



# Perceiving Fixed or Flexible Meaning: Toward a Model of Meaning Fixedness and Navigating Occupational Destabilization

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Winnie Yun Jiang<sup>1</sup>  and Amy Wrzesniewski<sup>2</sup> 

## Abstract

This article examines individuals' cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses to the destabilization of their occupations, how their responses differ, and why. We focus on the context of journalism, an occupation undergoing severe destabilization in the U.S. and seen as deeply meaningful by many of its incumbents. Drawing on two waves of interviews with 72 unemployed or former newspaper journalists, conducted over five months, and additional interviews with 22 others, we identified two sets of responses, each characterized by distinctive cognitive, emotional, and behavioral patterns. Building on these findings, we developed the construct of "meaning fixedness" to capture the extent to which individuals view the meaning of the different components of their work to be fixed within one occupational context or flexible across different occupations. We found that participants held different interpretations of journalism's destabilization and assessments of how portable their work components were to other occupational contexts: flexible-meaning perceivers generally engaged in actions to reinvent their career, while fixed-meaning perceivers engaged in actions to persist in journalism with the hope that their occupation could be restored. Our findings culminate in a model of meaning fixedness and how it shapes individuals' navigation of occupational destabilization. This research uncovers an individual-level perception that has the potential to shape the varied responses to occupational changes observed in prior research, contributing to the literatures on occupations, the meaning of work, and role transitions.

<sup>1</sup> INSEAD, Singapore

<sup>2</sup> The Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA, USA

## Corresponding author:

Winnie Yun Jiang, INSEAD, 1 Ayer Rajah Avenue, Singapore, 138676, Singapore.

Email: [winnie.jiang@insead.edu](mailto:winnie.jiang@insead.edu)

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Occupations constitute a powerful social institution that organizes incumbents' work, establishes their role, and defines their identity (Pratt, Rockmann, and Kaufmann, 2006; Bechky, 2011). In the past two decades, societal and technological forces have brought destabilizing changes to an unprecedentedly wide range of occupations, leading some to label this era "the age of disruption" (e.g., Officer, 2017; Krishnan, 2019). It is estimated that by 2030, 75 to 375 million workers, or 3 to 14 percent of the global workforce, will need to switch occupations (McKinsey & Co., 2017a, 2017b), with a much higher percentage projected for advanced economies such as the U.S. (32 percent) and Japan (46 percent). Working in stable occupations matters for individuals, as they provide a sense of belonging, self-worth, and meaning (Kohn and Schooler, 1973; Dierdorff, 2019). When occupations become destabilized, the consequences for individuals can be profound. Yet, few studies have examined how individuals are affected by the destabilization of their occupations, how they respond, and what shapes their responses.

We define occupational destabilization as the process through which a series of changes challenge the jurisdiction, principles, and/or value of an occupation, upsetting established practices and potentially members' employment. According to Anteby, Chan, and DiBenigno (2016), occupations are socially constructed entities that encompass not only a category of work in a division of labor but also the members performing the work, their practices, and the structural and cultural systems upholding the occupation. Changes in any of these elements can destabilize an occupation, causing members to struggle to remain relevant and subjecting them to identity threats or unemployment (Rosenblatt and Mannheim, 1996; Petriglieri, 2011; Murphy, 2014). While blue-collar occupations are often at risk of being destabilized due to the more automatable nature of their work, recent developments, particularly the rise of artificial intelligence (AI), have put white-collar and creative occupations under greater threat (Kalleberg, 2009; Hollister, 2011, 2012; Ford, 2015). For example, AI, using machine learning, can act as teachers to give individualized assignments based on students' performance (World Economic Forum, 2019) or as artists to create images based on existing artwork (Elgammal, 2019). For some workers, disruptive changes, such as technological transformation, can improve work conditions. But for many others, these changes challenge or eliminate their work and career, compelling them to change their practices or leave the occupation entirely. The impending destabilization of many occupations and the implications for both individuals and society create an imperative to understand how individuals react to occupational destabilization and the micro-processes that underpin individual adaptation to an evolving labor market.

Scholars have long studied how occupational members react to destabilizing changes (e.g., Barley, 1986; Abbott, 1988; Zetka, 2003; Huisig, 2014, 2015; Kahl, King, and Liegel, 2016). For example, Barley (1986) demonstrated how radiologists and technologists altered interaction patterns and role relations after a new device—the CT scanner—was implemented in their hospitals. Kahl and colleagues (2016) compared two occupations—systems men and production planners—and found that in order to survive in the face of new technology,

systems men sought to reclaim control over their areas of work to regain independence, while production planners tried to relate themselves to other legitimate occupations to establish codependence, with the latter effort proving more effective for occupational survival. Also examining two occupations, Bourmault and Anteby (2020) showed that subway drivers and station agents reacted differently to becoming managers after subway trains were automated, with drivers reacting far more negatively to the change than agents did. Huising (2014, 2015) found that when health research professionals' control is threatened, some work closely with other professionals to establish relational authority, while others remain non-collaborative and distant. While these studies have revealed a broad range of responses to destabilizing changes, we know relatively little about why individuals respond to these changes differently.

One factor that likely plays a key role in shaping individuals' responses to occupational destabilization is how they view the meaning of their work, broadly defined as individuals' understanding of why they do their work and what makes their work significant (Pratt and Ashforth, 2003; Rosso, Dekas, and Wrzesniewski, 2010). Scholars have established broad variation in the meanings people attach to their work (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997; Schabram, Nielsen, and Thompson, 2022), which relates to markedly different responses to undesirable work conditions or changes (Rouse, 2016; Schabram and Maitlis, 2017; Bourmault and Anteby, 2020). However, less research has examined how the meaning of work shapes individuals' responses to the challenges brought by occupational destabilization, including but not limited to job loss (see Wrzesniewski, 1999 for an exception). Furthermore, current theories of the meaning of work largely assume stability in the work itself and focus on the negotiation, assignment, and expression of meaning in work (Rosso, Dekas, and Wrzesniewski, 2010; Schabram and Maitlis, 2017; see Bourmault and Anteby, 2020; Jiang, 2021 for exceptions). While this research adds great value to our understanding of the individual, collective, and work elements that define and shape meaning, it is largely silent on how the meanings that individuals assign to work act to protect, expose, or endanger them when their occupations are upended. It is also unclear whether and how people's expression of the meaning of their work amid stability will differ when that stability disappears. As Rosso, Dekas, and Wrzesniewski (2010: 106) noted, "the context in which work occurs in the modern world has changed since some of the foundational meaning of work scholarship was published." Given that occupations constitute a key source of meaning for individuals (Pratt, Rockmann, and Kaufmann, 2006; Dierdorff, 2019), when an occupation no longer exists in its familiar, stable form, how affected members make meaning of their work in the wake of change and how their perceived meaning shapes their responses when their occupation's sustainability is challenged become important questions.

This study is devoted to understanding how individuals react to the destabilization of their occupations, whether their reactions differ, and if so, how and why. We investigate how individuals make meaning of their work in the face of occupational destabilization and how their meaning-making may influence their responses. Understanding these dynamics is important for both practical reasons, given the broadening scope of occupational destabilization, and theoretical reasons, as it will enhance our knowledge of why different responses to

occupational changes emerge and how individuals make meaning of their work in career-threatening contexts. To gain insights, we draw broadly on research on job loss, involuntary role exits, identity, and the meaning of work.

## NAVIGATING OCCUPATIONAL DESTABILIZATION: JOB LOSS AND INVOLUNTARY ROLE EXIT

The destabilization of occupations often results in departures, mostly involuntary, of their members (Hollister, 2011; Ford, 2015). Thus, research on job loss and involuntary role exit can provide helpful insights for understanding how individuals navigate occupational destabilization. Job loss has numerous negative effects on individual well-being (Jahoda, 1982; McKee-Ryan et al., 2005), ranging from emotional and psychological consequences, such as depression and anger (Vinokur, Price, and Caplan, 1996), to physical effects, like headaches and high blood pressure (Schwarzer, Jerusalem, and Hahn, 1994; Gallo et al., 2000). Individuals vary in their interpretations of and attitudes about job loss (Hepworth, 1980; Sharone, 2013). While some perceive job loss as a challenge to identity and self-esteem, others view it as an opportunity to escape adverse work environments or reinvent their careers (Hepworth, 1980; Lazarus and Folkman, 1984; Latack, Kinicki, and Prussia, 1995; McFadyen, 1995). However, job loss resulting from occupational destabilization can differ from typical job loss in important ways.

Typical job loss represents losing a setting in which to do one's work. Individuals can generally expect to find the same role in the same occupation, albeit in a different organization. The possibility of changing organizations without changing occupations means avoiding the challenges of changing a skill set or one's fundamental relationship to the work. However, these challenges must be confronted when an occupation is destabilized. Losing a job amid occupational destabilization can mean losing opportunities to find a job within that occupation, such as in the case of occupational decline. It can also mean having to adjust one's long-time work practices to continue working in the occupation. Both outcomes mean inevitable changes to skill sets and one's relationship to the work. Facing these challenges, those affected by occupational destabilization may attribute their predicament to external market forces rather than to personal shortcomings (Sharone, 2013) and thus be less psychologically challenged than those experiencing job losses who feel personally targeted (Miller and Hoppe, 1994). They may also receive peer support from other incumbents facing similar challenges, turning an isolating experience into a collective one that allows positive reappraisals of their predicament (Leana, Feldman, and Tan, 1998). Nevertheless, we still need to better understand how individuals navigate the unique challenges characterizing occupational destabilization that go beyond those associated with typical job loss—challenges that involve having to construct new or transfer existing skill sets and redefine relationships to the work.

Job loss is one form of a broader category of involuntary role exit, a research area that focuses on how individuals navigate departure from roles in such cases as layoffs (Leana and Feldman, 1992) or involuntary retirement (Wang, Henkens, and van Solinge, 2011; Mosca and Barrett, 2016). Building on the involuntary role exit model proposed by Ebaugh (1988), Ashforth (2001) proposed a model of involuntary role exit, suggesting that such exits start with a turning

point, such as a layoff notice, that triggers the exit, followed by individuals distancing themselves psychologically from their past role and seeking information that both confirms their dissatisfaction with that role and prompts escalating doubts about persisting in the role (Ashforth, 2001). After the turning point, individuals may also directly seek and weigh alternatives, subsequently moving to a new role and completing the process of involuntary role exit (Ashforth, 2001). However, in its assumption that involuntary role exiters eventually enter new roles, this model does not provide insights on whether, how, and why such workers might seek to continue in their previous roles.

Similarly, empirical research on how individuals navigate role exits has mostly focused on successful role changes. Specifically, most studies examine how individuals successfully adjust their identity following role transitions (see Tosti-Kharas, 2012 for an exception). According to identity theorists, individuals tend to develop a stable sense of self within a role they occupy (Thoits, 1986; Stets and Burke, 2000). Once that role changes, they engage in identity work, making cognitive efforts to create and sustain a coherent and distinctive sense of self (Snow and Anderson, 1987; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003). For example, individuals use self-narratives to revise and reconstruct their identity to align it with their prospective role (Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010), and when they can no longer fulfill a desired identity, they enact it through imagination and vicarious experiences (Obodaru, 2017). Moving beyond successful role changes, several scholars have suggested that some individuals could find navigating involuntary role exits to be particularly challenging, highlighting the possibility of failed recovery following job loss (Shepherd and Williams, 2018) or work-related identity loss (Conroy and O'Leary-Kelly, 2014). In particular, Conroy and O'Leary-Kelly (2014) theorized that following such losses, people experience strong negative emotions (e.g., sadness, anger). The ability to regulate these emotions is key to positive identity transformation and favorable work outcomes. While this research suggests that involuntary role exits cause emotional struggles and identity threats (Petriglieri, 2011), resulting in less successful role transitions (Shepherd and Williams, 2018), why some people and not others experience role transitions (especially involuntary ones) as so challenging remains a puzzle.

Studies on the benefits of having multiple identities indicate one possible piece of this puzzle. Research has suggested that holding multiple identities buffers individuals from the negative effects of experiencing threat to any one identity (Thoits, 1983; Petriglieri, 2011). Identity is multifaceted, whereby people's sense of who they are can be influenced by their membership in or relations to various social categories or entities, from demographic categories such as gender and race to social entities such as organizations and occupations (Stryker, 2008; Vough, 2012; Ramarajan, 2014). When one identity is threatened, others can be relied upon. For example, when individuals' organizational identity is threatened after being laid off, those with strong occupational identities have a pathway to sustain their sense of self-worth (Ashforth, Harrison, and Corley, 2008). The foundational work of Thoits (1983, 1986) established that while holding multiple identities protects against threat to one identity, when multiple identities are integrated and overlap, a threat to or loss of one identity is more detrimental. In psychology, these dynamics have been examined with the construct of self-complexity, referring to the number of relatively independent aspects that individuals use to cognitively represent

themselves (Linville, 1985, 1987). People with more complex cognitive representations of themselves suffer less in the face of stressful life events (Linville, 1985, 1987). Thus, holding multiple identities or having higher self-complexity could serve as a protective buffer against negative events that result in involuntary exit from any one role. However, this protective buffer would not be available to those who see their occupation as defining their most essential identity, as is the case for some professionals (Kaufman, 1982). These individuals are less likely to have and are more reluctant to fall back on other identities to derive a sense of self-worth (Thoits, 1983), thus raising questions of whether and how these individuals can successfully navigate the destabilization of and potential exit from their occupation.

Research on post-traumatic growth at work suggests it is possible—but not a given—for such individuals to successfully exit their occupation and experience positive transformation (Maitlis, 2009, 2012, 2020). A concept originally developed in trauma research by clinical psychologists, post-traumatic growth refers to the “experience of positive change that occurs as a result of the struggle with highly challenging life crises” (Tedeschi and Calhoun, 2004: 1). Bringing this concept to the work domain, Maitlis (2009, 2012, 2022) examined the experiences of musicians and dancers whose professional identity is core to their self-concept and who suffered injuries that rendered them incapable of doing this work. She found that while challenged, they navigated these involuntary exits, eventually constructing new positive work identities and embarking on new career journeys. Even when work represents the most important aspect of identity, traumatic experiences that force exits from work can become opportunities to grow and pursue different occupations. Maitlis (2020) suggested two processes, emotional regulation and sensemaking, as key to achieving post-traumatic growth and positive work outcomes. However, less known is the specific content and psychological underpinning of these two processes. That is, how is it that individuals experience these processes differently in ways that lead to different outcomes, and why?

In short, although research has suggested that holding multiple or complex identities can facilitate successful role changes following occupational destabilization, for those who see their occupation and work as constituting their most meaningful identity, the process is likely to be more fraught. For these individuals, how they regulate their emotions and make sense of the destabilization is critical. Research has shown that the meanings individuals ascribe to their work affect their emotions and sensemaking in the face of work challenges (e.g., Schabram and Maitlis, 2017), suggesting that for devoted professionals who are less likely to hold and therefore benefit from multiple or complex identities, examining the meaning they perceive from work may help us understand their different responses to occupational destabilization.

### **Meaning of Work and Responses to Occupational Destabilization**

While a constellation of identities and their facets may offer relief to those navigating occupational destabilization, what defines their challenged occupational identity may matter even more for how individuals fare. The meaning of work has long been a focus of research that purports to reveal how individuals define the relationship between their work and self and how this matters for their experience of work and life. Indeed, research suggests that the meaning of

work influences people's navigation of the various challenges their work entails, including its changes. For example, Schabram and Maitlis (2017) found that animal shelter workers could relate to their work in three different ways, leading to three paths of negotiating challenges at work. Studying Parisian subway drivers who were promoted to managerial roles as their subway trains became automated, Bourmault and Anteby (2020: 1452) found that they experienced "managerial blues" after an ostensibly attractive promotion because they derived a strong sense of meaning from personal, direct contact with passengers—a feature of working as drivers, not managers. While not focused on occupations, Rouse (2016) studied how founders navigate exits from their organizations, finding that whether they see their work as bringing personal or social benefits shapes distinct disengagement paths. In particular, these studies showed that the meanings individuals perceive from work associate with different emotional experiences and actions in response to work challenges or changes, suggesting that the meaning of work can provide a helpful lens to understand people's different responses to occupational destabilization, especially for those with fewer identities or lacking complexity in their identities.

However, little research has examined how the meaning that people perceive in their work relates to their responses to the potential challenges of occupational destabilization. Research on job loss and involuntary role exits has generally not examined the role of work meanings in these experiences (Kanfer, Wanberg, and Kantrowitz, 2001; McKee-Ryan et al., 2005; Wanberg, Zhu, and Van Hooft, 2010; but see Kaufman, 1982; Wrzesniewski, 1999; and Jiang and Wrzesniewski, 2022 for exceptions). This is a critical omission, as several studies have suggested that the meaning of work matters for one's experience after job loss. For example, Kaufman (1982: 16) argued that compared to nonprofessionals, professionals, or "those in occupations requiring a base of knowledge and skills acquired through higher education and subsequent experience," tend to consider work as playing a more central role in life, which makes the psychological effects of job loss more severe. Further, Wrzesniewski (1999) found that compared to those who see their work as a job (i.e., focusing primarily on work as a means to a financial end) or a career (i.e., focusing primarily on advancement in their occupation), job seekers who see their work as a calling (i.e., focusing primarily on work as a fulfilling end in itself fostering contributions to the greater good) take more time searching for a new job. Furthermore, existing research on the meaning of work has largely assumed the work as well as the broader context in which it is performed to be stable (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997; Schabram and Maitlis, 2017; but see Bourmault and Anteby, 2020; Jiang, 2021 for exceptions), thereby overlooking dynamics of meaning when work undergoes undesirable changes such as in the case of occupational destabilization. We need better understanding of how people make meaning of their work in the wake of occupational destabilization and how their perceived meaning influences their responses to the associated challenges, which include but are not limited to job loss.

Overall, our review of the relevant literatures suggests unanswered questions about why individuals differ in their responses to the involuntary work changes that often result from occupational destabilization. While previous research suggests that the way people perceive the meaning of their work might be an important factor, we do not know precisely how it might shape people's varied responses to undesired work changes. By examining how individuals respond to

the destabilization of their occupation, whether they respond differently, and why, we hope to enhance our knowledge of this process.

## METHODS

### Research Context

We were interested in studying individuals who were personally experiencing the destabilization of their occupation and navigating their way through an undefined set of next steps. This aim led us to choose journalists as the focus of our research. Among occupations that have been destabilized, journalism provides a poignant setting.

Journalists gather, prepare, write, and distribute news or other current events for media platforms such as newspapers, magazines, radio and television stations, and increasingly, the internet (Weaver and Wilhoit, 1991; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). Depending on the context, journalists can be more specifically called reporters, correspondents, columnists, editors, and photojournalists in their organizations. Over the past three decades, two major destabilizing changes occurred in journalism, compelling large numbers of journalists to leave their employment. First, the number of journalism jobs has declined considerably. Second, the content of the work has changed in ways that many journalists find unacceptable.

The destabilization of journalism as an occupation has accompanied the rise of the internet, social media, and other advancing technologies. Each advance has contributed to the changing landscape of this occupation, especially in the realm of print media (Beam, Weaver, and Brownlee, 2009). Since 2004, newspaper circulation in the U.S. has shrunk by more than half (Pew Research Center, 2021). Major U.S. metropolitan dailies have closed or downsized, including the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the *Detroit Free Press*, and the *Tucson Citizen*. The number of newsroom employees in the U.S. has dropped from around 458,000 in 1990 to about 85,000 in 2020, a decrease of over 80 percent, and is projected to continue to fall (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). In 2012, "reporter" was named one of the 30 fastest declining occupations (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012); it was the only occupation on the list requiring at least a bachelor's degree (Weissmann, 2012).

While many journalists have lost their jobs, others feel compelled to leave the occupation altogether due to the grim outlook on their future prospects as well as undesirable changes in the nature of their work (Pew Research Center, 2021). With the rise of the internet, cheaper or even free advertising options reduced newspaper revenue (Pew Research Center, 2021). Increasing popularity of social media and decreasing readership of traditional newspapers further shrank revenues (Dimmick, Chen, and Li, 2004). Revenue decreases drove massive layoffs, especially of longer-tenured journalists who commanded higher salaries (Pew Research Center, 2021), leading to lower newspaper quality, which further decreased readership (Franklin, 2008). Layoffs added responsibilities to the already heavy workload of layoff survivors, forcing increased productivity and generating burnout (Reinardy, 2013). Furthermore, journalism has been transformed by quantification, and many journalists in the U.S. disapprove of performance measures based on the number of clicks their articles receive (Christin, 2018). Over time, as revenue, circulation, and readership decreased, the cycle of layoffs, downsizings, and closings continued.



Akin to how shifts in blue-collar work have occurred, advancing technologies have gradually led machines or the general public to execute the traditionally white-collar work done by journalists. A growing number of news agencies and outlets, including The Associated Press and *The Washington Post*, have begun to use artificial intelligence to automate news-making (Peiser, 2019). With the rise of portable electronics and social media, the public is now a news supplier, reporting current events more quickly than professional news teams do (Knight, Geuze, and Gerlis, 2008). Digital platforms have enabled rapid dissemination of information from both valid and invalid sources, challenging core principles of journalism dedicated to accuracy and objectivity (Franklin, 2008; O'Sullivan and Heinonen, 2008; Hermida, 2010; Tameling and Broersma, 2013). Traditionally, journalism is expected to uphold nine core principles, according to Kovach and Rosenstiel (2001: 12–13):

- 1) journalism's first obligation is to the truth; 2) its first loyalty is to citizens; 3) its essence is discipline of verification; 4) its practitioners must maintain an independence from those they cover; 5) it must serve as an independent monitor of power; 6) it must provide a forum for public criticism and compromise; 7) it must strive to make the significant interesting and relevant; 8) it must keep the news comprehensive and proportional; and 9) its practitioners must be allowed to exercise their personal conscience.

Partly as a result of the changes we describe, following these principles has become more difficult for journalists (Zelizer, 2009; Reid and Ramarajan, 2021). The destabilization of journalism through the declining number of positions and the deteriorating nature of work over the last three decades made this context particularly well-suited to examine how incumbents respond to the destabilization of their occupation, whether they respond differently, and why.

### Sampling and Data Collection

Our sampling and data collection evolved over three stages to match our emerging research focus and theoretical categories (Locke, 2001). We began our study of journalists with a different research question: how journalists in different countries navigate their unique occupational challenges. In stage one, we recruited current and former journalists in the U.S. and China through convenience and snowball sampling, starting with personal connections. After the first 12 interviews, we found that navigating journalism's destabilization was a salient theme and whether journalists expressed a calling orientation toward the work seemed to associate with different responses. We then decided to focus only on the U.S. journalists to understand how they navigate the destabilization of their occupation differently and why. These 12 interviews served as pilot interviews for the current study.

In stage two, given our new research focus, we searched for unemployed or former journalists in the U.S. whose last job was at a newspaper, because newspapers have experienced the largest decline among all news media in the overall destabilization of the journalism industry (Pew Research Center, 2021), representing an extreme case that makes the dynamics of interest more visible (Yin, 1984; Eisenhardt, 1989). The findings from our pilot interviews indicated a potential correlation between having a calling orientation to journalism (or not) and responses to its destabilization. Thus, we followed a theoretical sampling approach

(Strauss and Corbin, 1990) to recruit journalists representing both orientations by requesting that our pilot interviewees provide referrals for journalists who they believed either viewed journalism as a calling or did not, as research has suggested that others can discern a calling orientation (Cho and Jiang, 2022). We also purposefully sampled on age and tenure in journalism, as these factors might relate to different responses. Specifically, older journalists could be less comfortable with new technology (Friedberg, 2003). Given that technology is a major force transforming journalism, older journalists may find navigating the changes in their occupation to be more challenging. In addition, longer tenure in an occupation relates to stronger commitment to that occupation (Kaufman, 1982), which would also make it harder to navigate its destabilization. Thus, we recruited journalists of varying ages and tenures in newspaper journalism who either had to leave (i.e., were laid off) or felt compelled to leave their newspaper due to undesirable changes to and unattractive prospects for their occupation.

We recruited a total of 72 unemployed or former newspaper journalists (excluding the 12 pilot interviewees) in stage two. This sample was constructed from three sources. First, we snowball sampled from our pilot interviewees (N=34). Second, we posted a recruitment message on two online groups populated by journalists—one group on a popular social networking website and the other on a popular professional networking website (N=27). Finally, the first author joined networking events for journalists and found potential interviewees through attendees there (N=11). Our sample included 40 women and 32 men, whose ages ranged from 30 to 59 years ( $M=44.10$ ,  $S.D.=8.39$ ) and whose tenure in newspapers ranged from three to 39 years ( $M=18.00$ ,  $S.D.=9.38$ ).<sup>1</sup> Their most recent positions in journalism included reporter, staff writer, editor, copy editor, columnist, and photojournalist. They hailed from 37 U.S. states. The majority of them (76 percent) had worked for at least two newspapers; they typically started at smaller community newspapers and moved on to larger regional, metropolitan, or national ones.

To examine consistency in these journalists' narratives and how their responses to destabilization evolved over time, we conducted two waves of interviews with all 72 participants. The first and primary interviews were conducted during March and April 2016 (Time 1), and the second interviews were conducted five months later in August and September of 2016 (Time 2).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> When purposefully sampling on age and tenure, we aimed to yield about 20 individuals each in their 30s, 40s, and 50s and the same-sized groups of 20 in each decade of tenure in journalism. This yielded a sample aged 30–39 (N=25), 40–49 (N=28), and 50–59 (N=19) who had worked in journalism for 1–10 (N=23), 11–20 (N=15), 21–30 (N=26), or 31–40 (N=8) years. Not surprisingly, age and tenure are highly correlated in our sample ( $r = .86$ ;  $p < .001$ ).

<sup>2</sup> We used a five-month gap for two reasons. First, the second-wave interviews were not initially planned. After analyzing the first-wave interviews and discussing preliminary findings, the authors agreed that it was important to collect additional data to examine the consistency of interviewees' narratives while inquiring about the employment status of those who were recently unemployed at Time 1. This decision was made toward the end of July 2016. Given our focus on employment transitions, we turned to previous work on unemployment and reemployment as our guide. This research typically used a six-month follow-up period with participants (Vinokur, Price, and Schul, 1995). We then began conducting second-wave interviews in August 2016, which was about five months after Time 1. Second, Lally and colleagues (2010) investigated the time it took for an average person to adjust to a change in life. They found that the time ranged from 18 to 254 days, with a median of five months, suggesting that those who were recently unemployed at Time 1 were likely to reach a relatively stable state five months later at Time 2.

We conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews guided by a protocol (see Online Appendix A). Six interviews were conducted in person and the rest by phone, as most interviewees were geographically distant from the authors. The interviews averaged 57 minutes (range of 50 to 160 minutes) at Time 1. Follow-up interviews at Time 2 averaged 23 minutes (range of 15 to 30 minutes). All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. In the Time 1 interviews, we asked interviewees to describe their journey into and through journalism, to detail the factors that had led them to consider exiting journalism and entering different occupations (if applicable), and to share their emotions, thoughts, and behaviors regarding the experience of leaving or staying in journalism as well as the paths they had traveled since then. Time 2 interviews focused on their current work status and how their perceptions and experiences had unfolded or changed since the last interview. In all interviews, we probed for further elaboration as potentially important themes surfaced.

As we began analyzing the interviews, we found that whether journalists' accounts suggested a calling orientation did not correspond precisely to different patterns of navigating occupational destabilization, and neither did characteristics such as age or tenure in journalism. Specifically, although interviewees who did not express a calling orientation toward journalism ( $N=12$ ; 17 percent) showed similar responses to each other, those who did express a calling orientation ( $N=60$ ; 83 percent) narrated two divergent patterns.<sup>3</sup> The two patterns were characterized by whether interviewees described the fundamental meaning of journalism as fixed solely in this occupation or as flexible and thereby plausibly existing in other occupations—an emerging theoretical concept we labeled “meaning fixedness” (discussed further below). To home in on refining the properties of these two patterns of responses to occupational destabilization, we again employed a theoretical sampling strategy in stage 3 (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). For part of this process, we specifically sought additional unemployed or former journalists who did not express a calling orientation toward journalism ( $N=8$ ), as our earlier interviews suggested they tended to be low in meaning fixedness. This move was also intended to supplement the relatively smaller number of non-called journalists in our initial sample (i.e.,  $N=12$ ) to allow us to determine whether other patterns in meaning fixedness among the non-called would emerge. We conducted interviews until no new theoretical insights on meaning fixedness or other themes emerged, suggesting theoretical saturation (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). We added 22 interviewees to our initial sample of 72, growing our sample to 94.

## Data Analysis

Since our knowledge based on previous research is likely to influence our interpretation of the data, we began data analysis by following grounded theory

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<sup>3</sup> Following Schabram and Maitlis (2017), we determined that interviewees who mentioned at least three of the following four indicators were likely to view journalism as a calling: (1) they work primarily for the fulfillment brought by the work itself instead of its material rewards or advancement opportunities (Bellaah et al., 1985); (2) they see their work as socially valuable (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997); (3) they feel morally obligated to pursue their work as it fulfills a unique purpose in life (Bunderson and Thompson, 2009); (4) they feel strong passion toward their work (Dobrow and Tosti-Kharas, 2011).

techniques with a postpositivist perspective, acknowledging the existence of our biased foci while seeking to minimize subjectivity (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). We began by reading and analyzing the transcripts separately, meeting weekly for two hours to compare the codes emerging in our independent reading of the data from sets of five to ten interviews each time, exchange insights, and discuss relevant literatures. While our data analysis process was iterative and nonlinear, for clarity we describe this process as unfolding in four roughly defined stages.

In the first stage, we read Time 1 transcripts separately to note potentially important themes, paying particular attention to coding interviewees' cognitions, emotions, and behaviors as they described their experiences. Coding in this stage reflected in-vivo or descriptive coding (Locke, 2001), which involved labeling a section of text with single words or short phrases directly extracted from the transcript or closely describing its meaning. For example, interviewees described "feeling sad" about what happened to journalism and "feeling nervous" about the future. As we read, we were struck by a bifurcated pattern of interviewees' accounts of their interpretations, emotions, and behaviors in the face of the changes they described. For example, in describing what journalism's destabilization meant to them, one interviewee lamented, "It's horrible. The worst part of it is the blow to self-esteem and self-worth" [9-Mfix], while another took a lighter approach, noting, "There are so many other things in the world that can use my skills and experience" [3-Mflex].<sup>4</sup> We assigned to the former quote the in-vivo code "threatening self-esteem/self-worth" and to the latter "seeing opportunities in other things."

In the second stage of data analysis, we reexamined and integrated our descriptive codes to form more-abstract codes. This stage reflects a process of axial coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Locke, 2001). For example, we considered the descriptive codes "threatening self-esteem/self-worth" and "seeing opportunities in other things" to be interviewees' views of leaving journalism as either a threat or an opportunity, which we later further abstracted to the theoretical category "interpreting occupational destabilization" given that the codes reflected different ways of interpreting the implications of journalism's destabilization for one's self and career. At this stage, our meetings became intensive discussions of the axial codes to use, focusing on resolving disagreements and generally discussing the plight of the journalists we interviewed.

In the third stage, we focused on delineating the two patterns of responses we observed among our interviewees and identifying their respective cognitive, emotional, and behavioral characteristics. This stage involved rereading the transcripts of interviewees demonstrating each pattern and reexamining the descriptive and abstract codes to construct a detailed description of the two kinds of responses to occupational destabilization. We also developed and refined theoretical categories to capture the content within each pattern of responses. For example, we first used the theoretical category of "sensemaking" but later changed it to "interpreting what destabilization means for the occupation and oneself" to more precisely reflect how journalists viewed the destabilization of their occupation differently.

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<sup>4</sup> Interviewee ID number is indicated in brackets followed by whether they viewed the meaning of their occupation as fixed (Mfix) or flexible (Mflex).

Finally, we adopted a holistic view of all interviews while interpreting the meaning of and connections between our codes. We sought to construct an integrated theoretical understanding of interviewees' responses. This reflected a shift to a constructivist perspective to assess how the theoretical categories fit into a cohesive framework (Charmaz, 2006) for us to "construct an image of a reality" (Charmaz, 2000: 523). We analyzed the variation within each theoretical category, identified patterns, and constructed connections across those variations to build and deepen our understanding of how the bifurcated responses to occupational destabilization unfolded and why. Across the four stages of data analyses, we went back and forth between our data and multiple research literatures in cognition, role transitions, and occupations (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). We performed all four stages of analysis with Time 1 data, using the second wave of data to supplement our findings and further validate our emerging theoretical model. We conducted member checks by explaining our model and core findings to ten interviewees who provided feedback on and validation of our model.

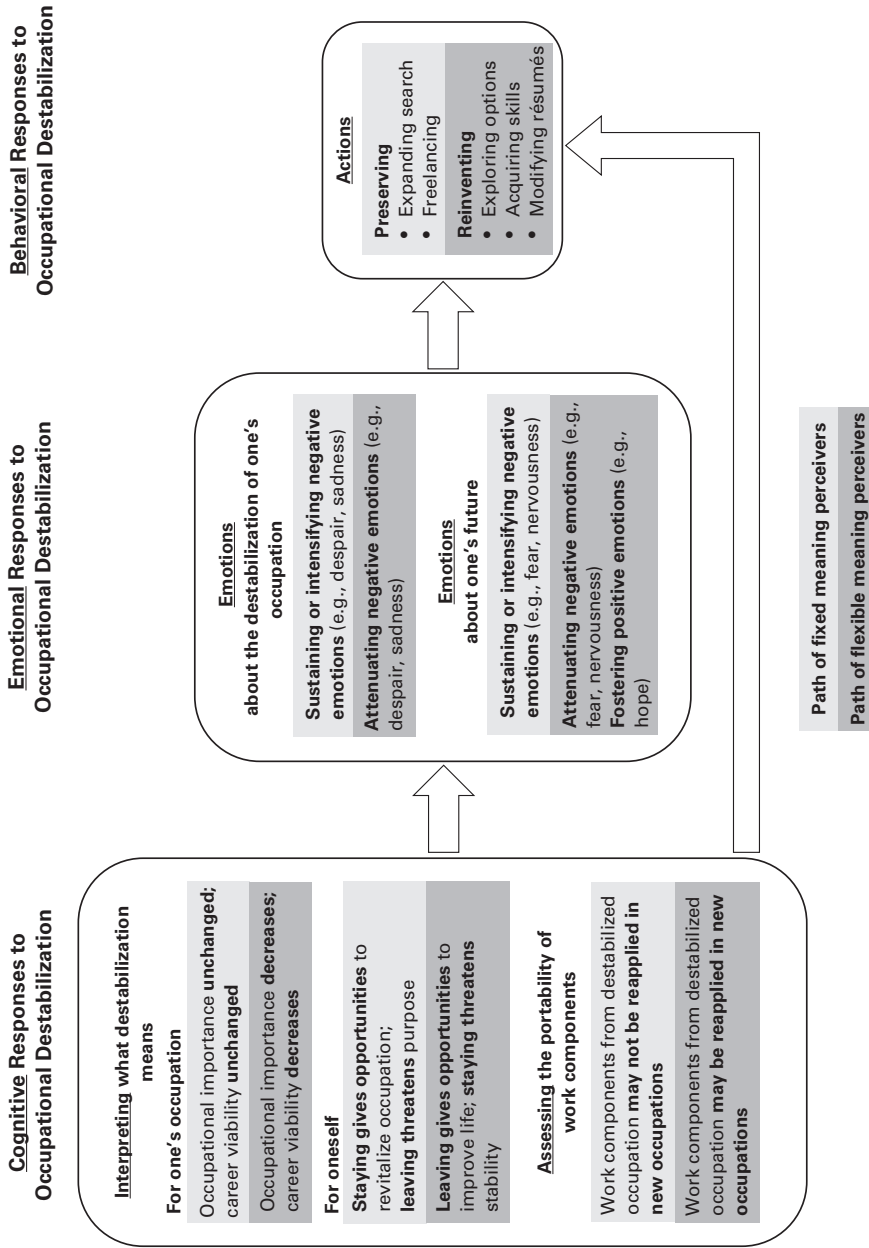
## FINDINGS

Our analysis revealed two primary paths through which journalists responded to their occupation's destabilization. Each path consisted of two cognitive processes—interpreting the destabilization of journalism and assessing the portability of journalism's work components—as well as two emotional processes regarding journalism's destabilization and their future. Further, we found that these two paths seemed to reflect whether journalists perceive the meaning of the work components defining journalism to be flexible across occupations or fixed within journalism—a theoretical concept we term "meaning fixedness." Fixed-meaning perceivers believe that the work components maintain their meaning only in journalism; they tend to interpret the occupation's destabilization as an imperative to stay in it, with the hope that staying might revitalize it, which only heightens their sadness about its ongoing plight; they also tend to see the work they do in journalism as not applicable to other occupations, making them more worried about their future. In contrast, flexible-meaning perceivers believe that some work components can exist and retain meaning in other occupations; they tend to interpret journalism's destabilization as an opportunity to pursue new careers, which alleviates their sadness about its decline; they also see potential to use the components in new contexts, reducing fears of the future. Ultimately, while fixed-meaning perceivers try to preserve their careers in journalism, flexible-meaning perceivers work to reinvent their careers in different occupations. These findings provide the foundation for us to theorize a model of meaning fixedness and how it shapes individual responses to occupational destabilization. We use Figure 1 to summarize our findings and orient this section.

### **Beyond Calling: Two Paths of Navigating Occupational Destabilization**

Many interviewees' accounts suggested that they held a calling orientation toward journalism. Some used the term "calling" without prompting. As one put it, "I think in order to be a journalist, especially these days, you kind of have to be called to it, and that's me. To me it's a lot more of a calling than a

Figure 1. Two Paths of Navigating Occupational Destabilization



profession and if you don't have that passion then you're not going to make it" [6-Mfix]. Another said,

I always knew I was going to be a journalist. I mean, even as a teenager I knew I was going to be a journalist. That was the only thing that I wanted to do. For me it was a calling. It was something that was important to our country that some people keep an eye on the political process and serve as a watchdog. I saw it as community building. I saw it as democracy protecting and I did see it as a calling. [44-Mflex]

Others did not specifically use "calling," but their narratives strongly reflected a calling orientation. As one suggested, "I think it's almost impossible for me not to do journalism. Even if there's absolutely no other reward in the world for me other than the satisfaction of having done it; if there's no financial payback for it or there's no accolades for it I wouldn't care; I would have to do journalism" [34-Mflex].

In contrast, some interviewees suggested that they enjoyed working as journalists but did not report feeling a sense of calling to this profession. For example, this interviewee compared herself to those who had a calling orientation: "I know a lot of people who go into journalism because they love it and are absolutely passionate about it. I mean, I like it too, but I'm definitely not one of them. I like that the work I did in journalism was a bit different every day and was fun, but there's nothing more special than that" [61-Mflex].

Although we initially expected that having a calling orientation or not toward journalism would associate with different responses to its destabilization as previous research suggested (e.g., Wrzesniewski, 1999), it became increasingly clear during our analysis that some calling-oriented journalists' responses resembled those of the non-calling-oriented, while others showed a markedly different pattern. Because the narratives of the former group suggested a sense that the meaning they derived from working in journalism could be found or cultivated in other occupations, we call this group flexible-meaning perceivers. In contrast, the latter group seemed to view the meaning of journalism as unavailable elsewhere and was thus labeled fixed-meaning perceivers. As we will describe, flexible- versus fixed-meaning perceivers showed different cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses, culminating in two paths of navigating occupational destabilization.

### Interpreting the Destabilization of Journalism

Every journalist in our sample acknowledged that journalism had been undergoing severe destabilization. Without being prompted, most interviewees likened journalism to a sick or dying person, or compared the experience of seeing the occupation weakened to mourning the death of a loved one. These accounts reflected a great deal of negative emotion, which we analyze in a later section. As one put it,

It was very hard. It's kind of like mourning. It was like my newspaper, my love, was like a relative that had, say, a terminal illness where you knew you couldn't do anything about it and it was very bitter because it was just not—it didn't have any life left in it and I couldn't do anything about it. [22-Mfix]

Interviewees also noted the destructive changes to their work over time. Some who experienced undesired changes in their work likened their separation from journalism to a divorce, comparing journalism to an increasingly abusive spouse. As a journalist of 27 years recounted,

It is like a divorce. You know, you mourn. I cried. I cried not because the job itself was so great but because in the heyday, during the early days, journalism was so great. It is very much like when you leave a bad marriage and you know he was a great guy and in the beginning when it first started he was the love of your life, but towards the end of the marriage he was an asshole. You know, you mourn, not the man you are leaving, but the man you married. I was mourning the career that I married because I had intended to be in that career the rest of my life. [36-Mfix]

Although journalism's destabilization was well recognized, how journalists interpreted its destabilization varied. Their accounts reflected a cognitive process in which they contemplated what the destabilization meant for journalism as an occupation and for themselves. Fixed- and flexible-meaning perceivers exhibited diverging patterns of interpretation.

**Fixed-meaning perceivers.** These journalists focused on justifying the importance of journalism as an occupation and reflected the view that high-quality journalism continues to be important work that brings value to themselves, others, and society as a whole:

I'm going to go back to the guiding statement for journalists . . . and that is "Speak out truth and report it." That is the job of the journalists. It doesn't matter what beat you have, what topics you are covering; you can distill it down to that. . . . It takes a very special kind of person to really have ink in their veins and want to get down into the nitty gritty and do that. A journalist is a watchdog for the public; whatever the readership is, the journalist is ultimately supposed to represent that readership's best interests, and they're supposed to provide the readers with information those readers need to make good decisions and to be informed citizens. . . . Editorials shouldn't tell people what to think, they should give people something to think about. . . . For those reasons we still need good journalists to do good journalism. . . . That's fulfilling to us and important to our society. [17-Mfix]

For this interviewee, good journalism was both a personal and social imperative; it remained important to represent the public and provide people with objective and accurate information. Another fixed-meaning perceiver had a similar emphasis:

I try to help people by telling stories. Like back to this heroin story, I'm hoping by telling some of these people's stories I can help other people who're reading this story. This is why journalism is still very important, you know. It's because it makes sure there are professionals who make people's stories heard in the most accurate and profound way possible . . . thereby helping everybody who reads that story and who learns from that experience. [5-Mfix]

Fixed-meaning perceivers insisted that there were still career opportunities involving high-quality journalism, although the work would not be financially



rewarding. Many of these journalists also indicated that attacks on journalism might revive the occupation:

Some papers still do real investigative journalism so there are still places that have it. . . . It's definitely not the same as it was but we do still have some places that still have it but not as many for sure. . . . And financially it almost certainly will be difficult. . . . I feel like in a way the Trump thing is going to perhaps, if we're lucky, it may reenergize journalism and not from the standpoint of the working journalists but from the standpoint of people paying for it and understanding that they need to pay for real companies to make real news for them. . . . So hopefully it will help. [35-Mfix]

Another fixed-meaning perceiver indicated that, although the field was very competitive, there were ways to succeed "if you go to certain schools, like if you go to Columbia . . . there is a way that you get jobs and you get to go work, even intern at *The New York Times*; you go intern at *The LA Times*; you go work at *The Boston Globe* and things like that" [29-Mfix]. These accounts of viability came both from journalists who had built careers in prominent outlets and those who had worked for less-known papers.

Thinking about the implications of journalism's destabilization for their personal lives and careers, fixed-meaning perceivers described how they had to devote their careers to stopping the decline of the occupation by persisting in it. The sense of responsibility and obligation to preserve journalism as an occupation is clear in the words of this journalist:

Even though I can find another job that's similar to journalism, but not journalism, I wouldn't want to do that. I do feel they mean very different things to me, very much so. Especially like right now with the political climate we're in, it's more important than ever to have journalists. . . . People like me were left here mourning the death of the industry and had to figure out how to do it [journalism] in our own way. [5-Mfix]

Some fixed-meaning perceivers had considered the possibility of leaving journalism for another occupation, but they rejected these thoughts because they threatened their purpose in life. As one interviewee suggested,

I don't see myself leaving. You know . . . I think part of this is that this is a passion, like a calling. And so it's not having a job. It isn't just . . . the economic necessity which of course is a factor. You have to support yourself. But to do what you've learned to do, to feel that you have it and that would make a difference, I think this is important to every intelligent sentient being . . . so that they have purpose and meaning in their life. [15-Mfix]

**Flexible-meaning perceivers.** To flexible-meaning perceivers, in contrast, destabilization implied that journalism's importance had decreased, that it had become obsolete while only some aspects remained valuable. As one former journalist suggested,

People now can write their own stories on social media. Anyone can take a picture of an event, post it on Facebook or Twitter and it can get the information out faster than any journalist can. . . . There's no more journalism . . . so you have to move on and find other things to do with the skills you have. [13-Mflex]

Her account implied that because journalism now could be done by anyone, it no longer maintained its importance as a profession. Another flexible-meaning perceiver commented that the internet made it easy and often free for people to access information online, shrinking the size of journalism's audience and shattering its status:

The internet happened and this is a huge change for a lot of journalists. . . . The biggest change for me is that the companies started giving away their products for free on the internet. . . . Anybody could find out information and read articles for free and so no one really thought about that and then that just led to a whole spiral of reduced subscribers and money and people say now, "Well I don't have time to read the newspaper. I just, you know, check on the Twitter and read what I want to read online." . . . Clearly, journalism has no place in the market anymore. [27-Mflex]

In addition, flexible-meaning perceivers suggested they saw little career viability for journalism in the future:

The number of journalists has declined precipitously in this country because of the dramatic reduction in size and number of news providers, community newspapers, small city newspapers, television and radio. Newsrooms have either closed down completely or downsized, and journalism is not a really good career choice for young people today because you go to college and spend all this money to get a university degree, and then you're looking at basically making minimum wage coming out with whatever you might have, and something that's very difficult work that might not even find an audience. Journalism is no longer a sustainable career, period. [7-Mflex]

I just wanted to be working in newspapers my whole career, and that was before the internet sort of changing things and making it clear that newspapers and journalism weren't a viable career option. . . . I am 50 years old and I need to work for about 20 more years and there is absolutely no way that anybody should be counting on working for another 20 years in newspapers. They are crazy if they are. [47-Mflex]

As a result, flexible-meaning perceivers described leaving journalism as their preferred response to its destabilization. They characterized journalism as a dying field; their words suggested that staying in journalism represented a threat to their economic stability. As one explained,

I love newspapers more than anyone does, but it's a sinking ship. I was making \$35,000 a year working more than 80 hours a week and that was with 24 years of experience. There was no hope of that pay ever going up. The pay was not going to go up. I was going to be stuck. . . . We had two kids and their expenses . . . it would be nice to make some more money and there would be a more stable feel in our family. [27-Mflex]

Because of the worsening conditions they associated with the occupation's destabilization, for flexible-meaning perceivers, leaving journalism meant better opportunities, freedom, and quality of life. One journalist, who was contemplating using her skills and experience to start a marketing business, said, "I like saying, you know what, it's my shop today and I can find a couple of hours in my day and I'm going to go out in the garden. You know . . . I'm the master of my own universe" [13-Mflex]. We offer additional quotes in Online Appendix B

describing how journalists interpreted the occupation's destabilization in differing ways.

### Emotions About the Destabilization of Journalism

All interviewees described strong sadness about the destabilizing landscape of journalism, which evoked a profound sense of loss. They described a grieving process marked by struggle and the loss of a secure foothold in their beloved occupation. A journalist who had worked in newspapers for 26 years described the challenge:

You know, we are addicts and we can't let go. You know, journalism is who we are in the very core of our DNA, and it really is revolutionary, and I am not using that word in an altruistic way. I mean it really is revolutionary, and to extricate yourself from all you have ever been, what you ever will be, you know, your whole identity and say, "Okay, I am 49 years old, I am going to be something else." It has been. . . . It is quite like a loss . . . it really is, and you will hear this from other journalists as well, I am sure. [31-Mflex]

A sense of loss dominated their accounts, which were filled with negative emotions reflecting anger, emptiness, and depression. Interviewees reported feeling "heartbroken" [32-Mflex] and "devastated" [13-Mflex], "having an existential crisis and having to go see a psychiatrist to put me on medication" [10-Mfix], "resenting the managers and furious about the changes" [43-Mfix], and feeling "profound sadness, emptiness, hopelessness, and complete loss of purpose and self-esteem" [28-Mflex]. While every journalist reported negative feelings, notable differences emerged between fixed- and flexible-meaning perceivers in how their negative emotions changed in intensity, which seemed to follow their different interpretations of journalism's destabilization.

**Fixed-meaning perceivers.** As fixed-meaning perceivers tended to focus on justifying journalism's importance and viability as a career, such focus only seemed to make the plight of journalism more salient, sustaining or even intensifying their sadness about their occupation's deterioration over time. Citing the stages of grief introduced by Kübler-Ross (1969), a journalist who had worked in newspapers for 30 years described an intense mourning that had not abated for five years:

I think when anybody who is so called to a profession, to a dedicated profession, it's medicine or art or whatever, and you have wanted all your life to be in it and you're trained for it and you've gotten the experience and then at a certain point it says, you know the profession tells you that you have to leave. When you have to leave, especially when you have to leave not because of anything you've done wrong, okay? But because you're no longer considered necessary. Alright? This, then, yeah, it's a death and you go through all the stages of grieving, you know, which is denial, and anger and then finally acceptance. . . . It's pretty much like a death and for five years I just haven't reached the acceptance stage yet. [15-Mfix]

In words that reflected the recurring theme of death even one year after being laid off, another fixed-meaning perceiver said, "I think I'm still in depression and denial. Maybe after I get to acceptance I will go out there and looking for

gigs but you know, it takes energy and I just don't think I have that now" [68-Mfix]. Their prolonged and intensified sadness about journalism's destabilization and their failure to reach acceptance of it appeared to strengthen a determination to persist in journalism, which might present an eventual chance to revitalize it. A journalist who had been laid off two years prior but harbored hope about journalism's comeback captured this belief:

I think from the time I took my first job at [newspaper] I just thought, "This is what I am doing and I am all in and this is it." Sixteen years later I think I am starting to go, "Okay, now I have to do something else." And that is horrifying. It's very upsetting to see what journalism is going through right now and I think more than ever we need people to keep doing it and bring it back. [37-Mfix]

**Flexible-meaning perceivers.** Flexible-meaning perceivers described their feelings at the outset of their destabilization experience in terms similar to those used by fixed-meaning perceivers. But for flexible-meaning perceivers, negative emotions about journalism's destabilization followed an abating trajectory. While fixed-meaning perceivers seemed stuck or experienced a strengthening sense of loss, flexible-meaning perceivers reported recovery from their sadness. Their interpretation, reflecting an acceptance of journalism's plight and ability to see opportunities outside journalism, seemed to support and enable the recovery. A journalist who had worked in newspapers for 20 years noted,

I would wake up and I would go, "Well, do you miss it so terribly that you're going to go back for your job today?" And the answer would go, "No," because my jobs are not there anymore. . . . When I left I looked back and I didn't feel there was any possible way to return to what I did. . . . This was me recognizing that I didn't have a place in that particular realm anymore. But what I knew and what I did was still valuable, just not for those people. . . . It's over and feeling sad about it won't help. [33-Mflex]

While fixed-meaning perceivers often said they needed much more time, and in some cases said that *no* amount of time would allow them to move past their feelings of loss, flexible-meaning perceivers reported that it took them typically "a few weeks" [56-Mflex] to come to terms with the destabilization. Some interviewees seemed aware of this contrast in the emotional responses of fixed- and flexible-meaning perceivers. As one flexible-meaning perceiver suggested,

There is a mourning process. You know you go through these stages of grief and many of us are still in denial, "Oh, (the) newspaper will come back." I mean we are all sort of really having a hard time accepting that this thing that we love doesn't love us back and that we are not going to be able to make a living out of it. Some of us are coming to the acceptance stage sooner than others but hopefully we are all going to get there. . . . But it is also possible that some will never get there. [27-Mflex]

Thus, although interviewees started with similar negative emotions when facing the destabilization of journalism, the different ways they interpreted its destabilization seemed to associate with how their emotions changed in

intensity. Fixed-meaning perceivers focused on abstract hopes for journalism's continued importance and career viability, reinforcing their sadness and sense of plight over its destabilization. Flexible-meaning perceivers accepted the plight of journalism and saw promising opportunities elsewhere, attenuating their sadness and accelerating their recovery. Online Appendix C provides additional evidence of interviewees' emotional reactions to journalism's destabilization.

### Assessing the Portability of Journalism's Work Components

Besides interpreting what journalism's destabilization implied, journalists' accounts reflected another cognitive process: assessing the portability of journalism's specific work components, that is, whether journalists were able and willing to transfer the work components they deemed meaningful in journalism and apply them in other occupations. When asked about the parts of journalism they viewed as meaningful, all journalists noted several work components, which we classified into three groups, the first of which reflected the tasks of the work, the second its relational features, and the third its impact, a classification that corresponds to sources of meaning in work examined in previous research (cf. Wrzesniewski and Dutton, 2001; Rosso, Dekas, and Wrzesniewski, 2010). The task components referred to activities that journalists performed in their jobs, such as reading, learning, writing, reporting breaking news, taking photos, and going to interesting places. The relationship components comprised interactive aspects of the work, such as connecting with people by interviewing them and publicizing their stories, as well as working and socializing with fellow journalists. The impact components involved the mainly positive effects that journalists have on others. Our interviewees described improving people's lives, especially lives of the marginalized, promoting democracy and social justice, benefiting communities and country, motivating social change, and contributing to society in general. Noticeably absent from their accounts of the meaningful work components were mentions of pay, status, power, or fame, suggesting that these did not define how they experienced meaningfulness in journalism, a broad consensus that might be attributed to journalism's strong occupational culture (Ryfe, 2016). For example, one journalist described the work as being very meaningful to him because it combined the task, relationship, and impact components:

It is interesting work and it allowed me to be curious and learn about a variety of different topics. . . . I was on a special assignment after the Newtown school shooting covering the aftermath of that and was able to keep the public informed. . . . I had a really unique access to people. . . . It was compelling and it was essentially allowing me to continue my education, to remain curious, and to serve the community.

[51-Mflex]

Another similarly noted,

It was hands-on and it was very practical writing . . . it got me close to people doing things that I felt were interesting . . . and when you get to touch somebody's life, help people and when you get to help somebody that's a lot of fun. . . . I've had a lot of moments like that where the information I delivered helped somebody, changed somebody's life, changed something and that's as . . . good as it gets. [11-Mfix]

Expecting journalism's work components to maintain some meaning in other occupations, flexible-meaning perceivers described being able and willing to carry forward parts of what they did to make them useful for other occupations. However, fixed-meaning perceivers tightly rooted the meaning of these work components in journalism and appeared to be unable or unwilling to transfer them to different contexts. The perceived portability of work components expanded plausible career possibilities for the former group while limiting them for the latter.

**Fixed-meaning perceivers.** Fixed-meaning perceivers mostly described an inability or unwillingness to see the work they did in journalism as transferrable or applicable to other occupations. As a laid-off journalist who began freelancing noted, "[I] don't think what I do in newspapers can transfer" [21-Mfix]. One former journalist elaborated:

I think some things are only possible in journalism. It's the ability to engage with the world, learn about the world, and connect to people from everywhere and to change their life for the better. It's also the ability to dig out the truth for people, to find out what is really going on. People always live in their own bubble but as a journalist, I'm naturally curious about everything that's going on and everybody's life and that's to me something that only journalism can provide. [25-Mfix]

A photojournalist who was also laid off and had worked as a freelancer ever since described his view that although the task components seemed transferable, he did not see them as so:

A lot of my colleagues opened their own studios or worked for others doing commercial photographs like weddings, portraits, and shooting products. They make a lot of money, way more than in journalism. I know how to do them; I know all the technical aspects of them and I can do them well, but I just hate doing them. . . . It is just, I mean, those things are different from journalism. They are fake, not authentic. I've heard too many photographers who have had like nightmare stories about how bride or groom or family or whatever, they didn't like the photos even though the photos were amazing. . . . It's just different. It has to be news and journalism. That's the only thing I can do. [30-Mfix]

One newsroom veteran also shared his view that the impact component could not transfer:

I'm one of these ink-stained wretches who has newspaper in my veins and I could never bring myself to be a PR person . . . and that's why I stayed in journalism, I was one of these idealists. I felt like I was in some way changing the world for the better and I wouldn't be able to do that in another field. [17-Mfix]

The commitment these journalists felt to one or more work components in journalism and their unwillingness to enact these components in other occupations or contexts was captured by an interviewee who was searching for another journalism job after becoming unemployed following a 23-year newspaper career:

I've only been writing for journalism, and will only be doing so. . . . I can't imagine writing for PR, marketing, advertising, or whatever. It's like moving all the furniture I have here to my neighbor's house. It's still his home, not mine. [68-Mfix]

In light of such a view, it is not surprising that in suggesting who should remain in journalism, one fixed-meaning perceiver said, "The only people that should really be in journalism are the people who can't imagine doing anything else, like me" [5-Mfix].

**Flexible-meaning perceivers.** Flexible-meaning perceivers seemed able and willing to transfer the task, relationship, and impact components in journalism and apply them to new occupations. Their accounts suggested the notion that "leaving the newspaper, and journalism, doesn't mean I have to leave all the things I love to do behind" [49-Mflex]. The words of a former journalist who had recently enrolled in a graduate program in counseling psychology captured his perception that some components of journalism could transfer:

It's definitely a challenge when you have to imagine yourself doing something else because like for me, I've been working in newspapers for 27 years but the way I see it is that, you know, journalism has everything I like but other jobs may have some of those things too. For me, I like helping people and writing and I can do that in counseling psychology too. It's just doing it in a different way, so, seeing the similarities between the two fields is helpful. [32-Mflex]

A former journalist who found her "calling" in journalism and felt "extremely sad" when leaving it after a 28-year career suggested that applying the work components of journalism elsewhere could not only benefit other occupations but also help to maintain the value of journalism:

So to me, that [the] newspaper is gone doesn't mean that you can't do journalism anymore. Maybe you can't do everything you do in journalism but you may still be able to do some journalism work like in teaching, I still write and educate people; in marketing and in PR you still socialize with people. . . . I think people need PR. Companies need PR and good companies need good PR, so if we journalists can do it well and can make the company better, why not? I think if we are good journalists we should be able to apply what we've learned in journalism, our work ethics, into other fields and let people see the power and value of journalists and that's how we can keep journalism alive. [56-Mflex]

These journalists described attempts to identify components of journalism that they could transfer to and reuse in other lines of work. For example, a journalist of 20 years described the main feature that defined journalism and his hope to keep it alive in other occupations:

I can't imagine doing a job without connecting with people, being their voice, and helping them. To me that's the core value of journalism and even though journalism is declining, I feel its core value is still here, maybe in a different place, like a different profession or industry, and I have the obligation to keep it alive. [33-Mflex]

When asked what advice they would give to journalists who were recently laid off, flexible-meaning perceivers encouraged being nimble, using the loved work

components in new contexts. A journalist who had moved on to an advertising company advised the following:

In today's world you really have to be adaptable. I would like to tell all those people that, you know, you can take the ingredients in journalism, add to them a few other ingredients, and you can make something different. You don't have to make the things that you always make. [48-Mflex]

The notion of decomposing journalism into its separate components, transferring relevant ones, and applying them in a new occupation is common in the accounts of flexible-meaning perceivers. As another from this group noted, "I understand that it is hard to leave journalism, but just because you've made a lot of sacrifices for it doesn't mean that this is the only right job for you. You have to be nimble and apply what you are good at, what you love, what you do in journalism into other fields" [39-Mflex]. By enacting some work components from journalism, flexible-meaning perceivers were able to reconstruct for themselves a new occupational home. One interviewee who became a client-relations manager described reapplying the journalistic components in her new job, which helped her excel in and feel satisfied with the job:

What I figured out really early on was that I didn't have to leave that piece of me behind. Like all the parts of me that made me a journalist—that I was able to ask questions, that I am not afraid to ask questions, that I knew how to research, that I know how to listen. . . . All of these things that I learned how to really be good at in the newsroom—connecting with people, knowing where to go for the right information . . . they then translated into my other jobs and what I was able to do. I think that made it less scary for me because those were all the skills that I valued and that I relied on. . . . The job that I had taken that I was really, really good at and liked because it has the pieces where I know, okay, if it is a sales client I am sitting across from or somebody who wants to do a special promotion, I have got to be able to ask the right questions, get to the heart of what it is, what are their goals, what do they want to accomplish, how do they want to do that; and then figuring out how I can then help them. [49-Mflex]

We provide more supporting data on how interviewees described the meaningful work components in journalism and assessed the portability of these components from journalism in Online Appendix D.

### Emotions About the Future

It is natural for workers in destabilized occupations to contemplate their future. While doing so, our interviewees reported negative emotions such as fear, nervousness, and worry due to the uncertainty involved at this critical moment in their career. In particular, fixed-meaning perceivers worried about not being able to sustain a living in journalism. One interviewee described the financial precariousness involved, likening the end of her work to the end of her life: "Every day I live in this uncertainty of whether I would be able to make money the next day. I am scared and nervous and kept thinking, okay, is it gonna be the end of my journalism career, the end of my life?" [36-Mfix]. Meanwhile, flexible-meaning perceivers were nervous about their occupational transitions. The words of this former journalist captured the stress: "You know for a month



I was nervous and stressed about what I will do as my next career and how I'm gonna make the switch. I wouldn't want to just do anything. . . . The feeling of uncertainty was overwhelming" [66-Mflex]. Such negative emotions remained or intensified for fixed-meaning perceivers but eased for flexible-meaning perceivers—diverging trajectories that seemed to follow their assessed portability of journalism's work components.

**Fixed-meaning perceivers.** Not being able or willing to transfer their journalistic work components into other occupations seemed to sustain or even intensify fixed-meaning perceivers' fear and nervousness about their future. Several reported making efforts to explore different occupations, attempts that often ended before they culminated in applications to new jobs. A journalist who had been freelancing since being laid off in 2010 put it this way:

I have never thought about doing something else and I can't think of anything that I would really rather do. I went on LinkedIn and I looked at the jobs that are out there and it's very hard to apply for a job that you don't want. You know, like even writing the cover letter for a job you don't want is really tough. You know, how do you sell yourself when you're like, "No!" When I realized I don't actually want any of those jobs out there, that's when I started to feel really scared and nervous. What am I going to do? [42-Mfix]

This fear pulled them back and reinforced remaining in their familiar and loved occupation. One fixed-meaning perceiver described how the non-portability of his work intensified his fear of changing occupations, strengthening his inclination to stay in journalism:

You know, I was very nervous. . . . There was a part where I was talking to somebody about my experience and they said, "Oh, you're just a writer." And I was very offended by that but that also reinforced what I'm thinking. I'm like okay, well, I'm not just a writer; I'm a journalist. But still there's not a heck of a lot else that I can do or want to do. . . . There probably is that trepidation; there's the fear that you're going to go out and you're going to fail. . . . There's a lot of fear of that. . . . The more you fear, the fewer things you believe you can do. [21-Mfix]

**Flexible-meaning perceivers.** In contrast, flexible-meaning perceivers saw their work components as transferrable across occupations, which appeared to alleviate their fear and nervousness about the future. In some cases, it even fostered positive emotions such as hope. This is evident in the account of a former journalist who described how seeing the components of journalism as portable made her "more hopeful" and "less scared," which seemed to encourage her "to see a career psychologist" to explore other career options:

For about a month I was just very unsure about what I should do. I was nervous and also scared because I didn't know where my future would be. . . . I find that there are actually many things that people like me with journalism skills and experience can do, as long as you are willing to look for it and sell yourself. Once I realized that is the case I was more hopeful. I was definitely less scared. . . . So I actually went to see a career psychologist who my friend recommended and we did some career tests and talked for a while and you know the top career choice that came out for me was

journalist [*laughter*]. See, I was right. But, of course, I couldn't do that anymore because there's simply no jobs. And the next one is social worker. So I thought maybe I should try that since there are so many elements of journalism in social work such as listening to and helping others. [40-Mflex]

More evidence of how interviewees described their emotions about the future is presented in Online Appendix E.

### Preserving vs. Reinventing

As their cognitive and emotional experiences unfolded in the wake of journalism's destabilization, fixed- and flexible-meaning perceivers engaged in *preserving* and *reinventing* actions, respectively, as their ultimate behavioral responses. Nearly every fixed-meaning perceiver focused on preserving their work in journalism, either by freelancing or remaining unemployed while expanding their search for journalism jobs, sometimes living off of retirement funds to do so. Flexible-meaning perceivers chose, instead, to transfer work components in journalism to new occupations, reinventing aspects of their work in different contexts.

**Fixed-meaning perceivers.** Fixed-meaning perceivers undertook behaviors intended to preserve their involvement in journalism. They mostly became freelancers, often for pay that was much lower and less stable, or continued to seek employment in journalism while remaining unemployed. They insisted that they "would keep searching for journalism jobs" [67-Mfix] or "would continue to write and do journalism as long as there's still savings" [5-Mfix]. They believed there was still a chance that they could return to the newsroom one day:

Part of me is still hoping that we turn the corner and the prospects of the profession start to get better. You know, maybe tomorrow some millionaire will say, "Let's open the paper again and get all those people who used to work there back." [68-Mfix]

This sentiment was echoed in the words of another who had been laid off for a year:

I will keep looking for newspaper jobs. . . . To be honest I guess part of me still believes there's this slight possibility that newspapers will come back. It's like books never die completely. It's a part of our culture that will be sustained regardless [of] how fast the world is changing. [10-Mfix]

These preserving actions provided a chance for fixed-meaning perceivers to continue to express themselves in journalism and maintain self-worth. As one described, "I feel I became completely worthless after leaving the newspaper. I mean all I have been doing is journalism. All I will do is still journalism. . . . That's the only way I gain my self-esteem" [25-Mfix]. Another lamented, "What else can I do, this is what I've always done, and this is what I'm trained in. I have all this experience, you know, just not wanting to abandon all that" [71-Mfix]. This sense of being tied to journalism was reflected in an unwillingness to pursue new occupations, a sentiment expressed by nearly every fixed-

meaning perceiver. As a former reporter noted, no other occupation could compare:

I don't think those [other occupations] are for me. Like I said, after I did that reporter job in college I just couldn't imagine myself doing anything else but journalism. If I do PR or marketing I would be benefiting a single organization. If I teach I would be facing only a group of students. But in journalism I'm doing it for a larger audience, for everybody. It's the only job in the world that has everything I want in it and it is special in its own way. [36-Mfix]

**Flexible-meaning perceivers.** In contrast, flexible-meaning perceivers generally searched for occupations to which they could transfer and translate familiar work components. To find and enter these occupations, they engaged in reinventing actions, focusing on career exploration, skill acquisition, and résumé modification. Career exploration involved "talking to career psychologists" [31-Mflex] and "people in other jobs" [3-Mflex] and "trying different things" [19-Mflex] to identify a new path. Skill acquisition meant "learning new technologies and acquiring new skills" [8-Mflex] that could be helpful in other occupations, such as "learning how to edit videos and use different computer programs" [13-Mflex]. It often involved hunting for resources. For example, one interviewee said, "I never did a marketing plan in my life. I Googled how to write a marketing plan. . . . I Googled everything. How to write a marketing plan? What is [it]? They will say, 'Hey, do this.' I will Google, 'What is this? How do you do this?'" [47-Mflex]. Finally, résumé modification referred to translating the terms used to describe interviewees' work in journalism so that their experiences and skills could be understood and valued by other industries. For example, interviewees described changing "writing opinion pieces" to "creating content" [52-Mflex] and explaining in detail the responsibilities of being an editor [14-Mflex] on their résumés. The need to translate journalistic skills to other industries and the frustration it created was clear in the words of this former journalist:

I was sitting in one interview and the guy asked me, "Okay, well how are you with deadlines?" I just looked at him and like my eyes went up and my jaw dropped and I was like, "Well, I ran a newspaper." Oh, deadlines. Do I know anything about deadlines? I ran a newspaper! How did you not know that I am good with deadlines? . . . You know, I took out all journalism-related stuff from my résumé. Instead of saying I had experience in organizing and writing and editing special sections I changed that to say that I had experience in overseeing special projects. [47-Mflex]

Engaging in these reinventing behaviors was extremely challenging for fixed-meaning perceivers, most of whom did not even attempt these moves; those who did reported failure or resistance:

I couldn't help but start crying when I was rewriting my résumé for a coordinator job. I had to delete my reporting and editing experience and instead put stuff like I'm good with deadlines. It feels terrible. At the end I just gave up. [38-Mfix]

My daughter has been teaching me how to tweet and create websites, new stuff like that. I'm learning it because the recruiters ask for it. But I'm learning it very slowly

and to be honest a little reluctantly. It is really bittersweet. It feels like I'm pushing myself out of journalism, which I would never have done. [15-Mfix]

Fixed-meaning perceivers who made these attempts described great difficulty in carrying on, eventually to the point of giving up the search for jobs in new occupations. The sense of threat they felt reaffirmed their decision to remain in journalism through such actions as expanding their job search in journalism or pursuing freelance journalistic work. Online Appendix F provides additional data on interviewees' preserving or reinventing actions.

Overall, fixed- and flexible-meaning perceivers differed in how they interpreted the destabilization of journalism and how they assessed the portability of journalism's work components, both of which were associated with their diverging emotional trajectories. Ultimately they were steered toward either preserving or reinventing their occupation in the wake of its destabilization. The essence of this process is reflected in the words of a freelance journalist, who adopted an evolutionary interpretation of his experience:

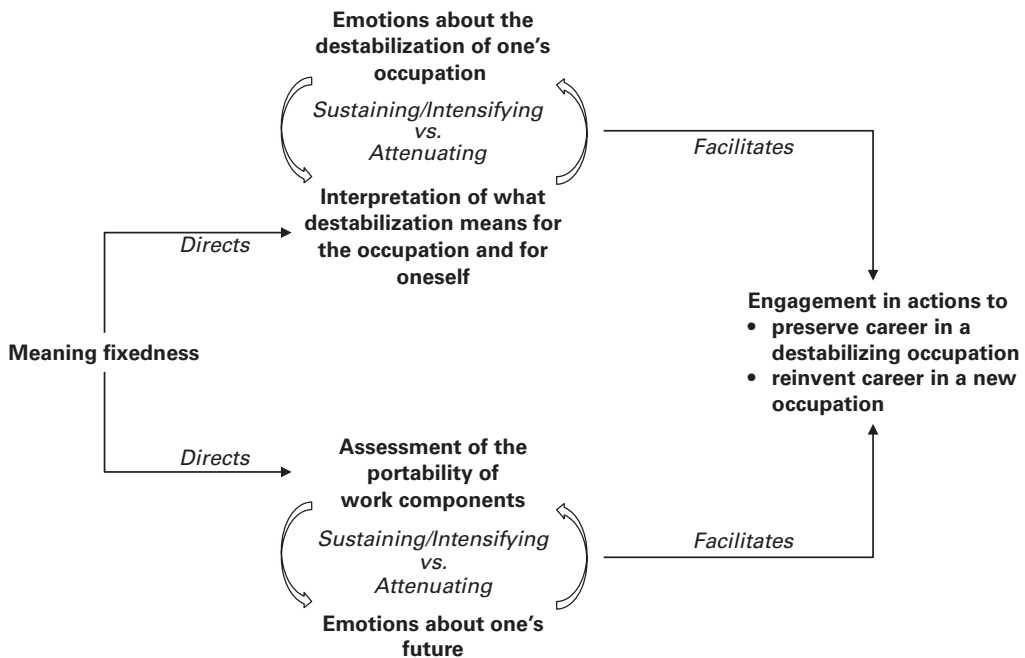
For everyone evolution is hard. Dinosaurs didn't evolve. We don't have dinosaurs anymore. I think . . . what is happening to people in our profession is kind of a mirror of what is happening to society. . . . I feel like I am kind of at the razor's edge where one side is suicide and [the] other side is evolution. Some days it is like too hard to try to evolve so I am on the side of extinction and suicide. On some days I feel like evolution is what I have to do and I absolutely can do that and there is a way forward. In the meantime I am feeling like I am still on that knife's edge of uncertainty. . . . It is tough times. [37-Mfix]

### Toward a Model of Meaning Fixedness

In delineating the paths taken by fixed- versus flexible-meaning perceivers, we also sought to abstract from our findings and theorize how these two paths emerged and why they unfolded in their respective patterns. As suggested by the labels we used, we propose that underlying these two paths was a distinctive individual-level perception reflecting the extent to which one views the meaning of work components in the occupation as fixed or flexible—a theoretical concept we term *meaning fixedness*, inspired by the construct of functional fixedness originally developed by Karl Duncker (1945). Functional fixedness refers to a cognitive tendency that limits a person's ability to think about or use an object in any way other than how it is traditionally used, such that an orange is only a fruit to be eaten, not a ball with which to play catch (Duncker, 1945; Adamson, 1952; McCaffrey, 2012). Consistent with this definition, meaning fixedness captures a tendency to view the components of work as meaningful only in a particular occupation and as meaningless if transferred, in part or whole, to a different occupation. We argue that the high versus low level of meaning fixedness characterizing the fixed- versus flexible-meaning perceivers, respectively, explains their strikingly different cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses to occupational destabilization. Drawing on our findings, we construct a model of meaning fixedness in the navigation of occupational destabilization, presented in Figure 2.

Our findings show that fixed- and flexible-meaning perceivers differ in how they interpret the meaning of their occupation's destabilization and in how they

**Figure 2. A Model of Meaning Fixedness and Individual Responses to Occupational Destabilization**



assess the portability of the occupation's work components. We suggest that meaning fixedness can direct individuals toward both interpreting the destabilization and assessing the portability of work components in particular ways. Specifically, high levels of meaning fixedness seem to fixate people's focus on justifying the destabilized occupation's importance and its continued career viability, as their work seems meaningful only when performed in this occupation. In contrast, low meaning fixedness can free people to see in the destabilized occupation clear signs of change and decreased career viability. Similarly, high meaning fixedness can render people less able or willing to transfer relevant work components to other occupational contexts, as to them, these work components would carry little to no meaning outside of the destabilized occupation. In contrast, with low meaning fixedness, people report a belief that the same work components can hold meaning elsewhere, making them more able and willing to transfer components to other occupations.

The cognitive responses we describe, characterized by their respective patterns of interpreting the destabilization of the occupation and assessing the portability of its work components, reflect people's understandings of and beliefs about what is happening to their occupation. As we show in our findings, people take striking emotional journeys as they develop an understanding of the destabilization of their occupation. The experience of occupational destabilization is negative, involving emotions of sadness and despair that often accompany a sense of loss as people grapple with the implications of the changes to their occupation. People also experience the emotions at a more personal level regarding what destabilization means for their future. The

fear and nervousness described universally by our participants about their path forward in the midst of destabilization reflect an understanding that their work—as it had been—is under threat.

While occupational destabilization brings universally negative emotions, we suggest that meaning fixedness influences both the intensity and, sometimes, the content of these emotions. With high meaning fixedness, a focus on justifying the destabilized occupation's continued importance and career viability seems to sustain or even intensify individuals' negative emotions about their plight. Low meaning fixedness yields more acceptance of the occupation's deterioration, helping to attenuate negative emotions over time. Moreover, feeling unable or unwilling to transfer work components from the destabilized occupation sustains or intensifies people's negative emotions about their future, keeping them stuck in a cycle of fear about what will become of them. In contrast, feeling able and willing to transfer work components to a new occupation attenuates people's negative emotions over time, even giving rise to positive emotions such as hope about the future. We suggest that these contrasting emotional trajectories are, in turn, likely to bolster individuals' respective cognitive responses (although our data do not directly indicate this), as emotions and cognitions mutually reinforce each other (Lazarus, 1982; Pessoa, 2008). The reinforcing cycle of cognition and emotion as people interpret, assess, and feel deeply about their plight is rooted in whether they see the meaning of their occupation as something that can be broken apart and carried forward or as something that is sacred and whole and cannot be deserted.

Finally, the cognitive and emotional responses we describe propel people to undertake different behavioral responses. Believing in the destabilized occupation's continued importance and career viability, as well as viewing its work components as fixed, encourages people to engage in actions to *preserve* their career in the destabilizing occupation. In contrast, when people no longer see the same level of importance and career viability of the destabilized occupation, and when they believe its work components can be applied elsewhere, they engage in actions to *reinvent* their career, striving to carry components of the work forward as they make transitions to other occupations. The emotions associated with each path are likely to facilitate the corresponding behavioral responses as well. Sustained or intensified despair, sadness, and fear will keep people clinging to what remains of the occupation, making sometimes desperate efforts to stay viable in it. Abating negative emotions and the emergence of hope unlock energy and the potential to move toward a new future, thus facilitating moving on to new occupational homes. In short, we suggest meaning fixedness as the underlying thread that sets in motion different cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses to occupational destabilization.

## DISCUSSION

Drawing on two waves of interviews with unemployed or former newspaper journalists confronting journalism's destabilization, we found that participants conveyed starkly different representations of how fixed or flexible the meaning of journalism's work components was in the occupation. We draw on the concept of functional fixedness (Duncker, 1945; Adamson, 1952) to elaborate how journalists view the meaning of these parts vis-à-vis the whole of journalism. We delineate a process through which meaning fixedness—the extent to

which individuals endorse a cognitive tendency to view work components as meaningful only when they are intact within the occupational context—sets in motion distinct cognitive, emotional, and behavioral patterns when individuals navigate occupational destabilization. Our study yields deeper understanding of the impact of occupational destabilization on individuals and provides insight into the underlying structure of the perceived meaning of work, which may inform a range of patterns of individual adaptation to work changes.

### Theoretical Contributions

Our study contributes to research on occupations, the meaning of work, job loss, and role transitions, as well as to our understanding of individual perceptions and cognition in general.

**Occupations.** Research on occupations has examined individual- and group-level responses to threats to jurisdictional control, but it has not suggested what drives the varied responses that scholars have observed (e.g., Barley, 1986; Huising, 2014, 2015; Kahl, King, and Liegel, 2016). In this study, we identify individual-level representations of meaning that are associated with the ways people respond to their occupation's destabilization. Such individual responses may subsequently inform broader responses to occupational challenges. For instance, compared to people with flexible-meaning perceptions, individuals with fixed-meaning perceptions might be more likely to guard their occupation's boundaries and principles when their occupation is challenged.

Furthermore, our study suggests that incumbents' meaning fixedness might be important in shaping the development of an occupation (Anteby, Chan, and DiBenigno, 2016). Our findings imply that a destabilized occupation could at least partly be sustained even in dire conditions when enough members derive a fixed sense of meaning from the occupation. Fixed-meaning perceivers may help their occupation to fight destabilization and keep it alive through their commitment to stay regardless of personal cost. This pattern of findings might explain why certain occupations, having experienced radical destabilization, do not completely disappear. For example, shoemakers have prevailed even though the majority shifted their career path to new occupational pursuits following advances in manufacturing technology. In the face of technological advancements, some have remained in this profession, ensuring its continuity (Stamberg, 2009). Our study suggests that those with higher levels of meaning fixedness are the most invested in persisting in and advocating for the occupation and, therefore, could constitute a force that helps to protect the occupation's jurisdiction. In contrast, flexible-meaning perceivers view work components as meaningful in different occupational contexts, which enables connecting and combining parts within different occupations, thereby facilitating further weakening of occupational boundaries as incumbents move on and away. Incumbents' flexible-meaning perceptions might plant the seeds for occupational evolution and fluidity, which has been receiving a great deal of attention in the literature (Bechky, 2011, 2020; Davidson and Meyers, 2015; Kahl, King, and Liegel, 2016; Howard-Grenville et al., 2017).

**The meaning of work.** Prior studies on the meaning of work have primarily assumed stability in individuals' occupations, focusing on identifying the factors that influence people's perceived meaningfulness of and relationships with the work (Pratt and Ashforth, 2003; Rosso, Dekas, and Wrzesniewski, 2010; Grant, 2012). Our study complicates the assumption of occupational stability by examining a context in which the occupation is undergoing destabilizing changes. Our findings reveal that individuals differ not only in the kind of meaning or the level of meaningfulness they perceive from their occupation, as reflected in prior research, but also in how fixed or flexible they perceive that meaning to be with respect to the occupation. Further, meaning fixedness—beyond type of meaning (e.g., job versus calling orientation)—seems an important factor shaping how people see the relationship among components of the work and how work changes are to be navigated. This study describes a process and offers a theoretical model that maps meaning fixedness onto the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses to an occupation's destabilization, providing important insights into how individuals perceive the meaning of their work in light of changing occupational landscapes and how that meaning relates to their work outcomes.

Our research also contributes to our understanding of callings. The current literature has suggested that pursuing a calling can require individuals to negotiate challenges to and sacrifices of their time, health, and economic resources that their work demands, as in the cases of zookeepers, animal shelter workers, and teachers (Serow, 1994; Bunderson and Thompson, 2009; Schabram and Maitlis, 2017). Many journalists in our study regarded journalism as their calling. Our interviews suggest that having a calling can exert a negative impact on individuals' physical and psychological well-being if the outlets for them to pursue it are being challenged, consistent with prior findings that failure to work in one's calling may cause regret and stress (Berg, Grant, and Johnson, 2010). However, not all people with callings are the same. Those with flexible-meaning perceptions can recover from negative emotions and engage in reinventing actions. Still, a fixed-meaning perception is not always associated with negative subjective feelings. Most fixed-meaning perceivers suggested they were pleased to engage in preserving actions as these actions aligned with their beliefs and values (Rosso, Dekas, and Wrzesniewski, 2010). While research has tended to treat the nature of callings rather uniformly across individuals (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997; Bunderson and Thompson, 2009; Berg, Grant, and Johnson, 2010; Dobrow, 2013; Dobrow and Heller, 2015; but see Schabram and Maitlis, 2017, Jiang, 2021 for exceptions), we suggest that people vary in important ways in how they define the relationships between the work components and occupations that compose their callings. Even among those called to an occupation, variation in whether meaning is fixed in the occupation or flexible and portable creates vastly different experiences of an occupation in crisis.

**Job loss and role transitions.** Our research contributes to the literatures on job loss and, more broadly, role transitions. Prior research in this realm has focused mainly on the effects of and remedies for losing a job (McKee-Ryan et al., 2005; Saks, 2006; Wanberg, Zhu, and Van Hooft, 2010), after which individuals can ostensibly change jobs while maintaining membership in the



same occupation. Because of this focus, prior studies on job loss and role transitions generally have not considered individuals' perceived flexibility of the meaning associated with the work of their occupation. Instead, this research has focused on factors like job search intensity, job search motivation, financial need, and social support as important predictors of individuals' experience and outcomes following job loss (e.g., Wanberg, Kanfer, and Rotundo, 1999).

However, as a result of unfavorable changes in the nature of their work and the shrinking number of outlets in which to perform it, individuals are likely to face additional challenges in coping with occupational destabilization. One such challenge is to translate occupation-specific experience or skill sets into assets relevant to other lines of work. Our study suggests that meaning fixedness associates with whether individuals are emotionally and cognitively prepared to enact this translation. Meaning fixedness may explain individuals' varied emotional, cognitive, and behavioral reactions to a broad range of changes to their work. Our findings answer a call for better understanding of individual-level dynamics in the changing landscape of work. As Kalleberg (2009: 14) noted, "in the current world of work, where workers are likely to be left on their own to acquire and maintain their skills and to identify career paths (Bernstein, 2006), we need a better understanding of the factors that influence personal agency and its forms." Meaning fixedness appears to be a key factor shaping individuals' experiences as they navigate destabilization in new worlds of work.

Our findings on meaning fixedness also suggest that whether people see their jobs as wholes or parts can play an important role in shaping individuals' experience of and transition from job loss. People's perceptions of any object as a set of parts or as a whole are rooted in the school of Gestalt psychology, which generally sees the whole as superior to the sum of parts (Wertheimer, 1922, 1923, 1938; King et al., 1994). As Max Wertheimer, the founding father of the Gestalt school, argued, "Viewing wholes as the mere sum of their component parts does violence to the true nature of these wholes" (King et al., 1994: 911). Our research adds to studies on the downsides of viewing objects as inflexible wholes (Luchins, 1942; Duncker, 1945) by showing that a fixed-meaning perception or a focus on the intact whole of a job can hinder individuals' ability to transfer work components and their meaning across contexts. The inability to separate the whole of a job into parts to be restructured can be an important obstacle for people navigating changes and transitions triggered by job loss.

More broadly, we add important insight to research on the factors that help individuals to navigate role transitions. Psychologists studying personal transitions have emphasized the effects of resilience (Tedeschi, Park, and Calhoun, 1998; Gowan, Craft, and Zimmermann, 2000; Bimrose and Hearne, 2012) and of individuals' implicit beliefs about whether their abilities are fixed or malleable (Blackwell, Trzesniewski, and Dweck, 2007; Tamir et al., 2007) on how they weather change. However, neither factor seems to fully reflect our data or account for our findings. Specifically, resilience refers to individuals' capacity to recover and thrive after adverse events (Richardson et al., 1990; Wolin and Wolin, 1993; Higgins, 1994; Bonanno, 2004). While it might explain journalists' emotional coping with their occupation's destabilization, it does not address why they may have displayed different interpretations of the situation or taken such different actions. Furthermore, individuals' implicit beliefs about whether their own abilities are fixed or malleable do not capture the perceived

transferability of the *elements of their work* and their meaning suggested by our data (Berg et al., 2023). Meaning fixedness can explain more nuanced differences in individuals' responses to occupational destabilization, compared to what resilience and implicit beliefs about one's abilities can reveal.

Related, organizational scholars have focused largely on individual identity in studying changes and transitions in the work domain (Ibarra, 1999, 2003, 2006; Maitlis, 2009, 2012; Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010). Research has suggested that individuals perform identity work to align themselves with their work realities (Alvesson, 1994; Ibarra, 1999; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003; Pratt, Rockmann, and Kaufmann, 2006). But we did not find that our interviewees' accounts focused on changing identities; they focused more on the (in)ability to recognize journalistic elements in new occupations and derive from them some sense of meaning that stemmed from this small victory. Our study suggests that beyond the malleability of individual identity, meaning fixedness plays an important role in responses to changes in work. Thus, our research adds to studies on individual navigation of changes and transitions by suggesting a new approach to interpreting this process that focuses on the work rather than solely on the self or identity. Individuals' ability to transfer the meaning of some occupational work components across contexts likely explains the variation in their experience when work identities are threatened and role transitions are required, including, for example, why some people but not others experience post-traumatic growth. Furthermore, our research provides additional empirical support to prior arguments regarding the roles of both cognitive and emotional experiences in navigating destructive changes, such as loss of a work-related identity (Conroy and O'Leary-Kelly, 2014) or an organization (Crosina and Pratt, 2019), highlighting that meaning fixedness translates into different actions by shaping one's cognitive and emotional processes concurrently (Maitlis, Vogus, and Lawrence, 2013).

Finally, our research contributes to our understanding of involuntary role exit. In his proposed model, Ashforth (2001) suggested one path of involuntary role exit: after leaving a role, an individual distances themselves from that role and seeks information that feeds disapproval of it, leading to increased doubts about the role's suitability and facilitating transition to a new role. Findings from our study suggest more than one path. In particular, for an individual who holds a fixed perception of the meaning of their past role's components, involuntary exit could encourage increased commitment or loyalty to persisting in the previous role instead of an escalating sense of doubt that facilitates role exit as suggested in Ashforth's model (2001; see Hirschman, 1970). Our findings that individuals could take either the preserving or reinventing path when navigating occupational destabilization parallel findings on how individuals navigate the demise of an organization (Crosina and Pratt, 2019), suggesting that these two paths are robust individual responses that can be observed in involuntary role exits triggered by different types of changes. Moreover, our research offers a novel explanation of why these two paths emerge, suggesting that they are shaped by whether individuals hold more fixed or flexible perceptions of meaning about their work.

### Practical Implications

The impact of new technology on work is immense and pervasive. Some predict that the rise of artificial intelligence and the use of robots at work will result

in massive unemployment and severe social problems (Ford, 2015). Others hold that robots will free people from tedious tasks to instead focus on work that is interesting and more suited for the market (Brynjolfsson and McAfee, 2014). Whether the changes are positive or negative, as blue- and white-collar occupations undergo drastic changes due to technological advancement, many people will navigate change or displacement, which will necessitate adapting within a workplace, finding new employment, or retraining for new occupations (Ford, 2015). Our research suggests that when designing programs to support these individuals, practitioners should consider the meaning of their destabilized occupations. Understanding meaning fixedness can help practitioners to better equip people for successful transitions. By realizing how meaning fixedness influences one's ability to enact reinventing behaviors, organizations and practitioners can try to identify separable components of work that are most meaningful, building a bridge to help capture some of those in new occupations.

Our findings may also generalize to more common types of changes at work such as promotions, demotions, or lateral work role changes. When moving employees across positions, managers often focus solely on their skills, experiences, and performance in prior roles (Peter and Hull, 1969). Yet, an ostensibly favorable change may bring undesirable outcomes. Research has shown that both nurses and subway drivers felt unable to make a tangible impact on individuals after being promoted to managerial roles (Leana and Kossek, 2012; Bourmault and Anteby, 2020). Our study suggests that when moving employees to new positions, managers should also consider employees' ability and desire to manage the changes in meaning across positions. In addition, meaning fixedness may influence how well employees perform in their new roles, as employees with higher meaning fixedness are likely to be more attached to the values and norms of their prior role, which could create cognitive baggage that hampers performance (Dokko, Wilk, and Rothbard, 2008; Dokko and Jiang, 2017). Organizations may benefit from offering career paths that accommodate different pursuits of meaning.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

Our study was based on the retrospective accounts of interviewees, making recall bias or post-action justification a concern (Baron, Burton, and Hannan, 1996). The fact that many of our interviewees had already left their organizations could influence how they described the meaning of their destabilized occupation, motivating them to describe the work as more precious and of deeper value than they otherwise might, reflecting a sense of nostalgia for what was lost, an influence documented in prior research (Routledge et al., 2011; Routledge et al., 2012; Zhou et al., 2012; Batcho, 2013). Although retrospective accounts are likely to differ from individuals' narratives taken in the midst of the kinds of navigation we have studied, they have been effectively used to study the dynamics of callings and identity changes over time in other occupations (Maitlis, 2009, 2012; Schabram and Maitlis, 2017). We tried to address the concern of recall bias by using a longitudinal research design in this study. Eleven interviewees had left their last journalism job less than two weeks before our first interview, allowing us to examine their narratives as time passed. The other interviewees had left their last journalism job more than

a month before our first interview, yet their narratives about the meaning they attached to journalism were consistent in both waves of our interviews. Further, we argue that for the purpose of this study, retrospective narratives may play a more important role than contemporaneous narratives in influencing individuals' future actions, as they reflect the more ingrained and salient parts of their experience and perceptions. However, future studies that compare how retrospective versus contemporaneous narratives shape future actions are needed.

We were unable to identify the specific antecedents to meaning fixedness given the nature of our study and our non-random sample. However, we conducted exploratory quantitative analyses to examine whether meaning fixedness might be related to certain demographic and personal characteristics. We did not find significant differences in gender; educational background and tenure in journalism; or marital, parental, and primary earner status of interviewees with high versus low levels of meaning fixedness (see Online Appendix G for results). Other unexamined variables could also influence the patterns we found. For example, individuals' level of success in journalism and the status of their past journalistic outlets may relate to meaning fixedness and whether they engage in preserving or reinventing actions. We attempted to explore these relationships by quantifying journalists' achievements and their employers' status, using the coverage size of the largest newspaper they had worked for (i.e., whether it had community, regional, or national coverage), given that interviews with journalists in our supplemental sample suggested that the coverage size of a journalist's newspaper employer is a good indicator of the journalist's competence and the newspaper's status. We found no significant difference in employer's coverage size between journalists with higher versus lower meaning fixedness and between those engaging in preserving versus reinventing actions. We suggest two possible reasons for this. First, most interviewees expressed a sense of pride and confidence in their ability to do high-quality journalism work. The shared subjective feelings of success and achievement they displayed suggested that their objective level of success might be less important than this subjective experience (Dobrow, 2004; Dobrow and Heller, 2015). Second, the majority of interviewees had experiences in both smaller community newspapers and larger regional or national ones, yet in their accounts they focused primarily on the work they did, with little mention of the setting or status of their previous employers. This preoccupation with the work itself rather than its trappings has been identified in prior research as a major characteristic of individuals holding a calling orientation to their work (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997). A small number of journalists in our sample worked for elite newspapers (e.g., *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*), and their accounts focused heavily on journalism and little, if at all, on employer status. Nevertheless, we encourage future research to more systematically examine the role of occupational and organizational status, as well as other factors, in individuals' responses to occupational destabilization.

With our interview-based, qualitative data, we were only able to demonstrate meaning fixedness as a two-level categorical construct relating to two broad sets of individual reactions to occupational destabilization. However, meaning fixedness is likely a continuous variable with the potential to generate more-varied experiences and outcomes. For example, having a measure of the full range of meaning fixedness might predict individuals' perceived

meaningfulness of their new occupations and the particular strategies they adopt to obtain or craft (Wrzesniewski and Dutton, 2001) a sense of meaning in their new occupations. Meaning fixedness of employees and leaders might also affect outcomes related to creativity and adaptability, such as entrepreneurial success and organizational change. We encourage future research to examine these possibilities.

Finally, our research is based on a context in which the occupation is in decline, with a rapidly decreasing number of positions. Our findings and model may not apply squarely to people navigating occupations that are destabilized but not in decline, that is, occupations that are disrupted but whose existence is not threatened, such as surgeons confronting skill disruption in the U.S. (Zetka, 2003; Beane, 2019) or doctors facing stigmatization in China (Wang, Raynard, and Greenwood, 2021). We consider decline as a major way through which occupational destabilization manifests. Other manifestations may include the content of work changing unfavorably when new policies are implemented or technology altering the design of work (Cohen, 2012; Beane, 2019). Regardless of their manifestation, changes associated with occupational destabilization are likely to cause individuals to reassess their occupation and career. Specifically, destabilization is an occasion when the salience of the work's meaning and its fixed or flexible nature should guide how individuals respond. We suggest that our model would apply whenever individuals experience undesirable—or perhaps even desirable—changes in their occupation and when these changes prompt them to reexamine their working lives. People in occupations that are not declining would perhaps be less likely to question the viability of maintaining a career there, when interpreting the implications of their destabilization. To examine this proposition, future research should study members of occupational contexts in which destabilization does not involve decline.

## Conclusion

We found that when confronted with their occupation's destabilization, individuals manifest one of two responses. Some recognize flexibility in the meaning of work components in their occupation and can apply these components in a different setting, often in new ways. Others become defenders, striving to guard the territory and preserve the purity of their occupation, even persisting in extremely tenuous work arrangements or in no work arrangement at all. At the core of our finding is that meaning fixedness underpins individuals' cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses in the face of occupational destabilization. As societal, technological, and other external forces continue to shape the occupational landscape, understanding individual meaning fixedness can shed new light on ways to create fulfilling work lives for people forced to confront destructive changes at work or, worse, to leave the work they love.

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### ORCID iDs

Winnie Yun Jiang  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0385-0978>

Amy Wrzesniewski  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2633-4813>

### Supplementary Material

Find the Online Appendix at [https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177\\_00018392231196062#supplementary-materials](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177_00018392231196062#supplementary-materials).

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### Authors' Biographies

**Winnie Yun Jiang** is an assistant professor of organizational behavior at INSEAD, 1 Ayer Rajah Avenue, 138676 Singapore (winnie.jiang@insead.edu). Her research focuses on the dynamics of meaning-making at work, work as a calling, career mobility

and transitions, and personal and professional development. She received her Ph.D. in management from Yale University.

**Amy Wrzesniewski** is the William and Jacalyn Egan Professor of Management at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, 3620 Locust Walk, Philadelphia, PA 19104 (amyw@wharton.upenn.edu). Her research interests include the experience and meaning of work, with particular focus on settings where issues of meaning are difficult to negotiate and require agentic responses. She earned her Ph.D. in organizational psychology from the University of Michigan.