An exploration of the midlife career transition experiences of professionals in the Midwest of Ireland

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An exploration of the midlife career transition experiences of professionals in the Midwest of Ireland

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Submitted to the University of Limerick, 25th April 2017
Declaration

I hereby declare that this is entirely my own work and that it has not been submitted as an exercise for the award of a degree at this or any other university. I agree that the Library may lend or copy this dissertation on request.

Signed:

______________________________
Siobhán O’Neill
Let yourself silently be drawn by the strange pull of what you really love. It will not lead you astray.

Rumi
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<tr>
<td>AEGS</td>
<td>Adult Education Guidance Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CEDEFOP</td>
<td>European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CMS</td>
<td>Career Management Skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSO</td>
<td>Central Statistics Office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IGC</td>
<td>Institute of Guidance Counsellors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DES</td>
<td>Department of Education and Skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DJEI</td>
<td>Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NCGE</td>
<td>National Centre for Guidance in Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>NESC</td>
<td>National Economic and Social Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGF</td>
<td>National Guidance Forum</td>
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<tr>
<td>OECD</td>
<td>Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development</td>
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Abstract

The aim of this research study is to examine the experiences of midlife professionals undergoing career transition in the Midwest of Ireland. A further aim of the study is to examine the types of professional careers support currently in existence for midlife professionals during the career transition process.

Career management skills (CMS) and lifelong guidance for adults are essential to increase employability, remain competitive and navigate multiple career transitions (Plant, 2012; Sultana 2011). Career practitioners need to understand career transition as it can be stressful and emotional for their clients (Reid, 2016). Guidance counselling is critical to steer people towards positive employment options and assist individuals manage career transitions successfully (NESC, 2011; Reid, 2016). However, even though guidance supports are recommended for all citizens, it is evident that employed adults do not have access to such support (Cedefop 2008).

An interpretive paradigm was employed using semi structured interviews to collect the experiences of six midlife professionals who had undergone a career transition in the previous twelve months. A thematic approach identified, analysed and reported patterns within the data collected (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

The research findings show that the career transition process is a complex one with adults facing specific challenges such as having to rebuild their professional reputation and identity, engaging with recruitment agencies, ageism and balancing of multiple life roles. Positive effects such as a growth in confidence, renewed energy and prioritisation of life roles were evident during career transition.

The findings conclude the positive benefits of professional careers support from a personal and professional perceptive. However, it appears there is currently a gap in the provision of quality careers support for the midlife professional. Finally, several recommendations are put forward to inform policy, practice and further research.
Chapter 1: Introduction

1.0 Introduction
This chapter presents this research study within the context of relevant theory, policy and practice. It will discuss the context and justification for this study. The positionality of the researcher within the research is established. The research methodology, aims and objectives of the research study are outlined. Finally, a plan of the thesis is given.

1.1 Context and Justification for the Research Study
This research will examine the experiences of midlife professionals undergoing career transition in the Midwest of Ireland. Furthermore, it seeks to establish the types of career supports available to midlife professionals and the benefits of such support. The National Economic and Social Council (NESC, 2011) views career guidance as a mechanism to positively support people with regards to their employability and adaptability in current working environments. Lifelong guidance has been receiving increased attention at international and national policy level during the last 10 years as it is viewed as a key contributor to retaining global competitiveness in a knowledge based society (Plant, 2012). Even though guidance supports have been recommended for all citizens to enable effective career development, the employed have not accessed or benefitted from this support to any great extent (Cedefop, 2008). Sultana (2011) outlines that at European policy level career management skills (CMS) are now deemed necessary for employees to navigate the current labour market through multiple career transitions increasing employability and managing non-linear work patterns.

From a constructivist perspective Savickas (2011) explains how advancing career theory and support strategies for career guidance enables people cope with unprecedented challenges in today’s labour market. Furthermore, he advocates for guidance counsellors to embrace new ways of helping clients in such situations. Kidd (2006) recommends engaging in qualitative research to assist this process and deepen our understanding. This study is concerned with midlife professionals between the ages of 40 and 55 undergoing career transition in the Midwest of Ireland. Although lifelong guidance is receiving increased attention, the researcher was concerned about the availability of career guidance to support midlife professionals in this geographical region particularly. Furthermore, the study aims to give a voice to users on what career support they find beneficial. Nicholson and West (1988) refer to work/role transition as
“any move into and/or out of a job, any move between jobs, or any major alteration in the context of work duties and activities (cited in Kidd, 2006, pg. 4). Although, there is no longer a clearly defined career path for many individuals, by providing quality support and interventions, transitions between employment and unemployment can have the potential to liberate and add value to people’s lives (Field, 2010).

In practice the researcher has worked with professionals undergoing redundancy as well as experiencing it herself so can empathise with the unique feelings associated with transitions out of and into the workforce (Sharf, 2010). Neary et al., (2016) concluded that strong evidence exists that career guidance support will impact positively on career development for adults, whilst Krumboltz (2009) maintains this support is essential during career transition. In Ireland, the Adult Education Guidance Service (AEGS) offers a guidance service to adults that includes impartial adult education information, one-to-one guidance and group guidance, which helps people make informed educational, career and life choices (NCGE, 2012). However, the service is targeted at specific groups, especially the unemployed, and not towards employed professionals who need career advice and guidance. It is likely that employed professionals rely on careers support from their own organisation, career coaches, recruitment agencies and have no central support agency to access careers support directly. Therefore, this study aims to develop new insights on adult midlife career transitions and is strongly motivated by learnings to assist careers professionals support this cohort of clients. Furthermore, the researcher is very client centred in her work and often finds herself under time pressure to deliver on deadlines whilst supporting clients in the transition process so is a strong advocator for adult career guidance.

1.2 Researchers Position in this Study

Thomas (2009) asserts the importance of stating the positionality of the researcher in interpretivist research. In this study, it was important for the researcher to acknowledge her own position and assumptions on the topic as well as on her role in the research process (Cohen et al., 2007). Therefore, this section aims to contextualize the researcher’s place in the study. The researcher has worked in the private sector throughout her career and has experience of transitions into and out several employment environments. She spent the last twelve years’ career coaching professionals who had experienced voluntary redundancy, wanted a career promotion, and were seeking entry or re-entry into the workplace. More recently she transitioned to working in a recruitment agency to gain a deeper insight into the recruitment
process to inform her practice. The research for this study was carried out in the recruitment agency where she is employed. This could be considered ‘insider’ research as it is within her organisation. Robson (2007) outlines it could also be considered outsider research as she was not investigating her own clients. Rather she interviewed clients of her colleagues so was not familiar with the population she worked with.

The researcher was aware of her positionality which may affect the interpretation of the findings (McLeod, 2011). Etherington (2004) posits that researchers need to be aware of their beliefs and deconstruct them to seek new knowledge to their research. It is not simply about self-awareness of these beliefs and attitudes but also about not reinforcing them. Reflexivity, therefore, became central to this research study to ensure validity and the research sought professional supervision to support this (Bryman, 2012). The researcher found the transition from self-employment to employment quite challenging. Feelings of being a new starter, entering unknown territory and having to prove oneself emerged for the researcher during her own career transition. She had to be careful to acknowledge these but not influence the findings or interpretation of these in any way by her own assumptions.

1.3 Research Methodology
An interpretivist paradigm underpinned this research project as the researchers wished to capture people’s experiences, perceptions and feelings about their career transition in the context of their age and life stage (McMahon and Patton, 2006). Six individual semi-structured interviews were conducted in late 2016 and early 2017 in order to acquire insights into the interviewees’ perspective (Sugarman, 2001). The interviews were transcribed and a thematic analysis strategy was used to generate the primary findings (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Thomas, 2009). The critical issues of validity, reliability, reflexivity and ethics were considered throughout the methodology used and are addressed in Chapter 3.

1.4 Aims and Objectives
The overarching aim of this research study has been to examine the experience of midlife professionals undergoing career transition in the Midwest of Ireland in 2016. Furthermore, the research objectives were:

1. Examine and critically analyse relevant literature available on Irish and international career guidance policy, theory and practice on the topic of midlife career transitions.
2. Gain an understanding and insight into the experiences of career transition for professional clients of a recruitment agency aged between the ages of 40 and 55.

3. Critically analyse the overall findings and make recommendations for future practice for guidance counsellors and other careers professionals to support the midlife professional undergoing career transition.

1.5 Outline of the Research Study

Chapter 1: The aim of this chapter is to introduce the reader to the research topic, the purpose of the investigation, methodology and aims and objectives of the study. It also provides an overview of the six chapters.

Chapter 2: This chapter critically reviews the relevant literature on economic and career guidance policy nationally and internationally as well as discussing theoretical models of career transition and adult development. It examines professional career supports available for the midlife professional.

Chapter 3: This chapter outlines the methodology approach applied to the research study. It identifies the primary and secondary questions as well as the rationale for the chosen paradigm. Data collections methods are discussed and issues of reliability, reflexivity, validity and ethical research are addressed.

Chapter 4: This chapter discusses the analytical strategy employed and the research findings from the primary data collection. The findings are presented under the themes that emerged from the data.

Chapter 5: This chapter presents a critical interpretation and synthesis of the findings and results of the study within the context of the literature review.

Chapter 6: This chapter draws conclusion on the overall findings of the study while analysing the strengths and limitations. It highlights recommendations for future policy, practice and research and reflects on the researcher’s personal learning.

1.6 Conclusion

This chapter provided an overview of the research study and outlined the researcher’s justification and researcher’s position in the study. It identified the aims and objectives of the research and provided an outline of each chapter. The next chapter reviews literature relevant to the research study.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.0 Introduction
The aim of this literature review is to examine literature relevant to the research topic which Thomas (2009) refers to as analysing and synthesising; analysing refers to how one part relates to another and synthesising is how one bring things together. In conducting this literature review, relevant research material has been sourced from primary texts, policy documents, journals, databases, articles and conferences (Thomas, 2009).

This chapter is divided into three thematic sections. The first section illuminates the current and recent economic context internationally, nationally and regionally. In addition, it highlights some of the policy measures to address the economic situation in relation to adult employment and guidance counselling. The second section seeks to define career and scrutinises some relevant transition models as well as typical themes that arise for midlife transition whilst referring to gender and cultural differences. The final section examines career development and decision making theories relevant to midlife. It also examines the role of the adult guidance counsellor in relation to support during career transition.

2.1 Policy Context: International, National and Regional
This section will examine the policy context in relation to lifelong guidance counselling in response to the economic situation nationally and internationally.

2.1.1 Economic and Employment Policy
This section will examine the recent economic situation, it’s impact on the Irish labour market and the government policies to address this. Bristow and Healy’s (2015) research into the resilience of economies post the recent economic downturn in Wales found that this economic period has highlighted the vulnerability of many regional economies to international shocks. One of their dominant themes identified is the effect of the economic crisis which impacted unevenly across European geographical regions (Bristow & Healy, 2015). While few countries escaped the impact of the recession, Ireland experienced one of the more severe downturns with unemployment increasing from 4.6 in 2006 to 15% in 2012. (Bergin et al, 2014; OECD, 2014). During the so called ‘Celtic Tiger Economy’ period, between the mid-1990’s and mid-2000’s when Ireland experienced rapid economic growth, Ireland was at full employment levels at 4% (CSO, 2015).
The impact of the downturn resulted in major social and economic problems in Ireland and across Europe (OECD, 2014). In response, the Irish government launched a major employment policy entitled Action Plan for Jobs 2012 with the objective of supporting job creation (DJEI, 2016). The key aspects involved investment in training and upskilling to improve employability and adapt to labour market changes (OECD, 2014). Subsequent Action Plan for Jobs have been produced including focused regional action plans. The Pathways to Work (DSP, 2015) formed part of the Action Plan which devised strategies to support the unemployed back into work. This approach has proven to be effective in bringing about a jobs recovery (OECD, 2014) as currently the unemployment rate stands at 6.6% (CSO, 2017). The Irish Government’s current target is to reduce unemployment to 6% by 2020 (DJEI, 2017).

Contextually, it is also important to understand current employment trends from a regional perspective. Regarding the location of the current research study, since the launch of the Action Plan for Jobs 2012 unemployment fell in the region from 16% in Q1 2012 to 7.4% in Q3 2016 (DJEI 2016 & 2017). Employment remained static in 2014 and 2015 in the Midwest region (CSO, 2016). An analysis of 2015 labour market transitions showed that, to begin with, the number of transitions into employment, either from unemployment or from economic inactivity, exceeded transitions out of employment (CSO, 2016). When compared with the year previously, there was a decrease in the share of persons remaining unemployed (CSO, 2016). The employment figures have been substantially boosted for people undergoing transition in this region. In May 2016, approximately 25,300 persons were on the Live Register in the Mid-West region, a 10% decline year-on-year (Milićević, 2016). However, the government’s latest Action Plan for Jobs for Midwest 2015-2017 only refers to career guidance counsellors in relation to secondary schools and young adults entering third level with no allusion to provision for adults (DSP, 2015).

2.1.2 Lifelong Guidance Policy
This section will discuss adult career guidance policy and highlight some key concerns for the midlife professional. For European and Irish policy makers, it was imperative to address the social and economic issues facing the nation during the economic recession especially in the context of employability (ELGPN, 2012). Watts (1996) stresses that careers education and guidance is a profoundly political process. It operates at the interface between the individual and society, between self and opportunity, between aspiration and realism. It facilitates the allocation of life chances.
The Council of the European Union (2004; 2008) has highlighted the need for strong guidance services throughout the lifespan to equip citizens with the skills to manage their learning and careers and the transitions between and within education/training and work (Cedefop, 2008; ELGPN, 2012). Ireland, as a member of the OECD, requires its citizens to be proactive regarding upskilling and training to equip them meet labour market demands (OECD, 2010). In relation to adults, the Council of the European Union (2008) identified the following as priority areas:

- Encourage career management skills development across the lifespan
- Facilitate career guidance access to all citizens
- Develop quality assurance in guidance provision services
- Encourage coordination amongst the various local, regional and national stakeholders (CEU, 2008).

The OECD, DES and European Council have outlined the rationale for providing adult guidance to assist societies and governments achieve social equity with a sustainable, knowledge-based inclusive society (DES, 2000). In Irish practice, there are a range of public agencies involved in providing adult guidance to adults in transition including:

- Intreo – a one stop shop providing income and employment supports and career guidance targeted towards individuals launched in 2012 (DES, 2013)
- Jobpath - new programme of employment activation aimed specifically at the long-term unemployed (over 12 months). (DES 2013)
- Solas – aims to improve further education and training opportunities for the unemployed and is an activation measure which responds to the European target rate for lifelong learning of 15% of adults (DES, 2013)
- Adult Education Guidance Service (AEGS) - The AEGS Service is a DES funded service providing educational guidance services for adults in forty Irish locations with one based in Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT) (NCGE, 2014).

However, the OECD 2014 argues these have been ad hoc and somewhat scattered (OECD, 2014). There are a range of online and private services including coaching, career guidance, career management and outplacement organisations across Ireland for the adult professional who is seeking guidance through career transition. However, there is little evidence of research
completed on their effectiveness and there is widespread agreement that the focus of guidance for adults in Ireland needs to be widened, to include adults who are employed as well as unemployed irrespective of financial income (NGF, 2007). Furthermore, the OECD highlights the adult can be reluctant to pay for these which presents a supply and demand challenge (OECD, 2003). Some employers provide these services to their staff but it is primarily down to the individual to access these in Ireland (OECD, 2003). In the context of midlife and later adulthood, growing international evidence suggests employers’ tendency is to invest less in employees above the age of 45 as they may not get as long a return than younger age groups (Sweeney, 2013). Whilst the OECD (2014) highlights the need for policies and recognises the reality of decreased budgets, individuals need to take responsibility for their own lifelong learning career development (Council of the European Union, 2008; NGF, 2007; OECD 2004). Services need to assist adults develop career management skills and not simply address quick decisions and immediate impact but adopt a long term lifelong career guidance approach (Sweeney, 201; OECD 2003, 2004). The Irish National Skills Strategy 2025 (DES, 2015) outlined the need for employers to support their employees with their career development. Traditionally, career guidance has been geared towards the unemployed or secondary and tertiary students (Hooley, 2014). Watts et al., (2005) raises an important issue of who should pay for these and highlight that individuals in the UK do not have a tradition of purchasing career guidance services. Therefore, a wider debate is required on accessibility to career guidance services to include all adults (OECD, 2003). Bearing this in mind, the essence of guidance counselling being independent, free of bias, well informed by the labour market yet focused on the individual should remain at the core of any service provision (Sweeney 2013).

2.2 Career and Career Transition
This section will examine what career means and discuss some relevant career transition models.

2.2.1 Defining Career
Career can mean different things to different people and it is wise for the individual to understand their definition of career during transition. Blustein (2006) proposed that working provides sources of identity for people as well as means of interpersonal connection, social contribution and opportunities for self-determination. Super’s (1980) developmental perspective describes career as a “sequence of positions occupied by a person during a lifetime”, whilst a more subjective view by Arthur et al. (1989) defines career as an “evolving sequence of work experience over time” (Briscoe et al, pg. 61, 2012). Career success or the
meaning of a career is individualistic and can be subjective or objective. According to Briscoe et al., (2012) subjective career success focuses on how a person feels about their objective career achievement. Conversely, objective career success focuses on salary, hierarchical position within an organisation and has more to do with status and social recognition than what the individual feels (Kidd, 2006). Cedefop (2008) argues that career can create purpose and meaning in one’s life.

2.2.2 Career Transition

Nicolson and West (1988) define work/role transition as “any move into and/or out of a job, any move between jobs, or any major alternation in the context of work duties and activities” (cited in Kidd 2006, pg. 44). Transition is a psychological process that individuals “go through as they internalise and come to terms with the details of the new situation that the change brings about” (Bridges, 2003 p. 3). Briefly Bridges (2003) describes transition as a three-phase process that individuals progress through: Phase 1 is letting go of the old ways and identity and deals with loss; Phase 2 is when the old is gone but the new is not fully operational; and Phase 3 is when people form a new identity and experience a different energy. The phases are different processes which can occur simultaneously and are not in a linear fashion. Goodman et al., (2006) define transition as “any event, or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles” (pg. 33). Transitions can be positive or negative experiences and bring about both positive or negative stress, emotions or reactions (Goodman et al., 2006).

Transitions in adulthood vary in how people experience them. Much change occurs in adulthood including behaviours, attitudes, opinions and social roles however personality is enduring (Boyd and Bee, 2011). In middle adulthood, most cognitive skills are maintained but these may be enhanced or inefficient pending experiences (Boyd and Bee, 2011). Physical changes can have an influence on the sense of personal identity as well as family and work domains (Boyd and Bee, 2011). As adults mature more integrated and contextual knowledge occurs, for example Atchley’s Continuity Theory of Ageing (1989) proposes that one retains a sense of internal continuity identity even in the face of significant external or environmental discontinuity (cited in Sugarman, 2001).

There are numerous transition models which have been applied to career transition that assist clients promote their own awareness of how they cope with the transition process (Kidd, 2006). One of the more famous ones is Schlossberg’s (1995) which identified three transitions types namely anticipated (such as expecting a baby), unanticipated (divorce, sudden
death) or a non-event (cited in Chickering and Schlossberg, 1995). Schlossberg’s (1995) models which strives to uncover basic processes of coping during any transition identifies factors that influence an individual’s ability to cope with transition as follows:

1. The Situation – this can be the trigger to set off the change, what sort of change, wanted or unwanted. She points out it is not the situation but the meaning we construct around the event.
2. The Self – to who is it happening – incorporates gender, culture, age as well as self-efficacy, values and resilience.
3. The Support – types e.g. family, friends, services, and whether is objective and stable.
4. The Strategies – one uses to cope or adapt to the transition (Goodman et al., 2006).

Another model proposed by Adams et al., (1976) outlines a series of seven stages that individuals go through when undergoing transition with self-esteem varying through each stage. Individuals commence at immobilisation which may involve shock. The next stage brings about a reaction either positive or negative and is sometimes accompanied by denial. Stage 3 and 4 bring about awareness and acceptance but can be characterised by self-doubt and can involve anxiety before moving into the 5th stage of exploring new options. Stage 6 involves searching for new meaning and finally stage 7 integrates the new way of life (Adams et al., 1976). Leybourne (2016) advocates using models such as this one as it can assist in understanding and helping employees through a transition.

Career transitions are contextual and determined by the individual’s relationship to the environmental setting in which the transition is occurring (Goodman et al., 2006). The impact of the transition varies depending on the alterations it causes in an individual’s daily life (Goodman et al., 2006). Career transitions often have a profound effect on a professional’s psychological and social status, relationships within the family, physical health and well-being and lifestyle (Yosen et al., 2012). Sugarman (2001) defines transition as life events occurring over a period influenced by history and outcome and highlights that midlife transitions are often viewed by adults as a challenge as opposed to a crisis. Sugarman’s life course model provides us with insight on transition clients as he highlights the individualistic nature of transition (Sugarman, 2004). Career can often hit a plateau during middle adulthood (aged 40 to 60) (Sugarman, 2004). However, Sugarman (2001) highlights that midlife (aged 40-60) is often seen as a period of change for the better with more freedom, new activities and
more time. Boyd and Bee (2011) point out that this age represents physical, cognitive social and personality changes stress the need for using the brain to compensate for cognitive decline. Oswald and Warr (1996) conducted several longitudinal studies on happiness in work and promote the concept of job satisfaction being U shaped in the context of age. Gazioglu and Tansel (2006) concurred with the findings of Oswald and Warr’s (1996) that midlife typically relates to lower levels of satisfaction as opposed to those younger or approaching retirement.

Transition triggers can be internal or external, i.e. driven by the person, so career transition can be influenced by an innate desire to develop, or by external forces such as organisational or economic changes (Briscoe et al., 2012). Briscoe et al., (2012) have highlighted that a dominant influence nowadays is the protean whereby the career actor drives himself or herself. Societal and economic shifts such as globalization, offshoring, and the recent unemployment crisis indicate how unstable and unpredictable the world of work has become (Brown, 2015). Furthermore, it is leading to non-linear career trajectories and it is now common for people to have to cope with several career transitions throughout their career lifespan (Fouad & Bynner, 2008; Rice, 2014). This unpredictability makes career planning difficult, and may increase the likelihood that chance events will affect people’s career development (Fouad & Bynner, 2008; Krumboltz et al., 2013; Savickas, 2011). The next section will deal specifically with literature on career development theory, decision-making and the role of career guidance.

2.3 Theoretical Perspectives on Adult Career Development, Career Decision-Making and Career Guidance

This section will examine adult career development theory including the differentialist, developmental, social learning and constructivist/narrative theories of development. It will highlight career decision styles which provide insight into how people make decisions during career transition. Furthermore, it will discuss the role of the career guidance counselling with adults.

2.3.1 Adult Career Development Theories

Career development theories can act as a source of guidance strategies, insight and techniques to aid the guidance counsellor (Watts et al., 1996). Historically career theory was governed by a matching process, fit to environment and trait and factor methodology known as the differentialist perspective (Kidd 1996). The first significant theory of vocational behaviour came from Frank Parsons (1909) who proposed the “job-fit” theory which involved the scientific matching of a person to a role and aimed to solve a social issue (Reid, 2016). Holland
(1985, 1997) enhanced this theory further by assisting clients to become more self-aware of their interests and personality and expanded it to include personality as well as work environment to assist people make informed decisions on their career direction (Reid, 2016). However, Holland’s (1985, 1997) theory has been criticised for its simplicity and lack of consideration to the economic situation and workplace environments, as well as individual variables that influence one’s career and decision making process (Kidd, 2006). Similarly, Hansen (2001) has stressed it does not provide enough focus on the individual within a dynamic world or take account of the various roles individuals occupy across their lifespan. However, Savickas (2011) argues the trait and factor theory still provides a basis for the 21st century theorists to develop thinking.

Two highly prevalent career stage/age development theorists are Super (1957) and Levinson (1978). Savickas (2005) characterised Super’s (1957) theory in midlife as establishment (aged 25–44) moving towards maintenance (aged 45 – 64). The preceding stages involve growth and exploration which occur from birth to aged 24. In addition, Super’s (1980) life-career rainbow represents the various roles one occupies through the lifespan and referred to one’s career as a vocation (Kidd, 2006). Developmentally, the adult will typically look towards self-actualisation, advancement, reflection and stabilising choices but progresses through an ongoing implementation of the self-concept (Inkson et al., 2015). Moving on he/she will seek to maintain a steady position, whilst performing, achieving, innovating and retaining interest (Inkson et al., 2015). Super’s (1957) focus on individuals and their personal circumstances gives flexibility to his theory and whilst Savickas (2002) proposed that this theory is still relevant, each time an individual is destabilised by economic, personal events a mini cycle may occur within an individual. Similarly, Kidd (2006) outlines that Super pays scant attention to the process individuals undergo whilst changing roles. Furthermore, whilst Super developed the construct of vocational maturity or progression through growth and exploration, the notion of career adaptability or readiness to cope with change is more relevant to today’s world (Inkson et al., 2015).

Another American theorist, Levinson (1978) used ‘seasons’ as a metaphor for life giving the midlife transition a place where reappraisal takes place and examination of what one really wants occurs (Inkson et al., 2015). In Levinson’s theory, the tasks of reviewing, modifying and revising earlier career choices in middle adulthood are relevant to career transitions (Kidd, 2006). However, Levinson’s theory is primarily based on middle aged American males and it largely reflects what goes on in the individual in spite of the career environment (Kidd, 2006;
Inkson et al., 2015). Interestingly Levinson characterised early 40’s as being a turbulent time in one’s life (Inkson et al., 2015). Whilst Kidd (2006) highlights that Levinson only included males in his earlier study in 1980 he concluded that women undergo similar stages but are more affected by culture and sexism in a further piece of research.

Erikson’s (1959) theory of lifespan development identified eight stages of development and at each stage a crisis needed resolution to progress to the next stage of development, to form a healthy personality (Boyd and Bee, 2011). Midlife or middle adulthood is referred to as the ages 40 to 65 and is characterised by generativity versus stagnation developing our sense of the bigger picture (Boyd and Bee, 2011). Erikson (1959) perceived this stage in career as career settling but highlighted that if in practice the client has unresolved conflicts arising from different stages, career counselling could be a forum to address some of these (Kidd, 2006). Furthermore, career advancement and vocational identity are prevalent considerations in midlife and work assists to create meaning and a sense of purpose in their lives (Yosen et al., 2012).

Finally, more contemporary theories such as the constructivist approaches reflect today’s dynamic world and enable the counsellor to broaden perspectives when working with clients (Savickas, 2011). For example, constructs such as identity rather than personality, adaptability rather than maturity are reflected in social constructivist theories and Savickas (2011) argues that adults design their careers with life-long learning, employability, family and life role priorities in mind. Savickas’s (2002) career construction model helps counsellors and clients to co-construct their story, find meaning within and learn from prior experiences and decision-making processes by reflecting on experience (Inkson et al., 2015). Savickas (2011) found as clients are going through transition they reflect on their past experiences if given the opportunity to do so and counsellors can assist them to understand their whole career story thus acting as a guideline for future transitions. Lent et al.’s (2002) Social Cognitive Career Theory is about individuals thought processes when making career decisions (Inkson et al., 2015). The theory explains how interests develop over time & self-efficacy is a central theme where outcomes are predicted by expectations, performance and work interest (Swanson & Fouad, 2010). Support and encouragement are central to this theory to increase self-efficacy (Inkson et al., 2015). However, we are now encouraged to look more reflexively at our careers and move away from information processing and social learning theories to more current thinking that accounts for divergent and convergent thinking process (Blustein et al., 2013).
2.3.2 Career Decision Making Theories

This section will examine career decision making theories which provide insight into how people make decisions during career transition.

“Career decision-making is undoubtedly a complex process involving a range of cognitive and affective processes, behaviours, environment and contextual factors, together with individual preferences and beliefs”.

(Bimrose and Mulvey, 2015, pg. 339).

Bimrose and Mulvey’s (2015) research across Europe found that much of the research on transitions has been based in the USA and centred on college students. They argue that more relevant qualitative and contextual research is needed to assist those who do not conform to traditional career theory. Even though their findings are limited, they recommend practitioners adapt their guidance service for adults considering individual decision making styles. “Career interventions are not quick and simple, especially with adults” (Bimrose & Mulvey, 2015, pg. 348).

Decisions on adjustments or transitions need to be made across the lifespan to manage one’s career “is viewed as a series of choices that individuals make over a life span, rather than a choice made early in life” (Fouad and Bynner, 2008, pg.241). Bimrose and Barnes (2007) proposed four different transition decision making styles arising from their research of adults who availed of career guidance as follows:

- Evaluative: self-appraisal through evaluation of needs, values and abilities
- Aspirational: career and personal goals intertwined with vague distant goals
- Strategic: focused assessment of options, identify goals and plan to achieve
- Opportunistic: use intuition and take advantage of opportunities; flexible and open

Bland and Pittman (2014) highlight that although the skills promoted by career decision making models based on information processing, social cognition and person fit environment are necessary for career success, they are insufficient for today’s current demands. Murtagh et al., (2011) suggest decisions can also be heavily influenced by emotions and gut reactions. Finally, decision making around career requires insight into skills, abilities and interests as well as developing knowledge on the options available (Gati and Levin, 2014).
2.3.3 Career Guidance for Adults

This section discusses the role of career guidance counsellors when working with adults. Guidance counsellors are often “key actors” in a transition point of a client’s life to support them through transition (Sugarman, 2001). Career guidance counsellors are well placed to support clients through challenging changes and this research attempts to explore client experiences of professional career support (Kidd, 2006). The issue of support during career transition was addressed by Bright et al., (2005) who suggested that career guidance counsellors can encourage clients to become more comfortable with the notion of developing meaning and purpose to their careers during career transition. It would seem imperative that given the decision-making process is critical to successful transitions career guidance would play a strategic role around the career development process for adults (Sultana, 2012).

Savickas (2011) highlights the relevance of advancing career development theories and developing strategies to assist clients that support them in with unprecedented challenges. For example, being life-long, holistic, contextual, and preventive, the proposed life-design framework for counselling interventions aims to increase clients’ adaptability, narratability and activity (Savickas et al, 2009). Krumboltz et al. (2013) found that outplacement counselling can be helpful if psychological factors are not addressed and emotional effects are particularly damaging. It helps clients think, feel and act in the real world outside of the career counselling session (Krumboltz et al., 2013). Krumboltz et al., (2013) encourages individuals to expect the unexpected and advocates for career counselling to encourage clients to view challenges as opportunities and find work they are passionate about. Niles et al’s (2014) hope based counselling generates positive encouragement in clients especially in times of redundancy or career indecisiveness which are typical challenges facing the adult. It encourages self-reflection, action, visualisation, goal setting, planning, adapting and implementation as a process (Niles et al., 2014). Stoltz et al., (2013) concluded that an integration of mental health and career counselling during transition could be beneficial for clients (Stoltz. et al., 2013). Briscoe at al., (2012) found that someone who supported their interviewees, whether it was to challenge their assumptions or think outside the box, was highly beneficial irrespective of that intervention being of a casual or a formal one. Furthermore, Hooley and Dodd (2015) stress the role career guidance plays in supporting employees to acquire skills and qualifications.

For employees, career transition support can provide an opportunity to reflect on one’s career (Kidd, 2006). Career transition support also increases managers’ sense of control or agency (Johnson and Jackson, 2012). The goal of any career intervention is not to eliminate stresses,
transition or changes in life but to help support individuals to cope with them (Kidd, 2006). Kidd (2006) also highlights the notion of career guidance counsellors not being experts in today’s world but rather guiding people to choose their career path.

Arising from the literature is the conclusion that occupational prospects seem far less definable and predictable, with job transitions more frequent and difficult. These new conceptions of work life recognize that career belongs to the person not the organization (Savickas et al., 2009). Therefore, guidance counsellors need to encourage clients to take an active role in the career decision making process and recognise social influences when constructing meaning to their own career stories (Blustein et al., 2013). However, a cautionary word from Gluck (1997) who criticised reflective career decision making models as introducing uncertainty into the lives of people already experiencing stress (cited in Bland and Pittman 2014). During the career transition process, it may not be appropriate to promote self-understanding and growth but rather listen empathically to feelings to enable the individual process what transition means for them (Ali & Graham, 1996) and a combination of career counselling and coaching may be more beneficial for the client (Reid, 2016).

2.4 Conclusion

This literature review has critically examined key issues related to a regional, national and international policy on employment and lifelong guidance counselling for midlife adults in career transition. It discussed the adult guidance services sector in Ireland which seems ad hoc at its best and not geared towards adult professionals undergoing a transition irrelevant of context. It explored the concept of career in the context of our current world of work and examined career and guidance theories relevant to midlife and transition models that assist to inform practice for a guidance counsellor. The focus of this study is to examine the career transition experiences of adults who are in or have come through the career transition process in the current economic context. The next Chapter will address the methodology employed in the study.
Chapter 3: Methodology

3.0 Introduction
This chapter will discuss the research approach and the paradigm underpinning this research study. It also includes the methods used for data collection and analysis. Furthermore, issues of validity, reliability, reflexivity and ethics will be addressed.

3.1 Research Questions
Thomas (2009) states that research is not about proving something but rather searching for answers to questions of problems. He explains the term methodology is not just a presentation of the methods used in a research study but involves consideration of the methods, how they were used and why these specific methods were chosen over another. The research topic in the current study was concerned with the experience of career transition for midlife professionals (aged 40-55) based in the Mid-West region of Ireland. Furthermore, it sought to explore how careers guidance counsellors can assist this client group to navigate their career transitions. The research questions underpinning this study are addressed in the next section.

3.1.1 Research Questions
The specific research questions in this study are divided into primary and secondary questions. The primary question asked, “What are the experiences of midlife professionals who are undergoing career transition in the Mid-West region of Ireland?”

The secondary questions were:

1. What effects does career transition have on midlife professionals?
2. How do midlife professionals adapt to their career transition/s?
3. What is the client’s experience of career guidance support, if any, in relation to his/her career transition?
4. How can career practitioners assist midlife careers professionals with their career transition?

The following sections will address the research approach that was used to answer the research questions.
3.1.2 Research Paradigm: Interpretivist (Qualitative)

This section will discuss the underlying paradigm and methodology of the study. A paradigm is a school of thought on a subject (Thomas, 2009). The paradigm is usually determined by the topic the researcher is investigating (Cohen et al., 2011). Broadly speaking, there are two major paradigms used in social sciences to conduct research namely quantitatively (positivist) or qualitatively (interpretive) (Thomas, 2009). Positivism believes the social world can be studied objectively whereas an interpretivism examines the constructs individuals bring to their own situations (Thomas, 2009). The positivist approach views knowledge from an objective viewpoint without researcher bias (Thomas, 2009). Conversely, according to Bryman (2012), using an interpretive approach allows researchers view events through the eyes of the people they are studying and is prone to researcher bias. Furthermore, it captures meanings and insights into experiences which quantitative research cannot do (Bryman, 2012).

An interpretivist paradigm underpinned this research project as it is about people, their experiences, perceptions, feelings and how they construct the narratives of their career transition in the context of their age and life stage (McMahon and Patton, 2006). An interpretive method “assumes there are many realities as there are people” (Kidd, 2006, pg. 86). In the context of this practitioner based study, this approach allowed the researcher to gain insight into the client’s experiences of career transition and change at a point in their career development (Kidd, 2006). Increased use of interpretive methods in counselling and guidance research is advocated for as traditionally these disciplines have been largely positivist (Kidd 2006; McLeod 2011).

While positivism enables generalisability and predictability of results, interpretivism does not guarantee this as it considers the complexity of individual’s realities (Thomas, 2009). Qualitative methods are “concerned with social and personal processes and relations” contrasting with quantitative which does not allow the researcher explore feelings and thoughts in a social world (Hogan et al., 2009, pg. 4.) Rather quantitative methods focus on facts, numerical data and the verbal word to interpret the data (Hogan et al., 2009). Stead et al’s (2012) analysis of both types of methods in career guidance research found that using a qualitative approach enhanced the ability to accurately capture the experience of peoples’ working lives and careers in ways that are inaccessible through statistical means. They concluded that whilst quantitative approaches have been the traditional method deployed by researchers in the careers field, the limited amount of qualitative research is a concern which needs to be addressed. Furthermore, they stress that rigour is a growing concern in conducting
qualitative research even though careers practitioners are equipped to conduct this type of research. Bimrose and Hearne (2012) echo the lack of qualitative research but counteract this concern by emphasising the need to address issues of bias, ethics and trustworthiness to produce rigorous qualitative research.

Whilst it might have been useful to combine both paradigms, the researcher’s skillset, interest and timeline for the purposes of this study led her to choose one methodology over the other. As feelings and thoughts are relevant to the topic of career transition an interpretive method was deemed the most appropriate approach. When clients open up to tell their story, they have already constructed a meaning to their events in the context of their personal situations (Savickas, 2005). The researcher was interested in this meaning and hoped that the narratives of the research participants could provide insight for others undergoing career transition as well as the practitioners who support and guide them through the process.

Bryman (2012, p.41) emphasises that “choices of research strategy, design, or method have to be dovetailed with the specific research question being investigated”. There are many variations of research design and often these can overlap, so the role of the researcher is to become sensitive to these whilst adopting a recursive approach to one’s research (Yin, 2011). This research was carried out with a sample of clients undergoing a career transition who, in 2016 accessed the services of the Irish Recruitment Agency where the researcher worked. The researcher sought to understand what it was like to experience career transition and provide thick descriptions of such experiences (Cohen et al., 2011). Furthermore, it was envisaged that the acquisition of professional insights from the study may assist other careers professionals working with clients undergoing career transition. By choosing a small sample size and gaining thick descriptions of the multiple realities of the participants, the findings may be typical of individual’s experiences but are not likely to be generalisable to the wider population (Cohen et al., 2011; Thomas, 2009; Yin 2009). To ensure objectivity the researcher chose not to engage with her own clients in the study. The process was viewed as research as opposed to professional practice (Hearne, 2012).

3.3 Data Collection Methods
This section will outline how the researcher accessed the sample required and the method used for data collection.
3.3.1 Access and Sampling

This research gained ethical approval from University of Limerick on 7th November 2016. At the outset, a subject information letter and consent form was given to the researcher’s Line Manager seeking approval to conduct the research in the Recruitment Agency (Appendix A). Signed consent was given by her manager on the 16th November 2016 to carry out the study in the organisation (Appendix B). Following consent, purposive sampling was employed to access participants’ as this type of sampling provided depth to the study and helped the researcher to access people with knowledge and experience of the subject of career transition (Cohen et al., 2011). The research deliberately sought to gain a variety of experiences amongst the sample. Some participants had experienced unemployment; others redundancy and others had transitioned for personal reasons. However, a disadvantage of this type of sampling is “it does not represent the wider population” (Cohen et al., 2011, pg. 157). Furthermore, Cohen et al., (2011, pg. 161) point out that this sampling method is selective and biased, but the aim of this research study is not to make generalisations but to present findings with their “own intrinsic value”.

A sample of six participants was chosen which allowed the researcher gain thick descriptions of their career transition experiences. The justification for this number is it enabled the researcher to obtain sufficient information within the scope of the study. The sample population all had a professional background so all were educated either to Diploma or Doctorate Level. All six participants were between the ages of 40 and 55, of mixed gender, residing in the Midwest and had undergone a career transition within the last 12 months.

For the purposes of the ethical selection of participants, the Line Manager organised another colleague to identify a possible sample population using the criteria of age and location from the Recruitment Agency database. This produced a sample of ten potential clients who had received recruitment support from the Recruitment Agency and had experienced a career transition during the last twelve months. When approval was granted by the Line Manager, a condition for data protection purposes was that the colleagues who worked with the participant would initially seek permission from them to use their email address. A brief introduction to the project created by the Line Manager was given to the colleagues to make these telephone calls. The first six individuals contacted were willing to receive an email directly from the researcher. A follow up email was then sent by the researcher with an information letter inviting them to participate in the research interviews commencing on the 15th December 2017 (Appendix C). Consent forms were sent to participants which were signed and returned to the
researcher in advance of the interviews (Appendix D). Dates and times were arranged by the researcher and the six interviews were conducted between the 28th December 2016 and 13th February 2017.

3.3.2 Semi Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect the data from the six participants as the researcher was interested in the client’s story and this allowed for personal descriptions of experiences (Brown and Lent, 2005). McLeod (2011, pg.15) points out the qualitative method forms a “narrative knowing, grounded in everyday experience”. The semi-structured interview method permitted the researcher to use the core skills of guidance counselling developed over twelve years of professional practice. Thomas (2009) credits the semi-structured interview as being flexible enough to expand and probe when appropriate whilst maintaining structure in the interview process. Whilst structured interviews use predetermined questions in written or oral format and are usually used to obtain demographic information (Merriam, 2009), semi-structured interviews allowed this researcher “to understand the world from the interviewees’ perspective” (Sugarman, 2001, pg. 34).

The researcher sought participant’s opinions, feelings, experiences and narratives in the context of their personal and professional situation. McLeod (2011) highlights how researchers can assist in the telling of stories by using open ended questions, listening, reflection and inviting client disclosure. Clarification was sought by the researcher during the interview and furthermore it enabled the topic to be explored with depth (Sugarman, 2001). Interviews allowed the researcher to observe body language as well verbal language and enable the interviewee to expand on the topic if necessary. Interviews, however, were time consuming and contained data which was not easy to analyse (Cohen et al., 2011; Sugarman, 2001). They were also subject to researcher bias (Punch 2009; Thomas 2009). To counteract this, using the skills of active listening, flexibility and being non-judgemental during the interview was employed by the researcher (Bryman, 2012). The core skills of counselling, i.e. active listening, congruence and empathy, were used throughout the interviews to develop rapport and trust between the participant and researcher (Hennick et al., 2011). Furthermore, bracketing of the researcher’s own personal bias and assumptions on career transition was important. The researcher had recently undergone her own career transition from self-employment as a career coach to employment as a recruitment consultant. This bracketing of bias was assisted by professional counselling supervision for the researcher during the interviewing process (Clarke and Braun, 2013).
A framework of data collection questions which emerged from the literature review process was used to conduct the six interviews (Appendix E). Following the literature review, four key themes were identified namely the participants’ individual career stories, their experiences of career transitions, how they had adapted to the career transition and what, if any support services they availed of during this time. The interviews were organised via email or telephone and took place in a confidential location as preferred by the participant. Some interviews were conducted online using Skype for the convenience of the participant. They were audio recorded using a phone and iPad. Interviews took 50 to 60 minutes with an additional time for introduction and closing at start and finish. The interviews were transcribed using a confidential transcription service due to time constraints on the researcher’s behalf. Cohen et al., (2011) do caution that transcription does not record everything that takes place within the interview. For this reason, notes on body language and reflections after the interview became a vital part of the process. Furthermore, personal reflections before and after each interview were recorded by the researcher in a research diary which proved very useful as the interviews progressed.

3.4 Data Analysis

The qualitative data collected from the six interviews was analysed by the researcher using a thematic approach which “provides a flexible and useful research tool, which can potentially provide a rich and detailed yet complex account of data” (Braun and Clarke, 2006, pg. 5). The data analysis process included data collection, interpretation and moved into understanding, representing the data and interpreting the meaning of the data (Thomas, 2009). It involved repeated listening of the recorded interviews by the researcher which resulted in new insights for the researcher (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The constant comparative method, which is the basis of interpretive research, involved the researcher going through data repeatedly and comparing elements of the data with others (Thomas, 2009). This method will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.

3.5 Validity and Reliability

In qualitative research, as opposed to quantitative, validity refers to the extent to which the research measures what it is designed to measure and is concerned with the integrity of the researcher’s conclusions (Bryman, 2012). Cohen et al., (2011) argue that validity in qualitative research can be determined by the richness, depth and honesty of the data being researched. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest four key criteria for validity in qualitative research: credibility (validity), transferability (generalizability), dependability (reliability) and
confirmability (objectivity) of data. Kvale (1996) emphasises that the researcher’s quality of interviewing and rigorous interpretation of the data is central to the credibility of the research which the researcher felt she adhered to.

In this study, research rigour was obtained through careful recording of data, record keeping, data analysis and checking interpretation of results with participants (Cohen et al., 2011). To ensure rigour, the six participants agreed to be contacted after the interviews to check interpretation of data in the transcripts for accuracy. All of them replied concurring with the transcript content. Transferability in qualitative research asks if the findings apply to other social contexts. Lincoln and Guba 1985 (cited in Bryman, 2012) state that providing “thick descriptions” as the researcher has aspired to achieve in this study gives a “rich account” so others can decide whether it is transferable or not (Bryman, 2012, pg. 392).

Reliability refers to the consistency of data and the extent to which the instrument would achieve the same result if used again (Cohen et al., 2011; Flick, 2014). Many researchers argue the relevance of the term in qualitative research and some prefer to refer to terminology such as credibility, trustworthiness and dependability (Cohen et al., 2011). In answering these questions, the positionality of the researcher is central to the research. So, questions such as would another researcher interpret the data in a different manner, would the volunteers respond differently when asked again are very relevant. The reality is the answers may be entirely different. Kvale (1996) emphasises using the core interviewing skills of developing rapport, seeking clarification, allowing space for checking understanding and clearly outlining the process will strengthen reliability. The depth of the researcher’s experience as well as recording observations before and after interviews added to the reliability of this study.

Reactivity is an additional concern contributing to the credibility of qualitative interviewing (Bryman, 2012). This “describes the impact of the researcher’s presence on the way participants behave or react while being observed or interviewed during research” (Hearne et al., 2016, pg.19). The researcher was aware that the participants were clients of the Recruitment Agency and as such could have been contributing phenomena such as ‘good bunny syndrome’ whereby the participant is motivated to give the researcher the desired answers specifically in the context of career supports received (Hearne et al., 2016). Emphasis on honesty and confidentiality was stressed by the researcher to minimise this effect. Finally, confirmability is concerned with objectivity and Cohen et al., (2011, pg. 392) argue that whilst “complete
objectivity is impossible”, the researcher acted in good faith ensuring her own values were not influencing the research process or the findings.

3.6 Reflexivity
Etherington (2004, pg. 31/32) describes reflexivity as “the capacity of the researcher to acknowledge how their own experiences and contexts inform the process and outcomes of inquiry”. Researchers need to understand their own role in conducting research, the influence of their values, beliefs and experiences on the knowledge they are creating (Berger, 2015; Hennick et al., 2011). The need to be trustworthy, scholarly and credible has been an essential element of this current research study (Hearne, 2012). The researcher endeavoured to use a reflexive approach throughout this study through ongoing self-reflection and professional supervision. The researcher was concerned with her own values and beliefs on career transition support services for midlife professionals and sought not to be unduly biased towards these services. The researcher has a firm belief in the value of the benefits of career coaching. Reflexivity has been very beneficial in the researcher’s practice with clients. Furthermore, she sought supervision throughout this research process and journaled regularly as she was particularly mindful of the ethical considerations involved. Consideration was also given to the boundaries of research versus professional guidance intervention. In the interviews, the researcher found it hard initially not to step into the role of career coach, but rather acknowledged this whilst not crossing over into intervention for the client (Hearne, 2012). The researcher was struck by the honesty and openness of the participants and humbled by this process.

3.7 Ethical Considerations
This section will address the ethical approval process and ethical guidelines the researcher used in this study. Cohen et al., (2011) highlight the extent of recent relevant literature and adoption of codes of practice on ethical concerns in qualitative research reflects the growing awareness and importance of this subject. Hennick et al., (2011) suggest ethical issues are more pronounced in qualitative research specifically as it can address sensitive issues and have potential for harm. Richardson (2005) stresses that in the search for truth, the dignity of research participants and career professionals needs to be maintained and boundaries of both research and participant respected. Therefore, the researcher’s quest for answers and new knowledge needs to be balanced with the subject’s values and rights (Cohen et al., 2011). Hearne (2013) recommends that guidance practitioner-researchers need to be ethical
throughout the research process and ethics should not be viewed as an afterthought. Practitioners need to be “guided by a set of principles that attend specifically to the issues of competence, multiple relationships, avoidance of harm, confidentiality and informed consent” (Hearne 2013, pg.6).

This research study adhered to the ethical guidelines and legislative requirements of the UL Ethics Committee Review (October 2016). The researcher was also guided by the Institute of Guidance Counsellor’s (IGC) Code of Ethics (2012) and the National Centre for Guidance in Education’s (NCGE) Research Code of Ethics (2008). However, McLeod (2011) points out that it is virtually impossible to produce ethically neutral research. Although the guidance counsellor/researcher is skilled to conduct qualitative research, the boundaries of the research and intervention could have become blurred in this study (Bimrose and Hearne, 2012). Ethically, the researcher needed to be non-judgemental and adopt a client centred approach to both the interviews and her own self care through the process. The researcher exercised a duty of care towards clients who volunteered their time, emotions and energy to the process.

The researcher was guided by the ethical principles of competence, informed consent, confidentiality with a non-harmful approach (Hearne, 2012). Firstly, in relation to competence, the researcher has worked in the field of career coaching for over twelve years and continuously engaged in professional development and supervision to enhance her profession. Secondly, in relation to informed consent, all participants were informed of the nature and purpose of this study through a Subject Information letter and a telephone conversation. Prior to the interview this was restated by the researcher and the option to withdraw was highlighted before and after each interview (Thomas, 2009) and consent forms were signed by the participants in advance of the interviews. Thirdly, confidentiality was maintained by using a confidential location, pseudonyms for participants and non-identification of the location of the research study or the participants’ place of work. Confidentiality and anonymity was adhered to throughout with the integrity of the agreement and consent endorsed at all times (Bell, 2010). Lastly, in exercising a duty of care towards participants, they were briefed and debriefed before and after the interviews thereby minimising harm (Merriam, 2009). Furthermore, the researcher had a list of supports for participants if needed, and checked in with them closing out the process to maintain this duty of care. In addition to seeking UL approval the researcher sought to develop her own professional ethical skills by adopting a reflexive approach to manage any ethical risks as discussed previously.
3.8 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the methodology which underpinned the research. Research questions were identified and a rationale for selecting the interpretivist paradigm was provided. Methods of sampling, data collection and data analysis were discussed. Attention was also given to matters concerning validity, reliability, reflexivity and ethics. Chapter 4 will present the data analysis strategy used and findings of the interviews.
Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Primary Findings

4.0 Introduction
This chapter will discuss the data analysis strategy and present the findings from the interviews conducted with the six interviewees.

4.1 Data Analysis Strategy

A thematic approach was used to analyse the data collected from the six semi-structure interviews. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It allowed the researcher to gain an “in depth understanding of individual experiences” (Kidd, 2006, p.86). The process involved detailed reviews and analysis of the spoken and written transcripts and also included the researcher’s field notes and observations during the process. The constant comparative method deployed involved coding, memoing, observations and identification of themes using a split page method (Thomas, 2009) (Appendix G). Themes are categories identified through the data which relates to the research question (Bryman, 2012). The data was coded using the coding strategy highlighted by Miles and Huberman (1994) which allowed themes and sub-themes to emerge from the interviews against sufficient evidence across a number of individuals. It enabled the researcher to reduce large amounts of the data (Byrman, 2012). Whilst thematic analysis can be used across a range of research questions to highlight similarities and differences, it can also act as a source of bias for the researcher to focus on those themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Researcher judgement and flexibility therefore became important to counteract this bias (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Arising from the analysis two overarching themes emerged with several sub-themes supporting these. The two themes are:

1. The experience of the career transition process
2. Career support for the midlife professional during career transition

During the data analysis, ethical standards were adhered to always, and the interviewees and the identity of their organisations and personal details were kept confidential using pseudonyms.
4.2 Participant Profiles

This study consisted of six interviews with three female and three male interviewees aged range between 40 and 55. Their profiles are outlined in Table 4.1. The clients varied in terms of occupations and qualifications. Interestingly, all the interviewees had experienced redundancy either voluntary or otherwise, recently or at some point in their career. Four of the interviewees had spent a considerable amount of years with the same employer before this transition (Leah, Paul, Peter and Darragh). One of the interviewees (Darragh) had experienced unemployment for a prolonged period before transitioning into his new role. Two of the female interviewees opted to take parental leave before transitioning into their current roles (Anna and Fiona).

Table 4.1: Interviewee Profiles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Client Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Highest level of Qualification</th>
<th>Transition Process</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leah</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>Irish</td>
<td>Accountant</td>
<td>Level 9</td>
<td>Spent 18 years in a pharmaceutical company before taking redundancy and now in Medical Devices.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Irish</td>
<td>Engineer</td>
<td>Level 9</td>
<td>Spent 19 years in a pharmaceutical company, took redundancy and now in Medical Devices.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Supply Chain Manager</td>
<td>Diploma</td>
<td>Spent 25 years in a food company before taking voluntary redundancy. Spent 2 years in next role before taking up this new role.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darragh</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>Irish</td>
<td>Supply Chain Manager</td>
<td>Diploma</td>
<td>Spent 20 years in a computer company and took voluntary redundancy. Experienced unemployment for 1 year and now 6 weeks in new role.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>Irish</td>
<td>Financial Analyst</td>
<td>Level 9</td>
<td>Spent 10 years in Banking following early career in computers, took one year off with children and now in financial services for 6 months.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fiona</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Irish</td>
<td>Chemist</td>
<td>Level 10</td>
<td>Spent 10 years in Medical Devices after spending 10 years in academia. Took 1 year off with children and now back into Medical Devices for nearly a year.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
With regards to their career development process, all the interviewees had experienced a fast-track career progression, particularly in their early career when they stayed in the same company. All spoke about the highs of their career enjoying the early years of their career immensely, describing it as “freedom”, “achievement”, “empowerment”, “buzzing”. Fiona spoke about the vitality of her role “it was a very dynamic... some people couldn't cope with it, I kind of liked that”. Anna animatedly described her first job at aged 22 as being great, bringing “money, opportunity and a sense of achievement”. For Darragh, the high points of his career included “achieving targets and liked the social aspect of work”. Peter’s highs involved “promotion through ranks and playing a part in mentoring others”. Leah and Paul both loved their roles in their early days. However, all the interviewees experienced low points during their career too. These included the disappointment of not getting internal roles they had applied for (Leah, Paul & Fiona), moving to a smaller company (Anna) and dealing with some specific management issues (Peter and Darragh). The highs coincided with their earlier career development and the lows with their more recent career development.

4.3 Theme 1: The experience of the career transition process

This first overarching theme will deal with the interviewee’s experiences of career transition and will be presented under three separate sub-themes; factors that influenced the transition decision; factors that helped and hindered the transition process; emotional impact of the career transition.

4.3.1 Factors that influenced the transition decision

Lifestyle choice and family emerged as a significant factor for the interviewees to change roles or move organisations. All six of the interviewees had made the decision to transition and even though in five of the six cases there was redundancy involved, it was voluntarily chosen. The impact of staying on versus leaving was evaluated carefully by most of the interviewees. In five of the six cases, the effects on family featured heavily in their decision making, especially for the three female interviewees. For example:

“It’s not about your own personal career choices anymore. I’d been there 17 years I was thinking about my career location, family and the whole thing” (Leah)

For two of the females, they had taken some time out with their children before taking on their newest roles. Fiona described this as “complete career suicide” and she was concerned about what a career break would look like on CV. Ultimately however, “what I actually want is part-time. They don't exist!”. When she took the break, she described it as “coming out of a
fog” and felt she had been caught up in the buzz and “made too many sacrifices from the kids’ point of view” (Fiona).

Both Fiona and Anna spoke about balancing the roles of motherhood and employee. Fiona did not believe ambition and family go hand in hand. Anna loved having the privilege time with her children, “I kind of got to know them again”. However, Anna highlighted women’s self-limitations saying, “I think we possibly self-impose our own glass ceiling because we decide what’s more important”. Family came ahead of career for all three women and whilst the males spoke about the effect of being away from family as an issue, none of them raised the issue of work life balance.

Another factor that influenced three of the interviewees was the feeling of being institutionalised. Darragh felt stale and wanted to “get away from that institutionalised feeling which I was worried about” after spending twenty years there. Likewise, Paul and Leah felt institutionalised but prior internal transitions helped this one. For Peter, it was a case of itchy feet, “I wanted to try something different”. His previous transition two years earlier was a lifestyle choice availing of voluntary redundancy. This transition was, however, a snap decision but he learned that it would have been useful to delve into that decision in greater detail as it involved relocating away from family as well as a career change.

For most of the interviewees, their career transition was planned carefully in advance. Strategic planning led Paul to the conclusion that he would not gain a lot from staying in a company that was closing in three years. He carefully weighed up the pros of a booming Ireland and financial impact, and the cons of the unknown effect on family life. He also explored relocating but decided it would not work for him. Likewise, Leah explored her future options and started interviewing with companies to find out about the employment market. Interestingly, for Darragh and Peter faith and chance events played a hand in this transition which mirrored Peter’s earlier career where a phone call provided the opportunity for him.

### 4.3.2 Factors that helped and hindered the transition process

When asked about factors that helped them with their career transition, some interviewees spoke about aspects that helped before the change and some during the transition itself. Routine was important to Peter who transitioned both country and job at the same time and moved away from family and friends. He highlighted that establishing some normality and habits such as going to the gym helped him to cope. Anna reiterated that exercise and meditation helped as well as support from her friends. All interviewees received strong encouragement and support
from partners and families. Three interviewees mentioned that having transitioned into leadership or other roles before this new transition had helped them (Leah, Paul and Peter). Darragh and Leah found that self-belief and positivity helped as they knew they could do the job. For example:

“I suppose a lot it is just reassuring yourself and believe in yourself that you're as good as you always were and that you didn't get where you were for nothing” (Leah)

Peter and Darragh mentioned that having cumulative skills, knowledge and experience had helped them. Leah had time to get organised and ready for the new role and acknowledged that the time off had boosted her confidence and helped her prepare for her new role. Paul would have liked more time between roles to get things done. Meeting people was very important to five of the interviewees, whether it was recruitment agencies, people who have experienced transitions, people through training courses or friends and colleagues. Darragh met someone who went through a similar depressive experience and that started his journey getting back on track,

“The last thing I'd advise to anybody would be to stay in bed so…I got out of that habit and got up and got positive” (Darragh)

Fiona added “Nothing has helped me as such with the process, what’s helped me is the work life balance that I have”.

In contrast, the range of factors that hindered the process for the interviewees included re-building one’s reputation, the induction programme at work, the recruitment process and their age. All six interviewees spoke about the issue of recreating their professional reputation and identity. Leah said, “the biggest concern I have is to I have to build my reputation again”. Many of the interviewees found that they needed to impress again, re-create their sense of identity and re-build their reputation and this brought them out of their comfort zone.

“The other thing is going from somewhere where everyone knew you and knew what you're worth….to knowing nothing…… didn't know the quality system, the processes, know who to go to, the decision maker” (Fiona)

Fiona spoke about reputation building in depth, “it’s a horrible thing to say but people won't do anything for you if they don't know you and if they don't respect you”. Anna reiterated this point about building up a reputation and people being unfamiliar with what you can do. Peter had to “re-invent himself, impress people, push myself out of comfort zone and that was challenging”. Darragh pointed out “In your existing role, you're maybe top of the pile, well respected”, likening it to starting from scratch again in the new role.
The six interviewees spoke about the challenges of starting their new role with many referring to the training or lack of training provided. For example, Anna said the environment was:

“so busy that nobody really has the time…my boss…was so busy, so stressed and so not communicative. I didn't know what I was supposed to be doing”.

Fiona mentioned that in her previous role they had extensive training and in her new role there was nothing. Peter and Leah found the starting few weeks challenging as they both transitioned into a large organisation where a faceless working environment prevailed. Most of the work was done over email which they found perplexing as they were used to knowing everyone by face and name. Darragh and Peter “got stuck in” into very different supply chain systems but adapted well. Fiona also mentioned she would have liked support from the manager such as “what do I think I could use you for?”

There were very mixed feelings about the experience of working with recruitment agencies as part of the transition process. Paul, Peter and Fiona worked with very supportive recruitment consultants. Paul relied on the recruitment agency for interview preparation and believed he could change industry after a conversation with a consultant.

“It’s hard to know what employers want and if you apply directly you often don’t get a response. But you don’t know which agency is good or which are really going for their own needs”. (Paul)

Peter found his recruiter gave him the pro’s and con’s which was useful and found it very holistic but would have preferred a deeper delve into the reality of relocating country away from his family. Fiona was generally satisfied with her experience of recruitment companies. However, three of the interviewees had less than positive experiences in their engagement with recruiters. Leah stated “the experience of working with recruitment agencies I would say is nothing short of horrific, disheartening and frustrating. She felt there was no genuine interest in her and the fee was their driver. Leah said to one recruiter:

“to be honest with you I'm just a person looking for a job. I'm just after losing my job you need to consider how I'm feeling, you're showing no consideration…You’re dealing with humans, not numbers” (Leah)

Anna was told by a recruitment agency she would not get the job in the company where she secured her current role. Darragh was informed by a recruiter that he would not get a job as he was too old.
Another key issue for all the interviewees was that of age. Paul perceived that “employers look at fifty and you’re starting to wind down your career”. Similarly, Darragh believed that age features heavily in the employer’s decision making process. Fiona also highlighted that finding a different career path is proving harder “I think at some stage it becomes too late”. Leah had heard from HR directors that 50 was a barrier, although she did not feel it was a hindrance during her recent career transition. However, Peter had a different perspective on age and did not see it as a barrier from a hiring perspective. His decision to transition was validated as he could have “free-wheeled” towards retirement like his buddies but he would have felt like a “zombie”. He now faces a longer career span but feels more energised and challenged by his own career development as a result. Anna did not raise the issue of age being a barrier but did highlight that as soon as her children are finished college, she would not like to be working full time at that age (around 57).

**4.3.3 The emotional impact of the transition**

The third significant sub-theme that emerged was the issue of the emotional impact of the career transition for the interviewees. Many of them spoke about the feeling of excitement initially and subsequently feeling very daunted coming close to starting in their new role. Paul “didn’t feel sad or happy leaving” his role after 20 years “it just felt like a natural ending”. In relation to his new role there was a “feeling of excitement yet being like a fish out of water”. Leah similarly had the “feeling of excitement but have to build reputation all over again” Additionally for these two individuals both spoke about being “just a number for a while and having to build up their reputation before people see what they can offer”.

Peter’s relocation from the UK to Ireland away from family proved too difficult “Without a shadow of doubt, it’s been the hardest thing to adapt to”. Darragh had a similar experience of being away from home and found this to be too challenging. Fiona also moved geographical location and role, but took time off in between to spend with her children. She found this to be a difficult process initially, “For me it was an either or; it was like career screwed or a family life better”. It was quite black or white for her and being away from work showed her she did not want that lifestyle once she opted out.

One interviewee, Darragh, spoke very candidly about the experience of being unemployed and its impact on his mental health. He spoke very factually and with little emotion “I had nothing to do. It was pure anxiety. I was jealous of some people who had made the decision to stay”. 
He went through a very bad depressive seven-month period, where he felt agitated, not very good at home, struggled to get out of bed at times:

“You don’t really understand the value of a job until you’re out of a job and you don’t realise what’s happening out there. And you're the same as all the rest of the people once you get out there” (Darragh).

Although Anna felt quite anxious during the first few months of job hunting, she started networking and did voluntary work for a friend which helped her land her new role. Leah experienced feelings of self-doubt before she landed the new role “I’d gone through my career being very good at my job and then you were kind of doubting yourself when you were going through the interview process”.

However, for two interviewees the emotional impact of the transition had been affirmative and life enhancing. For Peter the transition was positive and he felt more energised and challenged. Likewise, Paul was energised and believed he will change again in a few years’ time and would not be inclined to stay as long in the next company.

4.4 Theme 2: Career support for the midlife professional during career transition

The second overarching theme will deal with the experience of receiving career support during career transition and will be presented under these sub-themes; personal and professional support received; advice this group would give to midlife professionals during career transition; holistic career guidance.

4.4.1 Personal and Professional Support

All the interviewees experienced significant support from family members including spouses and friends. The three male interviewees spoke very openly about their wives being very supportive and positive during their transition process. Paul’s spoke about his wife asking him “not to worry, you’ll get a new job, just take the money and run”. He also got career support from his brother. Darragh’s wife was very patient and encouraging when he went through his depression. Anna had a very supportive husband and Fiona used her husband to bounce ideas off. Leah had a lot of support from family as well as friends who were well placed within her organisation.

With regards to professional supports, two interviewees (Leah and Paul) received outplacement career coaching provided by the company. Leah stated “even just to get your CV prepped and done up again and interviewing skills. Confidence boosting. Just inward reflections on yourself.
That was very useful”. Paul’s company “helped with career coaching and financial planning and this made the process easier”. Darragh had access to career coaching after he left the organisation but would have preferred it as well as career counselling before he made the decision to leave. He got “support from various employment agencies, coaching in interviews – that type of thing”. The other three interviewees did not receive any professional careers support apart from a small amount given by recruitment agencies and in general felt there was little support available to them at the time. Interestingly, Anna, Fiona and Darragh highlighted they would not know where they would get professional career’s support.

4.4.2 Advice to midlife professionals undergoing career transition

The interviewees were quite vocal on the issue of professional support for others going through career transition. A key point that emerged was the benefit of taking time out to reflect on their career situation.

“If you are taking time out to really take stock and maybe actually take some professional career advice. Because you're getting bias from everywhere even from your family” (Fiona).

Fiona added that it is important to analyse why you have made the career choices you made to give a broader sense of the career story. Similarly, Leah, Paul and Darragh stated that taking time to reflect was very beneficial and would be advocate it for others.

For the two females (Fiona and Anna) who opted for time out, it took a while to remember what their strengths were and career guidance would have fast tracked this process. Most of the interviewees, except for Peter, would have liked career support to develop their self-awareness on their skills, strengths and weaknesses. Furthermore, career support should encourage people to get into the right frame of mind for job seeking and educate them about options and process as well as interview preparation. Some interviewees (Leah, Paul, Fiona and Anna) spoke about a holistic career approach which takes the personal and professional life into account. Fiona would have liked an unbiased holistic approach including “why are you doing what you're doing. And is there something that you think you could do better or enjoy more”.

Finally, career management skills such as finding the right job, knowing your skills and strengths, what gives you career satisfaction, knowing and aligning your values emerged as important aspects during their career transition. Leah and Darragh spoke about the importance of preparation for interviews, and going for the right role which fits one’s values.
4.4.3 Holistic Career Guidance

The idea of giving people time to reflect emerged as a key strength of professional career support for a number of the interviewees (Anna, Fiona, Leah, Paul and Darragh). Career’s professionals need to get to know the person and adopt a holistic approach to career development to include all their life roles (Paul, Anna, Fiona and Darragh). However, Paul cautioned the following:

“Career people should say what the possible options are but don't push or encourage … use coaching techniques; the person has to be able to figure it out themselves.... don't tell them what to do … just say what possibilities are”.

Leah highlighted that it can take up to a year to prepare, plan and complete a career transition. From Peter’s experience, it is about taking a holistic view of clients and establishing what else is happening in their life. Whilst he may not have availed of professional career support he felt it is important to:

“understand where they're at in their life…and really delve. The critical part with recruitment is about finding the right individual. But if they're making a significant career, a significant lifestyle change look at what’s happening behind the scenes because ultimately you can look good on a CV but...if an individual finds it tough to relocate then…. everything else that’s happening personally within their life will just ruin it” (Peter).

Darragh also advocated for guidance and seeing the positives as well as doing something you really want and enjoy doing. He also spoke about the benefit of having a plan to work on a daily basis to drive you forward. For Fiona questions such as “is there something that you think you could do better or enjoy more would be helped and an unbiased objective approach would be useful”. She also spoke about the need for the careers advisor to be working to the client’s agenda. Finally, the issue of lack of knowledge on sourcing career support also emerged as both Darragh and Fiona were unclear as to where they could find this help. “It’s not well advertised” (Darragh). This concludes the explication of the primary findings. A summary of these will be provided in the next chapter.

4.5 Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the findings of the interviews. It highlighted the data analysis strategy as well as the two major themes that emerged from the data. The next chapter will synthesise these findings with literature reviewed in Chapter 2.
Chapter 5: Discussion

5.0 Introduction

The purpose of this discussion chapter is to synthesise findings from the face-to-face semi-structured interviews with the findings of the literature review, and to analyse these findings in the context of the primary research questions.

5.1 Overview of Research Findings

The primary research question set out to examine the experiences of midlife professionals who are undergoing career transition in the Midwest region of Ireland. A secondary question included identifying some of the effects of the career transition and how these individuals adapted to the transition. Additionally, the research asked what types of career supports these individuals received and found beneficial. Finally, it asks how career guidance counsellors could assist the midlife professional.

In this chapter, findings will be reviewed using a critical interpretive approach. The research study adopted an interpretivist paradigm to examine the lived experiences of a sample of clients who had engaged with one recruitment agency during their career transition. Despite it being a small-scale study, it does provide a snapshot in time of client’s experiences of career transition which are noteworthy. The primary findings revealed that these transitions appear to have been quite major for the six individuals. Several of them were employed in their organisations long term before this career transition although they had changed roles internally throughout their lengthy tenure. The interviewees experiences of transition broadly concurred with the models of transition of Schlossberg (1995), Bridges (2003) and Adamas et al. (1976). Several difficulties arose for this particular group including age, the recruitment process, the re-building of one’s reputation and balancing of work and life roles. Interviewees appear to have displayed robust career adaptability during their career transitions but nonetheless feelings of anxiety and depression emerged for a number of interviewees. However, establishing various coping mechanisms assisted their capacity to deal with any anxiety or challenges they faced.

The Irish National Skills Strategy 2025 (DES, 2015) outlined the need for employers to support their employees with their career development. However, it must be noted that professional career guidance for four of the interviewees was not seen as readily available even though all interviewees highlighted the many benefits it would bring. The findings revealed that the
provision of professional career coaching helped those who had access to it with their career management skills, identification of opportunities and time to reflect on their next career move.

The overall findings will be discussed under the two overarching themes that emerged:

1. The complexity of current career transitions for midlife professionals
2. Career Guidance support available for midlife professionals

5.2 The complexity of current career transitions for midlife professionals

This section will briefly allude to the career stories of the interviewees. It will examine some of the factors influencing the career transition and examine the experience of the transition process in the context of the literature review.

The primary findings on career satisfaction and what career means to individuals appear to correlate with the literature. During career transition, subjective rather than objective career success was more relevant to the midlife professionals in the current study (Kidd, 2006). Savickas (2005) outlined the importance of social connection, self-determination and contribution that one receives from working. These elements were evidenced by individual feelings of “achievement”, “buzzing”, “dynamic” and “empowerment” (Anna and Fiona) as well as social connection (Darragh). Highs coinciding with their earlier career and lows with their more recent career experiences concurs with the findings of Oswald and Warr (1996) and Gazioglu and Tansel (2006) who promoted the concept of job satisfaction being U-shaped in the context of age. They concluded that midlife typically relates to lower levels of satisfaction as opposed to those younger (Oswald & Warr, 1996). Sugarman (2004) also pointed out that career can often hit a plateau during middle adulthood (aged 40 to 60) as was demonstrated for a number of the interviewees in this study. For many interviewed (Paul, Fiona, Darragh, Peter) this career transition demonstrated a need to reflect on their career direction to regain subjective career success.

The world of work is dynamic and contributing to clients’ vulnerability with occupational prospects less definable and predictable and this was evident in the findings of this current study (Fotinatos-Ventouratos & Cooper, 2015). Overall the findings indicate that the experience of career transition is quite individualistic, nonetheless there were similarities amongst the individuals in this study. Whilst most of the interviewees had transitioned organisation earlier in their career, more recent transitions were internal organisational moves, as opposed to external. However, some interviewees envisaged more frequent transitions in the
future responding to today’s notion of non-linear career trajectories where people need to learn to cope with several career transitions throughout their career lifespan (Fouad & Bynner, 2008; Rice, 2014).

Briscoe et al., (2012) point out that transition triggers can be internal or external. An internal trigger can be an innate desire to develop whilst external responds to forces such as organisational or economics ones. For four of the interviewees, the trigger was internal with two opting to develop their career and another two to take time out to look after children. An external trigger drove the other two interviewees to early voluntary redundancy as the organisation was closing within a three-year period. Leah and Paul felt they would do better to leave than stay for another three years but interestingly both would have stayed had the company remained open. Both Darragh and Peter opted for a change to develop their career so their decision appears to correspond closely to Briscoe et al., (2012) who highlighted that protean careers are now more dominant in today’s dynamic world.

Sugarman (2001) highlighted that midlife transitions are often viewed by adults as a challenge as opposed to a crisis and this appeared to be the situation for all six interviewees. Fouad and Bynner (2008) highlight that career is increasingly viewed as a series of choices made throughout the lifespan, so transitions, decisions and adjustments are essential to manage one’s career. The interviewees made decisions and adjustments acknowledging the effects on family. From the male’s perspective, all three were taking their family situation specifically their children’s age range into account and unfortunately for Peter he felt he underestimated the effect of being away from his family. For the females, effect on family had a significant influence on their decision to transition. Savickas (2011) argues that adults design their careers with life-long learning, employability, family and life role priorities in mind which resonates with Paul’s career design. Paul appeared to have the desire to continuously learn and remain employable throughout his career as well as finding career and life equanimity. Furthermore, booming employment figures in the Midwest region gave Paul confidence to transition (DJEI 2016 & 2017).

Leybourne (2016) advocates using career transition models as they can assist in understanding and assisting employees through transition. All the interviewees in this study appear to correspond with Schlossberg’s (1995) model which identified factors that influence an individual’s ability to cope with transition. These are categorised as the situation, self, support and strategy and each of these will be discussed (Goodman et al, 2006). Firstly, regarding
situation, this can be the trigger to set off the change and determine the type of change whether it is wanted or unwanted. Schlossberg’s (1995) points out it is not the situation but the meaning we construct around the event that is important. For two of the interviewees the transition arose from voluntary redundancy (Paul and Leah) but both constructed positive meaning around their transition and opted for early redundancy as opposed to staying on for a further three years. One could also argue that their career decision was also protean (Briscoe et al., 2012). Midlife or middle adulthood, as Erikson (1959) refers to, is between aged 40 to 65 and this stage of life is characterised by generativity versus stagnation, developing our sense of the bigger picture (Boyd and Bee 2011). All six interviewees corresponded to generativity as opposed to stagnation. For two interviewees (Anna and Fiona) their stage of life influenced their decision to transition as both wished to spend time with their children before their next career move. According to Super’s career life rainbow (1980) our life roles play a large part in our career and breaks for parenting can take precedence which is evident in both Fiona and Anna’s career transition decision. However, Fiona found this choice quite challenging and referred to it as being “career suicide”. After several weeks, this thought subsided and her decision to spend time with her children was validated.

Secondly, regarding the self, this incorporates gender, culture, age as well as self-efficacy and values (Schlossberg, 1995). Whilst the personal characteristics of knowing one’s values, self-efficacy, optimism and positive attitude were evident amongst the interviewees for some the psychological characteristics of age and gender was felt as a barrier when it came to transition in midlife. Darragh and Leah found that self-belief and positivity helped them adapt as they knew that they could do the job. Gati and Levin (2014) proposed to make career decisions one must have insight into skills, abilities and interests which Peter, Darragh, Leah and Paul found beneficial and advocated for. Furthermore, both Peter and Darragh mentioned having a positive approach to life which helped them cope. However, Darragh estimated that age features heavily in employer’s decision making and employers underestimate what experience, confidence and maturity bring to an organisation. Paul felt if he stayed on in his company at 47 it might be harder to change roles, and Leah also was informed by HR professionals that 50 was a barrier during the hiring process as employers view you differently. These findings give further impetus to Sweeney’s (2013) evidence of employers’ tendency to invest less in employees above the age of 45 as they may not get as long a return than younger age groups. Nonetheless, whilst some of the interviewees believed age was a real barrier, others such as Anna and Leah felt it did not affect their transition process.
Furthermore, the gender issue played a part for two of the female in this current study (Fiona and Anna) who found they had to make too many sacrifices to combine the role of motherhood and working mother. Their situations appear to validate Hansen’s (2001) criticism of Holland’s person fit career development which did not provide enough focus on the individual or take account of the various roles individuals occupy across the lifespan. Their current career transition appears to relate more closely to Super’s (1980) Life Career Rainbow which interweaves our multiple life roles with career choices and transition decisions. Fiona did not believe motherhood and career can complement each other and whilst she missed her previous career where she worked longer hours, she did not wish to sacrifice her family for her career. From the male perspective, Paul and Darragh spoke about the effect of their new roles being away from home which was hard to adapt to.

Thirdly, with regard to Schlossberg’s (1995) support, which refers to types of support such as professional or personal from family and friends, all the interviewees in the current study received strong support and encouragement from their families with many using their partners as sounding boards. It has been found that someone who supported people undergoing career transition was highly beneficial irrespective of that intervention being casual, such as family or friends, or a formal professional one (Briscoe at al., 2012). All three males in this study spoke very openly about their wives being very supportive and positive for them. For five of the six interviewees meeting people was very important, whether it was recruitment agencies, people who have experienced transitioning before, people through training courses or friends and former colleagues for a coffee. The issue of professional careers support will be dealt with separately later in this chapter.

Finally, the issue of Schlossberg’s (1995) strategies, which one uses to cope or adapt to the transition emerged in this study, especially in the context of career adaptability or readiness to cope with change which is more relevant in today’s world (Inkson et al., 2015). Schlossberg (1995) argues that the basic processes of coping are important during transition. In Peter’s case, routine was important as he had relocated country and job simultaneously and was away from his family and friends. Whilst both Peter and Darragh struggled with being away from home, they found that establishing some normality and routines like going to the gym really helped them cope and Anna used exercise and friendship as a coping mechanism. Whilst not much attention was given to career adaptability in the interviews, nonetheless, all interviewees displayed signs of coping well and recognised the need to be adaptable in their future career.
Goodman et al., (2006) notes the impact of the transition varies depending on the alterations it causes in an individual’s daily life. In this study, work-life balance emerged as a coping strategy for all three women interviewed. Fiona pointed out that her new work-life balance has helped her adapt to the transition. Whilst Anna has not yet achieved balance in her new role she articulated that her family will not come second place for too much longer. Fouad and Bynner (2008) and Rice (2014) stress that in today’s world one needs to cope with multiple transitions and in Leah, Peter and Paul’s case prior experience of transition helped them cope with this new one. Despite Paul feeling institutionalised after nearly 20 years and dealing with this substantial change, his previous two leadership roles gave him much learning and growth to help during this transition.

The primary findings also support Bridges (2003) transition model in terms of the emotional experience of career transition. Bridges (2003, p.3) describes transition as a three-phase psychological process that individuals “go through as they internalise and come to terms with the details of the new situation that the change brings about”. All six interviewees related well to his Phase 1 of letting go of the old ways and dealing with loss of identity. The issue of reframing one’s identity emerged as one of the major challenges that all the interviewees found particularly perplexing. Phase 2 is when the old is gone but the new is not fully operational so it appears to be a continuum of reputation loss and working on building one’s new identity (Bridges, 2003). People in transition invariably feel they are in between stages forming a new identity. This is a psychological state where one’s old identity is firmly planted in the old world and one’s new identity takes time to emerge taking tentative steps into the new world (Bridges, 2003). This was a significant finding in the current study where all the interviewees spoke about the challenges of rebuilding their reputation. In their previous roles, they were highly respected amongst their peers and management but in their new roles, most of them reported that they had to step outside their comfort zone to impress people, re-invent themselves and encourage others to see what they had to offer. The interviewees did not mention how long the process could take as most were only early into the transition process. One interviewee (Fiona) had completed 11 months and still felt the issue was relevant. Finally, whilst Peter referred to a new energy which correlates to Phase 3 of Bridges (2003) model none of the others stated had arrived at this stage yet.

Whilst the interviewees did not necessarily go through the first stage of Adams et al.’s (1976) seven stage model of transition, they certainly had gone through some of the subsequent stages.
It is worth noting that stage one and two are usually accompanied by shock and denial and as the transition decision was pre-planned for all interviewees in this study, this was not evident. Career transitions often have a profound effect on a professional's psychological and social status, physical health and well-being and lifestyle (Yosen et al., 2012). Stage 3 and 4 of Adams et al.’s model (1976) is characterised by self-doubt and can involve personal anxiety which was evident in four of the interviewee’s narratives. Darragh, who experienced a period of unemployment felt very anxious and went through a very bad depressive seven-month period, where he felt agitated and struggled to get out of bed. Similarly, Leah experienced feelings of self-doubt whilst interviewing for roles which came as a surprise to her as she had felt so confident in her career up to that point. Anna and Paul also felt anxious starting the search for new roles. Anna found it hard to secure a new role after taking time out and was quite apprehensive when she commenced her search but rational thinking helped her through this. Stage 5 of Adams et al’s model (1976) involves exploration of new ideas and options. Four of the six interviewees explored new options before landing their new role. Future roles were unclear but Paul explored many options even commuting long distances before deciding they were not for him. Likewise, Leah explored options and started interviewing with companies to find out about the employment market. Finally, it is too early to say if the interviewees have gone through stage 6 and 7 of Adams et al’s (1976) model of integrating the transition into their lives. Interestingly, for Darragh and Peter faith and chance events played a hand in this transition and right through their career which correlates to the literature that chance events will affect people’s career development (Fouad & Bynner, 2008; Krumboltz et al., 2013; Savickas, 2011). Furthermore, it appears they adopted an opportunistic decision making style to their career transition as opposed to aspirational by Fiona and Anna and evaluative by Paul and Leah (Bimrose and Barnes, 2007).

5.3 Career Guidance support available to the midlife professional

The second over-arching theme will address the issue of career support for the midlife professional who is going through a career transition. The current study elucidates important findings in relation to professional careers support in Ireland. Within transition it is recognised that citizens need to be equipped with the career management skills during transition between and within education/training and work (ELGPN, 2012). Holland (1995, 1997) promoted the development of self-awareness of interests and personality and work environments to help people make informed decisions on their career direction. The development of career
management skills (CMS), such as identification of strengths, talents and range of skills, for
the interviewees in this study emerged as a central aspect of their transition.

Levinson’s (1978) theory which characterised a midlife transition as a point in time where
reappraisal takes place correlates with the findings of this study. All the interviewees advocated
for time and assistance to help them reflect on their career development and decision-making
during their transition. Furthermore, employment seeking skills such as finding the right job,
knowing how to explore opportunities, self-awareness on what gives career satisfaction, and
knowing and aligning personal values emerged as important aspects during their career
transition. For the two females who took time out to reconnect with their children, when they
were seeking to re-enter the workplace, it took a period of time to remember their strengths and
they felt career guidance would have fast tracked this for them.

An individual’s ability to manage transition can be very powerful in improving their situations
(Briscoe et al., 2012). Lent et al., highlighted that support can enhance self-efficacy and
outcome expectations and many interviewees found self-belief assisted their transition (Inkson
et al., 2015). Benefit was evident when someone supported people during their career
transition, either by challenging their assumptions or helping them to think outside the box
(Briscoe et al., 2012) Savickas (2011) argues that as clients proceed through career transition
they reflect on their past experiences, if given the opportunity to do so, and guidance
counsellors can assist them to understand their whole career story thus acting as a guideline for
future transitions. Most of the interviewees in this study felt there was little external support
for them and if it is present, it is poorly promoted. The consensus amongst the interviewees,
except for Peter, was they would have liked career support to develop their self-awareness in
relation to skills and strengths identification, educating them about options and the recruitment
process as well as interview preparation. Peter was never offered such a service and felt he
would not have availed of it in any case.

It would appear from both the literature review and primary findings that career guidance is
needed for adults to access relevant labour market information and encourage them to take
ownership and decisions around work (OECD, 2010). Yosen et al, (2012) found that work
provides meaning and a sense of purpose during midlife and work is not just about professional
advancement. Most of the interviewees in this study also voiced a desire for holistic career
support which is free of bias and takes the personal and professional life into account. Most of
the interviewees, apart from Peter, recommended people to avail of career support or career coaching even to think about your strengths, weaknesses and encourage people to get in the right frame of mind.

One type of career guidance that professionals experiencing transition may be able to avail of is outplacement counselling which helps clients think, feel and act in the real world outside of the career counselling session (Krumboltz et al., 2013). In this study, Paul and Leah found their outplacement coaching very beneficial highlighting that CV preparation, interviewing skills, confidence and inward reflections was very useful. Furthermore, they both received financial planning which made the process easier. Another participant, Darragh, had access to career coaching but only after he left his organisation and he would have preferred it before he made the decision to leave. As Darragh had gone through a difficult period, he would have liked counselling and concurred with the conclusion that an integration of mental health and career counselling during transition would be beneficial during transition (Stoltz. et al., 2013).

Several of the interviewees in this study received professional support from various employment and recruitment agencies and whilst some were positive, others were quite negative in their attitude towards recruitment agencies. Whilst Paul and Peter felt recruiters helped them with interviewing skills and assessing the advantages and disadvantages of the roles, Leah had a negative view of recruiters. In fact, she felt it was the most difficult issue to deal with during her career transition. There is little evidence in literature as to the effectiveness of recruitment agencies during career transition. Niles et al. (2014) hope-based counselling generates positive encouragement in clients especially in times of redundancy or career indecisiveness, which are typical challenges facing adults. It encourages self-reflection, action, visualisation, goal setting, planning, adapting and implementation as a process (Niles et al., 2014). It became evident the interviewees felt strongly about the benefit of support for career management skills and reflection time during their career transition process and this appears to be backed up by the literature reviews.

Access to career guidance services for adults across the OECD countries has been quite limited and does not try to develop career management skills for wise decision making and lifelong career management (Cedefop, 2008). For the adult careers professional who is seeking guidance through career transition there are a range of online and private services including coaching, career guidance, career management and outplacement organisations across Ireland but the primary findings show that there is lack of knowledge on how to gain access to these
services. Sweeney (2013) however notes that employers are increasingly more dependent on employees to upskill to meet employer needs. However, the OECD highlights the adult can be reluctant to pay for these (OECD, 2003). Whilst the findings revealed some employers provide these services to their staff, Watts et al., (2005) raised the question of who should pay for career support and point out that individuals in the UK do not have a tradition of purchasing career guidance services. None of the interviewees spoke about the issue of paying for them, rather they pointed to their lack and advertising of such services. In this study, only three of the interviewees received outplacement career coaching provided by their organisation and one of these was after the transition.

In relation to adult professionals undergoing career transition, the Council of the European Union (2008) identified the benefit of lifelong guidance. Bimrose at al., (2008) stress that guidance interventions support individuals make successful career transitions in turbulent markets. Therefore, a wider debate is required on accessibility to career guidance services to include all adults (OECD, 2003). Whilst Sweeney (2013) advocates for such provision he also states that guidance counselling being independent, free of bias, well informed by the labour market, yet focused on the individual should remain at the core of any service provision. Bimrose and Mulvey (2015) highlighted that a substantial evidence base now exists that indicates the positive impact of careers guidance on the working lives of adults. Careers advisors can support clients facing transition them helping them to accept and adapt well into new roles/careers (Kidd, 2006). Reid (2016) reiterates this message adding that career counselling and coaching combined can assist both the individuals professional and personal development as Darragh would have liked (Reid, 2016). Savickas (2011) found as clients are going through transition they reflect on their past experiences as interviewees would have liked if given the opportunity to do so and counsellors can assist them to understand their whole career story thus acting as a guideline for future transitions.

Whilst the OECD (2014) highlights the need for policies and recognises the reality of decreased budgets, individuals now need to take more responsibility for their own lifelong learning career development (CEU, 2008; NGF, 2007; OECD 2004). Career guidance services need to assist adults develop career management skills and not simply address quick decisions and immediate impact but adopt a long term lifelong career guidance approach (Sweeney, 2013, OECD 2003; 2004). Traditional career guidance, which Hooley (2014) argues has been geared towards the unemployed or secondary and tertiary students, jars with CEDEFOP’s (2008)
recommendations that all citizens have access to career guidance to effectively manage their career. In this study, the interviewees were asked for advice for other midlife professionals undergoing career transition and they all identified the need for good quality career guidance counselling. Support around decision making during career transitions centres requires insight into skills, abilities and interests as well as developing knowledge on the options available (Gati and Levin 2014). It would seem imperative given that the decision-making process is critical to successful transitions that career guidance would play a strategic role around the career development process for adults (Sultana, 2012). Although Paul alluded to being institutionalised in his previous role having stayed there for nearly 20 years, by coming through the process of voluntary redundancy he now advocates for change more often and access to continuous career guidance is a necessity to support this.

Finally, some key findings emerged in this study as to how career guidance professionals can support individuals through transition which are relevant for practice today. The interviewees expanded on the type of support they would like to receive. A key issue was the need for taking time to reflect as well as receiving objective career advice, as the support from family and friends may be biased. Kidd (2006) highlights the notion of career guidance counsellors not being experts in today’s world but rather guiding people to choose their career path. Paul advised that people need to be able to think and act for themselves and career coaches can help with this. The interviewees in this study would have liked career coaching to encourage reflection, delve deeper, education on career options possible but work to the client’s agenda to encourage and not push them down a certain path. This is reflective of Savickas et al’s (2009) argument for career counselling interventions being life-long, holistic and contextual, with the aim of increasing clients’ adaptability, narratability, and activity.

5.4 Conclusion

This chapter has critically discussed the findings of the research study incorporating those of the literature review and the semi-structured interviews. It found that the experiences of career transition for the interviewees in this study broadly aligned with the career transition models identified in literature. Furthermore, the findings raised issues about the importance and benefits of career guidance interventions for midlife professionals but indicates there is a lack in such provision calling for a wider debate on the issue.
Chapter 6: Conclusion

6.0 Introduction
This chapter presents the main findings and general conclusions in the context of the aims and objectives of the research study. Strengths and limitations are discussed and a number of recommendations are put forward from the study as well as considerations for further research. The researcher’s reflexivity is considered and personal learnings are discussed.

6.1 Overview of findings in the context of the study’s aims and objectives
The overall aim of the research was to examine the experiences of midlife professionals undergoing career transition in the Midwest of Ireland in 2016. To address this, several key objectives were involved:

- Examine and critically analyse relevant literature available on Irish and international career guidance policy, theory and practice the topic of midlife career transitions.
- Gain an understanding and insight into the experiences of career transition for clients of a recruitment agency aged between the ages of 40 and 55.
- Critically analyse the overall findings and make recommendations for future practice for guidance counsellors and other careers professionals to support the midlife professional undergoing career transition.

The objectives set out in this research study have been met. The six research participants provided a range of evidence on their experiences of the process of career transition and the support they received, if any, in the process. The emotional and practical perspective of career transition was described together with the factors that influenced their transition decision. Furthermore, the interviewees described what they found easy and difficult to adapt to as well as some coping mechanisms that helped them. Finally, professional and personal support was described as well as the preferences on what professional careers support would be beneficial.

A summary of the overall findings is outlined as follows.

Whilst the experience of career transition was unique for all the interviewees in this study, there were similarities in relation to the process and the type of professional career support people would like during career transition. Several conclusions can be drawn from the findings of this interpretivist study. The findings of the literature review and primary data of this study highlight that there appears to be a gap in the provision of careers services for the midlife
One of the biggest challenges facing the participants in this study was the reframing of one’s identity and rebuilding of reputation as identified previously (Bridges, 2003).

Mental health issues such as anxiety and depression were experienced by some of the interviewees during the career transition. Schlossberg (1995) identified coping strategies to assist with career transition and it was evident that all interviewees established various coping mechanisms which helped their career transition process (Goodman et al., 2006). These included maintaining routine and normality, sport and exercise, embracing support from family and friends and meeting people when seeking a new role or simply getting out and about. Factors that hindered the process included negative comments from professional recruiters, ageism on behalf of hiring managers and for the females balancing the roles of motherhood and career proved especially challenging. However, several interviewees reported being energised and challenged by their career transition.

In the current climate individuals also need to take responsibility for their own lifelong learning career development (CEU, 2008, NGF, 2007, OECD 2004) and Sweeney (2013) adds to this saying employers could play a role in this. Developing career management skills emerged as a very useful tool for interviewees as well as being positive and possessing self-belief. The literature highlights the importance of career management skills at EU level however it also revealed that access to career guidance services for adults across the OECD is limited and does not try to develop career management skills (OECD, 2004; ELGPN, 2012). Outplacement counselling assisted two of the participants developing their self-awareness of their career management skills as well as helping clients to think, feel and act in the real world (Krumboltz et al., 2013). It became evident the interviewees felt strongly about the benefit of support for career management skills and reflection time during their career transition process and this appears to be backed up by the literature. It is already argued that guidance services need to assist adults develop career management skills and not simply address quick decisions and immediate impact but adopt a long term lifelong career guidance approach (Sweeney, 2013; OECD 2003;2004).

Hearne (2009) concluded that acknowledging the outcomes of guidance counselling and giving a voice to clients is imperative to policy. From the researchers experience and this study’s findings, it is imperative that adults are given the opportunity to seek the type of career support they feel is most appropriate to them. Briscoe et al., (2012) highlight that adults need either
formal or casual support during career transition so it seems critical that the employed adult population would benefit from careers support. The type of career support adults would like to receive was addressed and this is reflective of Savickas’ argument for career counselling interventions being life-long, holistic and contextual, with the aim of increasing clients’ adaptability, narratability, and activity (Savickas et al., 2009). Interviewees would like a holistic career support service, free of bias which allows time and space for reflection on one’s career and personal life. Furthermore, development of career management skills need to be included in this support as well as education on career options. However, a preference for supporting decision making as opposed to advising on decisions was evident to enable the client make their own decisions.

6.2 Strengths and Limitations of this study

6.2.1 Strengths

There are a number of strengths in this research study. The interpretivist approach enabled insight and depth into the client’s experiences of career transition which may not have emerged in a quantitative study (Cohen et al., 2007). The thematic approach to data analysis was useful to provide insight into research questions and inform policy development (Bryman, 2012). As the interviewees were clients of the recruitment agency the researcher worked in, they were very willing to talk openly to assist the researcher and a good relationship was formed during the interview to build trust and rapport. Face to face interviews also enabled direct observation and opportunity to seek clarification. Furthermore, rigour was applied when interviewees transcripts were sent to them post interviews for checking. It was useful to have a balance of gender participate as this encouraged diversity of experience within the study and sought the views of the various life roles that apply to each gender. There is limited research in guidance counselling supports for midlife employed professionals undergoing career transition especially where it concerns recruitment agencies which motivated the researcher throughout the study. The researcher is a careers practitioner with over twelve years’ experience working with adults in career transition and so her familiarity and knowledge base enabled understanding of the issues presented in the study.

6.2.2 Limitations

There are a number of limitations in this research study. During practitioner research, there may be an issue of subjective bias, however, the researcher aimed to address this through adopting a rigorous approach and reflexivity throughout the research process (Bryman, 2012).
Another limitation is that it captures the participant’s perspective at a particular point in time for a sample of adults of similar educational backgrounds and ethnicity. As the sample of the study is small, drawing qualitative generalisations from the findings are difficult. However, the trustworthiness and authenticity of the data was ensured by focusing on the depth of the narratives supplied by the participants (Bryman, 2012). Therefore, it is hoped that the findings may be transferable to other career guidance professionals working with midlife professionals.

### 6.3 Recommendations for future policy and practice

Based on the findings of this study, a number of recommendations with regard to policy, practice and research can be made as follows:

#### 6.3.1 For Policy:

- It is recommended that there is a need to include the requirements of the employed adult professional population when it comes to career guidance policy.
- A wider debate on adult guidance provision is needed to include policy makers, employers, employees and the adult guidance community in order to address the needs of employed adults.
- Access to career guidance services for professionals needs to be addressed and the issue of who pays for such a service should be debated.

#### 6.3.2 For Practice:

- All careers practitioners including recruitment agencies need to take account of all the roles people play when undergoing career transition, allow space for reflection and delve deeper into the decision-making process when working with adults during career transition.
- Adults need to be equipped with the career management skills during transition between and within education/training and work. The basics of career transition support should be present so that clients are aware of their skills, strengths, values and what they can offer a future employer.
- Adults would like career support to encourage education on possible career options but work to the client’s agenda to encourage self-reflection and not push or strongly influence the client.
- Adult professionals should be aware of where and how to go about accessing career guidance so a key recommendation is to promote the advertising of such careers service that already exist.
• A further recommendation is to support people once they commence their new roles in forming a new identity. People in transition invariably feel they are in between stages forming a new identity and would benefit from support when faced with the challenge of building their reputation again.

6.3.3 Research Recommendation

• A further study would be useful to include a longer time frame to address experiences and learning a year after the career transition.

• A study to explore the experiences of working with recruitment agencies during career transition.

6.4 Reflexivity in Relation to Personal Learning

Reflexivity involves deliberately asking about the way we interpret and analyse evidence (Thomas, 2009). The researcher came with her own assumptions and attitudes on career transition and it was necessary to bracket these as much as possible during the study (Creswell and Miller, 2000). Reflections on my career assumptions included the perception of age and gender issues in relation to combining the roles of a working mother and career person. As the researcher is at midlife, she was struck by the perceptions of age which she had not considered for her own career. As a working mother, the researcher acknowledged that she too has had difficulties in balancing her varied roles in the context of her career. A reflexive approach was applied throughout the study through diarying, research discussions with the researcher’s supervisor and professional supervision (Appendix H). Furthermore, participation was entirely voluntary and confidentiality ensured as well as the option to withdraw at any point in time.

The researcher was struck by the openness and honesty of the interviewees and found it a deeply humbling experience. She also found parts of the interviews emotionally challenging and at times hard to hear about the individuals experience of professional careers support or lack of experienced by the interviewees. Furthermore, it was difficult to not cross over into career intervention for the individual. The biggest learning was in giving the interviewees’ time to reflect and think which several interviewees highlighted the usefulness of. The space to talk about their experience in a very open and non-judgemental manner was insightful and the researcher was struck with the thought that before any coaching takes place, this might be a valuable starting point. Whilst the researcher endeavours to provide this in her day to day work, nonetheless it is difficult with time constraints under tight targets and deadlines.
However, the researcher has developed a deeper appreciation for such support and would give more time to the individual’s life roles as well as their career roles.

Finally, the researcher has gained a deeper appreciation of the value of career guidance for employed adults where it can often be taken for granted. It has substantially added to the researcher’s own insight into the career transition process. Furthermore, it has raised the issue of balance and resilience on behalf of the researcher. Finally, the researcher is genuinely grateful for new learnings and experience she can bring to her own future careers practice.

6.5 Conclusion

This chapter concludes the study on the exploration of the experiences of adults undergoing midlife career transition in the Midwest of Ireland. It has provided an overview of the main findings of the research in the context of the aim and objectives of the study. It discussed the strengths and limitations of the study and outlined several recommendations for policy and practice. Finally, the chapter concluded with a reflexive assessment of the research study on a personal level.
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Appendix A: Letter to Recruitment Manager  
EHSREC No. 2016_10_13_EHS  
Date: 16th November 2016

Dear Manager,

I am currently a student of the MA Guidance Counselling and Lifespan Development Course with the Department of Education and Professional Studies, University of Limerick, under the supervision of Dr. Lucy Hearne. As part of my studies I must complete a research dissertation on a topic related to guidance counselling.

In my research, I aim to investigate the experiences of career transition in midlife professionals in the Midwest of Ireland. To gather this information and provide insights into the topic I would appreciate if you would give me consent to carry out the research in your organisation. I would like to conduct interviews with professional midlife adults who have undergone career transition in the last year.

All information will be gathered will be held in the strictest of confidence and pseudonyms will be used to ensure anonymity. Interviews will be audio taped recorded and the data will be destroyed afterwards according to UL guidelines. Participation in the study is voluntary and participants can withdraw from the research at any time. The results from this research study will be reported in my thesis and may be disseminated through other professional publications and conferences.

The collected data will be stored in a secure location approved by the University of Limerick. It is important to note that the organisation’s name and the name of the individual participants will not be used in the research and the organisation will not be identifiable to anyone other than those directly involved.

If you have any queries or require further information on the research study, please contact me or my supervisor:
This research has received Ethical approval from the Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee (EHSREC No. 2016_10_13_EHS). If you have any concerns about the study and wish to contact someone independent you may contact:

Chairman Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee

EHS Faculty Office

University of Limerick

Tel (061) 234101

ehsresearchethics@ul.ie
Appendix B: Consent Form (Manager)

EHSREC No. 2016_10_13_EHS
Date: 16th November 2016

Research Title: An exploration of the midlife career transition experiences of professionals in the mid-west of Ireland

I have read the letter outlining the research focus and understand in details the of the research project. I understand that the identity of the participants will not be revealed at any stage in the reporting of this study. The conditions involved in the research are designed to protect the privacy of the participants and respect their contributions are:

- Participation is voluntary
- Participants are free to withdraw at any time in the process and any contribution made will be subsequently destroyed.
- The interview will be kept strictly confidential and will be available only to the researcher and the supervisor. Excerpts from the interview may be made in part of the final research dissertation, but no names identifying any individual or characteristics will be included in the dissertation.
- I am fully aware that the recording of the interview and the data generated from it will be kept confidential

I hereby agree to give consent to Siobhán O’Neill to carry out this research in this organisation.

Signature:

Printed Name:

Date:
Appendix C: Subject Information Letter

Date: 15th December 2016

EHSREC No. 2016_10_13_EHS

Research Title: An exploration of the midlife career transition experiences of professionals in the mid-west of Ireland

Dear Participant,

I am currently a student of the MA Guidance Counselling and Lifespan Development Course with the Department of Education and Professional Studies, University of Limerick, under the supervision of Dr. Lucy Hearne. As part of my studies I must complete a research dissertation on a topic related to guidance counselling.

In my research, I aim to explore the experiences of midlife career transition amongst professionals in the Midwest of Ireland. This information could assist career professionals support individuals going through career transition. In order to gather this information and provide insights into the topic I would appreciate if you would agree to participate in a face to face or Skype audio-taped interview on the topic. The interview will be approximately take 45 minutes to an hour and will be arranged at your convenience.

All information gathered will be held in the strictest of confidence and pseudonyms will be used to ensure anonymity. Interviews will be audio taped recorded and the recorded data will be subsequently destroyed after data analysis. Participation in the study is voluntary and participants can withdraw from research at any time. The results from this research study will be reported in my thesis and may be disseminated through other professional publications and conferences.

The collected data will be stored in a secure location approved by the University of Limerick. It is important to note that the organisation’s name and the name of the individual participants
will not be used in the research and the organisation will not be identifiable to anyone other than those directly involved.

If you have any queries or require further information on the research study, please contact me or my supervisor:

Researcher: Siobhan O’Neill
Phone: 086 1049065
E mail: 14092255@studentmail.ul.ie

Supervisor: Dr. Lucy Hearne
Phone: 061 202931
E mail: lucy.hearne@ul.ie

This research has received Ethical approval from the Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee (EHSREC No: 2016_10_13_EHS). If you have any concerns about the study and wish to contact someone independent, you may contact:

Chairman Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee
EHS Faculty Office
University of Limerick
Tel (061) 234101
ehsresearchethics@ul.ie
Appendix D: Consent Form (Participant)

Date: 15th December 2017

EHSREC No. 2016_10_13_EHS

Research Title: An exploration of the midlife career transition experiences of professionals in the mid-west of Ireland

I have read the participant information sheet and understand in details the of the research project. I understand that the identity of the participants will not be revealed at any stage in the reporting of this study. The conditions involved in the research are designed to protect the privacy of the participants and respect their contributions are:

- Participation is voluntary

- Participants are free to withdraw at any time and any contribution made prior to the data analysis stage will be subsequently destroyed. The interview will be kept strictly confidential and will be available only to the researcher and the supervisor. Excerpts from the interview may be made in part of the final research dissertation, but no names identifying any individual or characteristics will be included in the dissertation.

- I am fully aware that the recording of the interview and the data generated from it will be kept confidential and my identity will not be disclosed.

I hereby agree to take part in Siobhán O’Neill’s research study:

Signature:

Printed Name:

Signature of Researcher:

Date:
Appendix E: Framework for collection of Participant Narratives

**Theme 1: Career Story**

Tell me about yourself outlining your story from school to now.

What was a high point in your career to date?

What was a low point in your career?

What did you enjoy most in your working life?

What did you enjoy least?

**Theme 2: Career Transition**

Tell me about your career change recently

Describe how it came about?

Was this your first time undergoing career transition?

How did you feel about the change?

How did those close to you feel about the change?

How did it affect you personally?

How did it affect you professionally?

Describe your experience of transition

How did you find your job search process and your new role?

What was it like before, during and after the transition?

What was Day 1 of your new employment like?

Looking back what have you learned from this process?
Theme 3: Career Adaptability

What does career adaptability mean to you?

How did you feel you coped or adapted through this transition?

What factors helped you during the process?

What factors hindered you?

Was there anything in particular that you found hard to adapt to?

What type of supports did you have during the process for example your family, agencies, career coaches, friends?

Theme 4: What might help midlife career professionals transition?

How do you feel about your future career prospects?

Would you have liked more supports during your transition process?

What type of support would you like from a career professional?

What else might have helped you transition?

If you were to offer insight or advise to other midlife males undergoing career transition what would that be?

If you were to offer any insight or advice to practitioners to encourage adaptability in midlife what would that be?

Is there anything else you’d like to add or talk about in relation to career transition?

Please note these are a guideline for research questions but interviews will be semi-structured allowing for fluidity depending on participant responses.
Appendix F: Transcription Service Confidentiality Consent Form

EHSREC No. 2016_10_13_EHS

Dear Siobhán,

As part of the transcription process, I understand that certain confidentiality conditions need to be adhered to in order to protect the privacy of participants involved in your research study. The interview data will be kept strictly confidential and the transcribed data will be provided to you only, as researcher. The names of the participants, any individuals, organisation or locations will not be disclosed by the transcriber. When appropriate or relevant, pseudonyms will be used at all times.

Name of Transcriber:

Signature:

Name of Researcher:

Signature of Researcher:

Date:
Appendix G  Extract from Interview Analysis

Sample Interview

Interviewer: Siobhán
Interviewee: Darragh

Interviewer: You weren’t being challenged in the role.
Darragh: Yeah and I thought there are people waiting for me out there, there isn’t going to be any implication here. Whereas there were implications as you’ll know later on in life. I didn't realise there was such a flow of young people coming up my back with all honours degrees and masters and whatever.

Code: Ageism and lack of formal education holding him back

Next section:

Interviewer: Of experiencing this on a day to day basis.
Darragh: Yeah, I was totally stressed out. Panned out literally. And I just … you know after a while then I thought about it to get positive, get on the phone you've a lot to offer.

Memo: Tone was very matter of fact – delivered with little emotion and well able to speak about his experience in a calm voice and tone. sticks to the relevant facts about the situation and is well able to discuss this difficult period

Interviewer: And on a day to day basis how did that manifest itself for you yourself?
Darragh: I was agitated. Not very good at home now very agitated and then I got into … following that I got into a mode of … I said to myself I really pulled myself together after … that was after six or seven months

Code: Depressive State
Memo: Very open talking about this experience

Interviewer: Can you remember sort of how that came about or sort of spending seven months where you were feeling very anxious and as you said depressive state.
Darragh: I went on a course FÁS course, it was business management course and met a guy there and he had experienced similar stuff and we had good chats. We said this isn’t the end of the world there’s a lot of stuff out there. and I just thought about ok I got a payoff form my company. I'm comfortable financially my wife has got a reasonable pension as well or whether and I said to myself Jesus just get out there and try and do what you want to do. So, I did a lot of courses. Did a course in training, train the trainer and all that type of thing, office skills and all that kind of stuff and eventually.

Code: Meeting people, doing something worthwhile. Picked himself up identifying with others and through very networks and training courses.

Memo: Again, very matter of fact

Interviewer: Sounds like she was a great support to you.
Darragh: Very practical person, she said look it we’re solid as a rock, as a couple as solid as a rock financially we’ve the mortgage paid ok or whatever and she’d a reasonable pension. Whatever happens we’ll be fine.

**Code**: Has a very supportive wife/spouse / personal support evident

Darragh: I’ve communication skills and life skills and trauma skills and the skills to get out of it and that type of stuff. I'm involved in GAA, X Club and I love working with lads in a team environment. So, I said that’s the type of stuff I want to do. Maybe you don't earn anything much out of it but I don't need anything much out of it at this stage of my life.

**Code**: Transferable skills

**Interviewer**: Okay.

Darragh: That’s quite difficult … you’re starting from scratch. You’re at the same level of everybody else. In your existing role, you're maybe top of the pile, well respected, you know everything. You’re a dinosaur in the company (laughter). So, starting at scratch … but it can be interesting, learning new stuff, utilising maybe some of the skills that you think are irrelevant in a new role ok.

**Code**: Rebuilding one’s reputation again. Issue and challenge of re-framing identity (Bridges, 2003).

**Interviewer**: So, like looking back I suppose how well do you feel that you’ve coped through the most recent transition?

Darragh: I coped very well. That’s the job... I coped very well. I'm very positive. Very assertive. You know, more direct ok. You know more about a subject than your boss or whatever (laughter) you can really tell people what to do literally. To be honest about it I was enjoying it, it was just the whole personal aspect around it didn't work for me.

**Code**: Location / personal life suffering
**Code**: Positive self-efficacy and belief really assisted

**Memo**: Smiling with plenty laughter. Very comfortable in his own skin talking about challenges and himself.
Appendix H – Extracts from Research Diary

Interview 1
I was nervous before my first interview with Paul. I had spoken to him before so that made it a little easier to establish the connection. However, it was in the middle of the Christmas holidays and I was conscious of “not being in thesis mode”. I spent much time beforehand going over the questions, reflecting on my own self and meditating to allow myself to get into this space. At the start of the interview, I found myself relaxing into it but he was talking a lot about his career story and I became conscious of time as we hadn’t touched on transition yet. But once, we got to the transition he was very open about his experience of it. Some of his story was mirrored in our story of moving home, so was conscious I needed to bracket this part off quickly which I did. At times, I interjected and interrupted the flow so I need to be aware of this for future interviews. Also, I did find it quite tempting to get into career coach mode at one point but again resisted this temptation. I used a lot of the counselling skills of listening, paraphrasing to draw the information from Paul and overall I was pleased with how the interview went. At the end, I was very relieved to get the process of interviews started at last.

Interview 2
I found myself a lot less nervous for this interview with Leah. I had gained confidence and learnings from 1st interview. So, I felt I introduced the topic with more depth at the start and did not interrupt as much as I did in the first one. Leah was very vocal about her experiences and sometimes her emotion was heightened. I found part of her interview very challenging when she spoke about her negative experience with recruitment agencies. This was hard to hear and I was conscious that I dwelt on it for a while so possibly was not as in the moment during that part of the interview. My own assumptions on the topic came into my head and this was challenging and distracting. However, once I became aware of this, I came back to the present and made a mental note of bringing this to supervision. Leah was very open and honest in her interview and again I found this humbling and was grateful for this. I felt I closed the interview well and had established a good rapport with her throughout. At the end of the interview, Leah also felt she had been very vocal in her negativity of agencies and was bothered by this. I thanked her for her honesty and assured her that this was appreciated.

Interview 3
This interview was late on a Friday night and took place online. I was tired after a long week’s work and conscious of the possibility of Peter being tired too. However, before we started, Peter and myself introduced each other and I really relaxed during that. We had a laugh and it made the process very comfortable. I was really struck by his openness, honesty and humour throughout the interview. I came away from interview feeling so positive about the work I do also. During the interview my own thoughts did come into it but this time I was not as reactive to them as I had been in the previous interview. I also found that I would love to ask more questions about certain aspects of their story and spend longer with them but time. An hour
flies and I noticed he was getting tired by the end of the hour but I was feeling very energised by this interview.

**Interview 4**

From the moment I met Darragh I felt this would go well. He was so open and thankful to be considered to participate in this research study and very willing to share his story. We established a really easy rapport early on. I was struck by his matter of fact tone when he spoke about his depression and humbled by his openness on his personal struggle. I also felt inspired by his passion for the need for guidance counselling. I did interrupt a bit again but once I noticed this happening, I was able to stop. I found myself really easing into the process at this stage, opening it very well and being very comfortable with closing and asking the questions. Darragh had really considered his transition before we met and thought a lot about it so the answers came to him quite easily and he didn’t need much reflection time to think about them. He found the process quite useful to talk through his feelings on it. I am now very comfortable with all parts of the interview.

**Interview 5**

Arranging this interview took some time as the participant was busy in work and home and I felt she was under pressure to fit this in. I started by really thanking her for her time and input. Again, rapport was established early on but I started to get nervous during the interview as she spoke about her whole career story for so long. I also found her answers to be really long and I was conscious she only had an hour so felt under a little bit of pressure. I didn’t like to interrupt the flow either. Again, she was very open and honest about her positive and negative experiences, beliefs and opinions which I found humbling. I had to really focus on listening as the connection was poorer but also, she was speaking about lots of different elements so I found this interview challenged my listening skills. Towards the end of the interview, I felt it was a little rushed and I didn’t close it out properly as she had to leave to collect her child. However, I sent her an email afterwards to thank her and closed it properly that way.

**Interview 6**

This is my last interview on a Friday evening again but I wasn’t tired and perhaps I was glad to be finishing this part of the process although it’s the part I have really enjoyed. Before we began we had a really great chat about career and life and I warmed to Fiona immediately. This interview was very free flowing and easy to follow her story. She was very honest again and both of us were relaxed throughout and neither were under time pressure to be anywhere which helped. I noticed her body language was very animated at times and it was interesting to observe this whilst still listening so carefully to her story. I feel that I have developed my interview process very well with familiarity with the questions. I also feel that preparation for interviews has been an essential part of the success of them so meditation before each one helped. This interview took the longest but I didn’t feel that and could have easily listened to a lot more. She was very vocal again and the thought struck me that none of my interviewees have been quiet in their responses which has made my role a lot easier. I have fine-tuned the process and would love to do more interviews so even though I am glad to be moving on in my study, I will miss this interviewing process.