway was rubbing my face in it.  I took off and just got out of there as quickly as I could.

## Relational identity and the balance of family power

Liem and Liem (1988) claim that employment provides the infrastructure of the family system and determines that work is a primary source of material, social and psychological resources. They state that the family unit derives its routine and ordering of time and place within a social network, social status and material wellbeing from labour force participation.

Haslam (2001) and Pratt (1998) (both in Sluss et al., 2007) state that individuals define themselves in the collective by what the relationship means to the individual, for example an individual may identify with his or her role or relationship with a co-worker because of the appealing role based identity of mutual support and the co-worker's display of empathy and humour. This is person based identity.  Putting this into perspective, the authors state that the greater one's relational identification the more empathy, understanding and loyalty one will have regarding one's partner and the more cooperation, support and altruism one will display towards one partner and the greater one's in-role performance will be providing other important role relationship are not denied support. This relates to the support that an

unemployed spouse (say husband), would get from the wife who empathises with his position.

## Conclusion

This paper has aimed to place the life of a man affected and impacted by the trauma of perceived age discrimination into a broader context by analysing the effects on his personal survival, coping mechanisms, environment and future. The research initially focussed on masculinity, male identity, male ego, self-esteem, depression and mental health and ponders the very issues of life that can, given circumstance and situation, affect each and every one of us, but issues which, in a modern Western world, the majority of us usually avoid.

This paper has told the real life story of dislocation, deprivation and tragedy and has told it in part by using the subject's voice to demonstrate his own personal anguish and pain. The story has, by implication, asked questions about men and in particular has sought to determine where is a man when he has been stripped of his dignity, pride and values, his identity, his manhood, and the very essence of what makes him a man. Where is he now located in the diverse and complex matrix of life? Who is he and where can he go from here?

In the backdrop of a modern world of supposed workplace equality, participative practice and diversity; anomalies, prejudice, discrimination and malpractice still exist in all walks of everyday life. The need for individuals, organisations and Governments to stand up and voice their objections to these practices is long overdue. In the pre-paper abstract I highlighted a comedian's observation on the coward's practice of hiding behind screens of prejudice. It is clear from the anomalous workplace and employment practices outlined in this paper that many people still today fall behind these screens and anomalous agendas to cover for their own lack of honesty and integrity. The fact that they can excuse and legitimise their discriminatory and prejudicial behaviour to the detriment of others is a stain on all honest, forthright and fair minded people of this world. This paper has attempted to throw light on this behaviour and demonstrate the real-life impact and consequences of these actions and hope that one day all forms of prejudice and discrimination can and will be eliminated.

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