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# IDENTIFYING ADULTS' PATHS TO DISCOVERING CAREER PASSION

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A Research Project  
Presented to the Faculty of  
The George L. Graziadio  
School of Business and Management  
Pepperdine University

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Science  
in  
Organization Development

---

by  
Shannon Philip  
December 2010

This research project, completed by

SHANNON PHILIP

under the guidance of the Faculty Committee and approved by its members, has  
been submitted to and accepted by the faculty of The George L. Graziadio  
School of Business and Management in partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE  
IN ORGANIZATION DEVELOPMENT

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## Abstract

This study sought to identify the paths people take to discover their career passion and specifically endeavored to identify how people define passion, what process they follow to discover their passion, and what outcomes they experience as a result of exercising their passion in their work.

A qualitative interview research design was used to conduct this study. Eight participants were identified using convenience sampling. Data were collected through in-person and telephone interviews. The research questions were answered using content analysis.

Participants offered three definitions for passion: enjoying and feeling energized about one's work, engaging in hard work inspired by the passion, and being in the flow or "in the zone." The process of discovering passion consisted of multiple phases including having certain initial conditions for passion, making a conscious choice and dedicating effort, and maturing. Outcomes from working in the area of one's passion included mutual benefits for the person and his or her clients, such as maintaining high performance, achieving maximum impact, experiencing significant intrinsic and emotional rewards, and gaining a supportive community.

Limitations affecting this study included use of a small, rather homogeneous, convenience sample; gathering data exclusively through self-report; and recording data using handwritten notes. Suggestions for additional research include examining passion using a large, diverse sample; examining the factors that equip people to pursue passion at a given point in time and more fully examining what supports need to be in place to help them along the journey; and to produce a more objective measure of passion's benefits.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

"Choose a job you love, and you will never have to work a day in your life." —Confucius

Passion has been defined as one's own unchanging, true nature (Campbell, 1988; Chen, 2006) or natural preferences (Jung, 1971; Myers, 1975). Exercising one's passion at work has been associated with outcomes such as heightened energy, emotional rewards and enjoyment, intrinsic motivation, high productivity, lower turnover, higher customer satisfaction, and benefits to society (Buckingham, 2001; Campbell, 1988; Henderson, 2000). This suggests that helping people discover and implement their passion could reap significant benefits for individuals, their organizations, and communities (Campbell, 1988; Henderson, 2000).

Studies suggest that the youngest generation of the workforce—the Millennials—are increasingly expecting their work to be meaningful and to capitalize on their unique passions (Zemke, Raines, & Filipszak, 2003). Similarly, decades earlier, psychologist Abraham Maslow emphasized the importance of doing personally meaning and fulfilling work: "A musician must make music, an artist must paint, a poet must write, if he is to be ultimately at peace with himself" (cited in Project Management Course, 2009, para. 3).

While insights exist regarding what stops people from discovering their passion and how passion may be discovered and implemented in people's lives,

this existing knowledge is documented primarily on Web sites, in books, in anecdotal accounts, and in trade journals. Limited peer-reviewed research is available on the topic. Without adequate explication of the construct and consideration of how passion might be implemented into career development and planning, a primary lever for enhancing employee satisfaction and productivity (and, in turn, enhancing organizational productivity) is left unexamined. Possibly this is the reason why less than half of all Americans report liking and feeling satisfied in their jobs (LiveScience, 2010). This study aimed to help fill the gaps in the literature about finding and implementing one's passion at work.

#### *Purpose of the Study*

The purpose of this study was to identify the paths people have taken to discover their career passion. Three research questions were explored for this study:

1. How do people understand and define passion?
2. What processes do people follow to discover their passion?
3. What are the outcomes of exercising one's passion at work?

#### *Significance of Study*

Exercising one's passion at work has been reported to result in significant benefits for individuals, their companies, and their communities (Buckingham, 2001; Campbell, 1988; Henderson, 2000). However, few empirical findings are available on what it really takes to discover and implement passion. This study generated new knowledge on how people understand passion and discover their passion. Insights additionally were gained regarding the outcomes of exercising

one's passion at work. This knowledge helps fill important gaps in the literature, as what is currently known is available primarily in the form of anecdotal data.

These findings have powerful implications for coaching and career development. Specifically, individuals, coaches, career counselors, and organization development professionals could use this new knowledge to help themselves and others understand the possibilities for work passion in their lives, understand the path to discovering it (along with its challenges), and anticipate the outcomes they might experience by implementing passion in their lives.

### *Researcher Background*

My interest in this topic began years ago when I found myself disillusioned with the jobs I had taken after graduating from college. I felt unsatisfied and had a great yearning for something more in my life and my career. In 1999, I began my own journey of discovery of just who I am, what am I passionate about, and where my strengths lie. My own path has included graduate school, exploring and experimenting with different positions and industries, therapy, career assessments, and other self-discovery activities, all geared to help me identify my unique passion. For example, from 2006 to 2008, I worked as an executive-style coach to college students helping them unlock their passions and motivations as they navigated their first years of college. While I gain clarity every day about my preferences and continue to gain comfort in acknowledging my natural talents, my path is still unfolding in front of me.

This journey has been incredibly meaningful and eye-opening for me. Through my own unfolding awareness, I had the realization that many people go through life without a sense of who they are and what is uniquely special about

them. Many people also spend their lives in jobs that make them miserable. Reasons for this fate seem to range from believing that finding and exercising their passion is impractical and extravagant, to not believing they deserve better, to simply not knowing how to change the situation. My hope is that the findings of this study will be inspiring and illuminating and motivate people to believe they can discover their own unique passions and by providing insights about how to they can actually exercise their passions at work.

### *Organization of the Study*

This chapter outlined the study background and purpose, the significance of the study, and the researcher's background. Chapter 2 provides an examination of existing literature on defining, discovering, and implementing passion in one's life.

Chapter 3 outlines the methods used to gather and analyze data for this study. Chapter 4 reports the findings of this study. Chapter 5 provides a discussion of the findings.

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

This chapter examines existing literature documenting the definitions, discovery, and implementation of passion. A definition of passion is provided first to establish a common understanding of the concept for this study. Factors supporting and obstructing passion are discussed next, followed by a description of the process people are believed to use to discover and reclaim their passion. Roadblocks to the process are examined next, followed by a discussion of how passion might be implemented into one's work and life. The final sections of this chapter document the benefits of working with passion and an overall conclusion to the chapter.

#### *Understanding Passion*

Understanding the concept of passion begins with the fundamental assumption that each person has his or her own unchanging, true nature (Campbell, 1988; Chen, 2006). Chen described passion as human potential that “varies from one person to another, presenting a very dynamic, complex, and unique quality that exists within each person” (p. 131). Eales-White (2007) contended that children tend to show their passions by exhibiting preferred behaviors. An example is found in Sarah Chang, who demonstrated a remarkable affinity and aptitude for music as a toddler. At age 3, she was playing one-finger melodies on the piano and by age 8, she was an accomplished violinist and was recognized as a world-class child prodigy (GoldSea, 2010). Clearly, these are not typical accomplishments for a toddler or child; however, it is evidence of Eales-White's (2007) assertion.

A person's passion is believed to be laden with emotion; thus, recognizing and operating within one's passion is a deeply emotional experience. Nichols (cited in Henderson, 2000) argued that people experience significant emotional responses when they are able to act in congruence with their passions.

The emotional reward of acting within one's passion has been described differently by different authors. Dueuease (2004) explained, "you will know you are passionate about doing something when you become naturally excited even about the thought of doing it and more excited about doing it" (p. 14).

Csikszentmihalyi (1990) called it *flow*, meaning "The state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it" (p. 4). Damon, Colby, Bronk, and Ehrlich (2005) described working within one's area of passion as heartfelt engagement and laboring "long and hard to acquire expertise" (p. 28). At the same time, Kanu (2008) cautioned that there is a difference between passion and emotionalism: "Emotionalism is an exaggerated display of strong feelings, while passion is the enthusiasm and interest you bring to your work. Despite their differences, emotionalism and passion can easily be confused because they both involve personal expression" (p. 68).

Just as operating within one's passion is a felt emotional experience, operating outside of one's passion is an equally powerful emotional experience.

Dueuease (2004) explained,

The one big reason people feel so frustrated while working is because it conflicts with their true desires and priorities. As time goes by, they feel that what they are doing conflicts with them and they cannot develop a genuine passion for their work, no matter how hard they try. (p. 14)

Dueease (2004) concluded this frustration and lack of passion is the result of confusion about who one really is. Lack of clarity about this can undermine one's passion and even lead someone to pursue the wrong career (Dueease, 2004). Eales-White (2007) argued that that "many staff in any organization are operating as square pegs in round holes" (pp. 157–158).

In contrast, working within one's passion tends to fill the person with a deep sense of purpose and destiny (Dueease, 2004). Campbell described the process of discovering passion as one that resonates deeply with the self and keeps one securely on what he called *the Hero's path*, centered with profound meaning and purpose (cited in Henderson, 2000, p. 305).

#### *Factors Supporting and Obstructing the Discovery of Passion*

Research by Eales-White (2007) and Strenger and Ruttenberg (2008) suggests that it is quite common for people to neglect or suppress their passion, inner wants, and values. Examination of the literature suggests that this happens due to intrapersonal drives, interpersonal influences, and environmental factors (Eales-White, 2007; Strenger & Ruttenberg, 2008).

Intrapersonal drives to suppress passion originate from cognitive distortions or limitations and passivity. One cognitive distortion that precludes people from discovering their passion is the belief that earning a living requires pain and suffering (Dueease, 2004). For example, characteristics of the Silent Generation, whose members were born from 1925 to 1942, include a hardworking nature and focus on getting things done (Zemke et al., 2003). A common saying among this generation is "I work to live, I don't live to work," suggesting that work is a means to an end rather than a vehicle of self-

expression. Further, people might not even be able to access, recognize, or understand what their wants, needs, and passions are (Eales-White, 2007).

These cognitive distortions and limitations then lead to confusion about who one actually is (Dueease, 2004). It is understandable that people then go on to lead lives absent of passion.

Others confuse achievement with truly satisfying work (Boyatzis, McKee, & Goleman, 2002). In the course of setting and reaching goals, people typically are rewarded for their success and they invest more and more of their time and their life in a career that does not align with their deepest passions. This kind of success also comes with certain trappings that make it less and less likely that the individual will ever discover his or her passion.

Another intrapersonal reason people neglect their passions is passivity (Strenger & Ruttenberg, 2008). Dueease explained, “They seem to just go with the [path of least resistance] and hope that they are heading in the right direction” (2004, p. 14). As a result, they do not take the time to discover what their desires and priorities are in life. Blustein and Noumair (1996) provided this example:

Shortly after World War II, a middle-class white man from a Western country would typically engage in career decision making primarily during late adolescence and would seek to answer the question “Who am I?” by attaining a stable and enduring self-concept. This individual would generally be reasonably certain that his line of work would not change dramatically and that his employment opportunities, although certainly vulnerable to modest economic shifts, would not undergo dramatic changes. (p. 437)

In great contrast to passivity, a person’s knack for tenacity and problem solving may lead them to stick with a difficult or ill-fitting situation in the hope of making it better (Boyatzis et al., 2002). Given these orientations toward life and work,

issues of “What do I want?” “What energizes me?” “What is my unique contribution to the world?” and “What drives me?” do not even come to mind and passion often remains dormant.

Another form of distortion and passivity occurs when people perceive their current job or life situation as a painful or boring waiting period until a “glorious passion” finds and delivers them (Strenger & Ruttenberg, 2008). Strenger and Ruttenberg elaborated, “We often feel like butterflies confined by the cocoon of our real lives, waiting to be released. This fantasy is expressed in fairy tales and movies” (p. 86).

The actual reality, according to many of the authors researching passion is that it is possible to discover and implement one’s unique passion in one’s work. However, this requires daily action, intention, and challenge (Henderson, 2000; Strenger & Ruttenberg, 2008).

Interpersonal drives to suppress passion seem to originate from many sources, including family tradition, parental pressure, spousal influence, peer pressure, society pressure and other outside pressures (Dueease, 2004). Dueease found that people within these spheres overtly or covertly encourage the individual to follow a certain career path. For instance, a young adult who comes from a long line of doctors may feel pressured to follow suit, even if it does not align with his or her passions. This young adult may have a different passion or desired career path, but not feel he or she has the right to pursue it. Dueease supported this idea, saying

Many people have their own inner wants, needs, and feelings, but they have undoubtedly suppressed them to suit others and to

conform. Many times, it is easier to follow how others view you than to look for and accept the truth. (p. 14)

Dueease cautioned that when someone chooses a career due to another's prodding, "deep conflicts will arise. These conflicts become a festering sore that will eventually seriously strain or damage the relationship with the person or group you are trying to please" (2004, p. 14). This suggests that even good intentions to guide someone into a particular career path can backfire.

While many factors influence whether people are connected to their personal identities and are ultimately operating within their passions, a leading factor is the family context (Grotevant & Cooper, 1985). Blustein and Noumair (1996) explained that familial contexts that feature autonomy, emotional support, and connectedness offer the most opportunities for personal identity exploration and recognition. For example, a child might have a natural passion for art, despite his or her parents' preference for business careers. If the parents label the artistic child's passions as foolish or unrealistic, it is likely that the child will pursue a career in business, but feel drained and unhappy because his or her natural passion is repressed (Eales-White, 2007). Similarly, people have their own inner wants, needs, and feelings (Dueease, 2004). When families and other social groups encourage each individual's preferences and unique proclivities, it is far more likely that their members will discover their passion. However, some people have suppressed their wants and needs to conform to their families or societies. "Many times it is easier for people to follow how others view them, than to look for and accept their own truth" (p. 14). The result is the suppression of identity and passion.

Another source of pressure can come from one's company—especially for high performers who are not working in the area of their passion. Boyatzis et al. (2002) acknowledged,

executives often feel threatened when employees start asking, “Am I doing what I want with my life?” The risk is very real that the answer will be no, and companies can lose great contributors. The impulse, then, may be to suppress such exploration. (p. 92)

Just as the family and corporate context influences one's ability to discover passion, one's external environment is influential as well. In particular, environmental factors such as geography, climate, and political and economic forces can have substantial and long-lasting effects (Rouse, 1996). Thus, while many people may deal with the basic issues of earning a living, raising children, and growing older, each person may perceive and respond to those issues very differently, based upon the societal norms, environmental conditions, and resources affecting and available to them. These environmental factors, in turn, influence the range of possibilities one may perceive as it relates to their passion. For example, a girl raised in one community may be surrounded by female role models who are wives, mothers, nurses, and teachers and may perceive these as her only possibilities later in life. In contrast, a girl raised in another community may be surrounded by female role models who are executives, entrepreneurs, artists, doctors, and mothers. Thus, she would likely perceive a different set of possibilities for her passions.

Other environmental factors include one's life stage, chosen career path, or natural stresses of life. Each of these can suppress passion as well. For example, young adults entering the working world endure many pressures that

influence the discovery of their passion and future career. Strenger and Ruttenberg (2008) found the pressures of “getting into a good school, getting high grades, landing a great first job, and arriving at such-and-such a position by age 30” greatly shape the identities, develop the abilities, and establish the self-esteem of young adults (p. 84). Many of these big life decisions are not made with a fully developed sense of self, as people must make them when they are still figuring out who they are and what they enjoy.

Strenger and Ruttenberg (2008) argued that young adults may often choose careers based on a process of trial and error governed partially by external circumstances (e.g., Company A rather than Company B gave them a job) and by their images of success (e.g., ideas that one must become a Wall Street executive). Dueease (2004) pointed out that the downside to this approach of choosing one’s career is that people may find themselves 10 to 20 years down the road stuck in a career they do not like because once the career path has been chosen, the path of least resistance is to ignore or deny one’s passion. Dueease explained that it is easier to adapt to what one’s boss wants, pursue career advancement in one’s existing field, and adopt the values imposed by the companies one works for than to strike out in a different direction. Alternately, given current societal trends that people switch jobs several times during their lifetimes, people may find themselves moving from job to job and career to career, never discovering their passion.

Along with blindly selecting one’s career path, it seems that the busyness and natural stresses of one’s modern life work against discovering one’s passion (Hansen & Amundson, 2009). For example, many people juggle families and

careers that distract them from issues of passion. Further, advanced technologies tend to keep people constantly browsing, texting, and talking, leaving them with little down time or space to step back and think about who they are and what they want from life. Hansen and Amundson found that while many of these forces seem to operate outside of people's control, there also are ways in which people cultivate and maintain busyness as part of their identities. The bottom line is that people often are continually distracted from what truly impassions them, makes them happy, and leaves them fulfilled.

Financial pressures also might compel people to neglect their passions. Whether these come in the form of feeling obligated to continue in a profitable profession regardless of one's passion (sometimes referred to as the "golden handcuffs") or in the form of having difficulty simply meeting one's basic needs, discovering one's passion might seem a luxury (Damon et al., 2005). Boyatzis et al. (2002) added that when someone has reached success in a position, it often comes with "the usual trappings of success—title, money, perks" (p. 87). Combining these with financial responsibilities can make it very "risky to trade security for personal fulfillment" (p. 87).

### *Discovering and Reclaiming Passion*

People cannot discover their true natures by following a path someone else has set out for them (Eales-White, 2007). However, several tactics have been identified as useful for identifying passion. These include increasing one's self-awareness (Blustein & Noumair, 1996; DeLima, 2005; Perls, 1969; Rouse, 1996), being still and listening (Hansen & Amundson, 2009), discovering one's priorities and interests (Henderson, 2000), being active (Chen, 2006; Hansen &

Amundson, 2009), being influenced by others (Strenger & Rутtenberg, 2008; Rouse, 1996), and maturing and aging (Strenger & Rутtenberg, 2008).

### *Increasing Self-Awareness*

Whether people are just starting their careers, hitting their peaks, or reaching their later careers, self-exploration can be a useful tool for discovering their passion (Blustein & Noumair, 1996; Boyatzis et al., 2002). Many tools are used for self-exploration, such as journaling and story-telling about one's past, present, and future; highlighting one's milestones and accomplishments; delving into one's conscious and unconscious thoughts; taking self-assessment tools; and talking with a professional such as a coach or therapist (DeLima, 2005). Together, these activities "help you consider where you are, where you're headed, and where you want to be" and can be carried out in the context of a intensive retreat, a career or personal development program, or personally arranged reflection over an extended period of time (Boyatzis et al., 2002, p. 86).

Rouse (1996) called the process of enhancing self-awareness a personal audit and acknowledged that it can take a significant amount of time. He added that people should engage in discovery "at multiple levels, including personal, interpersonal, organizational, and societal levels" (p. 36). This process is similar to the unpeeling of an onion, where each experience of self-discovery leads to a deeper awareness that, in turn, triggers an even deeper experience of self-discovery (Perls, 1969).

Dueease (2004) emphasized, "Believe it or not, the more you know about yourself the easier it will be to create or find your ideal position" (p. 15). This is because self-exploration allows people to realize who they are; what they want in

life; and what their needs, beliefs, expectations, attributions, and mental models are (DeLima, 2005; Rouse, 1996). The ultimate outcome of this even might include new beliefs, values, and behaviors (Rouse, 1996). Eales-White (2007) summarized that through self-exploration, people can enhance their self-knowledge. Knowing oneself more deeply in this way can improve one's relationship with oneself and others. This self-knowledge also can shift how one approaches one's job in that people will have a better understanding of whether their strengths, interests, inclinations, and personality preferences fit their current job or whether a different position would be better.

Chen (2006) discussed the idea of human potential, "the dynamic, complex, and unique quality that exists within each person," as a clue into one's passion (p. 131). The ability to "optimize and maximize that unique human quality" allows people to recognize what sets them apart and what gifts they have to offer the world. Chen found that for people to discover their human potential, they must first construct *human agency*, which is comprised of "self-awareness, forethought, self-regulation of motivation, meaning, and purpose in life that interact and interplay as a whole and shape one's direction in life" (p. 131). Therefore, awareness around one's self, one's motivation, one's personal meaning, and one's life goals "generates and forms a course of action that will lead the person to a more optimal life-career direction" and most likely towards one's passion (p. 132).

### *Being Still and Listening*

Hansen and Amundson (2009) found that before people can discover their passions in life, they first have to learn how to "be" in their life. "It is only when we

are in a resonance with our being as such that we can make wise decisions” (p. 41). Similarly, Campbell (1988) observed that the concept of following one’s “bliss” originated from three Sanskrit terms: *sat* (being), *chit* (consciousness), and *ananda* (bliss). The fundamental idea is that discovery of passion in oneself must first begin with being in touch with one’s self. Hansen and Amundson (2009) found that to get a deeper understanding of what it means to *be*, one might have to get into “a kind of stillness, openness, and undoing” of the mind and spirit. This stillness allows the mind to quiet and the person to listen and be fully absorbed in the present moment. It is in those moments that one’s being will surface and “life seems in a way, to talk to or through the person, as a wind harp plays its melody when the wind blows through it” (p. 34). Being still and listening can be supported by taking time off. Boyatzis et al. (2002) explained that this is sometimes the best way for people to figure out what they want to do and to reconnect with their passions.

Bennis similarly found in his interviews of leaders in the early 1990s that they stayed in tune and aligned with their passion by building into their lives “‘reflective structures,’ [meaning] time and space for self-examination, whether a few hours a week, a day or two a month, or a longer period every year” (cited in Boyatzis et al., 2002, p. 91).

### *Discovering Priorities and Interests*

Through the process of generating self-awareness, people can begin to look at their desires and interests in order to find a key into their passion.

Dueease (2004) stated that the “only way you will know which career is best for you is to focus first on you to discover what YOU want and what is important to

YOU” (p. 14). Further, even when people discover what they wants now does not necessarily mean that they will continue to want the same thing down the road, as people’s values, passions, and desires tend to change through the years. Thus, Dueuease emphasized the importance of “continually keeping a pulse on one’s self to determine their new priorities and to reshape their career position to what is important to them in each stage of their life” (p. 15). For instance, one who is passionate about photography in their youth may want be a travel photographer, in search of the perfect subject, but may prefer photographing subjects closer to home once they have a started a family.

Many tools exist that enable people to reconnect to their desires and interests and help people discover their passion. One tool is a *narrative-style counseling process* where a counselor helps people create a narrative of their life, highlighting moments of happiness and enjoyment in their past. As one reconnects to moments of happiness, they can begin to uncover those experiences that they enjoy and point to their passion, such as “helping others grow, creating new solutions to touch problems, restoring things to working order, discovering new sources of information, creating aesthetic environments, creating markets for new products” (Henderson, 2000, p. 312). Other tools that can heighten clarity about one’s passion are psychometric tests, which measure things such as interests, aptitude, and personality, such as the Strong Interest Inventory (CPP, 2009) and the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (Myers, 1975). The Myers & Briggs Foundation (n.d.) explained, “Personality type is a practical tool for investigating what works for you, then looking for and recognizing work that satisfies your preferences” (para. 2). They added that personality type can be

useful for deciding the specific type of work to perform. Burke and Fiksenbaum (2008) provided insight about why discovering one's passion requires some understanding of one's interests. They explained that passion involves having a strong inclination toward some activity the person likes and finds important. Vallerand, Paquet, Philippe, and Charest (2010) concurred, emphasizing that passion manifests as a "strong inclination toward a self-defining activity that individuals like (or even love), that they value (and thus find important), and in which they invest time and energy" (p. 290).

However, the focus on discovering one's desires and interests does not mean that passion requires finding the job where every element suits the person's preferences. This simply suggests that interests can help point people toward discovering their passion. Further, it is unlikely that every moment of exercising one's passion at work will be pleasurable or desirable. Damon et al. (2005) emphasized, in fact, that pursuing one's passion is *not* always pleasurable: "we do not agree with the pop psychology view that equates meaningful work with fun. Indeed, the etymological root of 'passion' is *passe*—or 'to suffer'" (p. 28). He added that while pursuing one's passion actually often may be painful:

It is satisfying in a way that routinized, fill-the-hours work is not. Good work is always mindful of its mission; and passion, whether painful or pleasurable, both energizes the mission and provides an enduring emotional reward that goes beyond pleasure or pain. (p. 28)

Beyond just the recognition of one's desires and interests, it also may be necessary for people to examine the "assumptions and beliefs they hold about themselves and their perceived capabilities to facilitate more fulfilling career

choices” (Henderson, 2000, p. 306). For example, it is one thing for people to recognize they love writing, but it is a whole other challenge for them to believe they can become an author.

### *Being Active*

Literature on passion has suggested that taking action is a necessary step to discovering one’s passion (Chen, 2006; Hansen & Amundson, 2009). This idea is epitomized in the well-known expression, “The road to hell is paved with good intentions,” meaning that good intentions by themselves are futile—appropriate action must follow (“The Road,” 2010). Chen (2006) elaborated that it “is a combination of human intention and action that results in making things happen” (p. 131). Chen added, “Career action is not unconscious and aimless behavior but rather intentional effort that is goal-oriented, purposeful, and outcome-driven” (p. 135).

The ultimate goal of taking action toward one’s passion is to “generate new ways of doing things that will bring positive change in one’s life-career development” (Chen, 2006, p. 136). Hansen and Amundson (2009) suggested that poetry, artwork, and different forms of meditation could open one’s eyes to their deep career passions. Placing oneself in different cultures, pursuing different vocations, and experiencing stressful environments also could allow passions to emerge (Rouse, 1996). Boyatzis et al. (2002) concurred, explaining that people “may want to step off the fast track and give their minds a rest by doing something different” (p. 89).

Action also might include getting out into the world of opportunity, such as through networking, attending lectures and conferences, making company or site

visits, or shadowing professionals, which can maximize the chances of having serendipitous encounters that propel one's career in new and enjoyable directions (Henderson, 2000). For example, completing a voluntary project in one's community or company can create opportunities for the person to experiment, try out different jobs and skill sets, and ultimately explore one's passion (Strenger & Ruttenberg, 2008).

Taking on new projects and experimenting in life allows one to “gain invaluable firsthand experience of practicing and validating action in a real, rather than an imaginary context” (Chen, 2006, p. 136). Although not every experience will lead to one's passion, there are lessons to be gained from every new experience. Chen found that “both positive and negative learning experiences become useful reference sources that help one to revise or reconstruct intention and action, generating updated and more relevant effort for career agency enhancement” (p. 136). Ultimately, the more life and career experiences one has, the more people can learn about themselves and where their passions lay.

Campbell discussed the idea of taking action toward one's passion by stating “that ‘following your bliss’ is a simple yet intricate process of making choices in life and work direction” and also, that the pursuit of one's passion “seems to demand a dogged investment of energy and consciousness into those activities that generate a significant emotional blissfulness” (cited in Henderson, 2000, p. 308). This suggests that people cannot simply wait for their passion to come to and discover them—they must actively seek and discover their passion.

Campbell popularized the idea of the hero's journey, which is an “original experience” imbued with profound purpose and meaning that “allows an opening

and a blossoming of human potential” (cited in Henderson, 2000, p. 305).

Campbell (1988) described this experience as one that involves (a) leaving the world as it is currently experienced, (b) moving profoundly into the realm of the self and being tested and developed, and (c) returning to the world with something more (e.g., greater capability). This can occur through seemingly normal everyday occurrences. Each hero’s journey presents the opportunity to deepen in the awareness of one’s potential and passion.

Lee DeWyze, the newest American Idol, exemplifies the process of taking action and embarking on a hero’s journey. DeWyze, a high school dropout, was an untrained musician and had been working at a paint shop in Mount Prospect, Illinois, when he heard the news that the American Idol auditions were coming to Chicago. Instead of just sitting back, hoping for his passions to be realized, DeWyze took action and auditioned for the popular singing competition that has launched multiple singing careers since first coming to television in 2002. Six months later, Lee DeWyze was crowned the 2010 American Idol and his life will never be the same (Melisurgo, 2010). This story illustrates the power behind taking action towards one’s passion and the possibilities that are unlocked by doing so.

### *Being Influenced by Others*

The process of discovering one’s self and one’s passion is hard to do alone. Boyatzis et al. (2002) explained, “Our own biases and experiences sometimes make it impossible for us to find a way out of a difficult or confusing situation; we need an outside perspective” (p. 91). It seems that the process may be made easier with a support system in place, including friends, partners,

coaches, therapists, or career counselors (Boyatzis et al., 2002; Rouse, 1996; Strenger & Ruttenberg, 2008). Ducease (2004) found that it is impossible for people to discover what they want in life without having an objective reflection of who they are. “Just as people must look into a mirror to see what they really look like, they must have another person act as their objective mirror to see what they really want to do and be in life” (p. 15). Having this kind of “mirror” also can help people see the parts of themselves they have been reluctant to look at before.

Rouse (1996) suggested looking for support from people who share similar agendas. He explained, “To the extent that key elements of your agenda are central elements of other people’s agendas, you will have many people working to help you succeed” (p. 38). Rouse added that sharing one’s passion and plans with others may excite others and prompt them to help advance one’s priorities.

Chen (2006) argued that family, friends, and existing contacts may be subjective and not necessarily support the individual in pursuing his or her own unique passion. In such cases, a career counselor or coach can be an invaluable source of support in helping someone discover or reclaim passion. One benefit of these professionals is that they often offer specialized tools and knowledge. For example, they can engage clients in a reflective process where they share and reflect on their intentions in career planning and decision making. The career counselor then can help them revise and reframe those intentions, leading to an optimal “recycling” process that is always ongoing and developing. The result can be a comforting sense of direction in the process of discovering passion. Jenny,

an aspiring entrepreneur, reflected on her process with a career coach after their first couple of sessions:

Now that we have started to work together I have a great sense of hope. I know that there is a concrete, real path to take me where I need to go, and you have walked it . . . (a couple times) and you are willing to share it with me, Wow! I now know I have a lot of work to do, but they are the right things to do to succeed. (Entrepreneur, 2010, para. 1)

Career coaches also might have greater objectivity than one's family and friends during the process (Chen, 2006, p. 134). DeLima (2005) agreed based on his research that family, friends, and colleagues may not be able to remain objective and also might have a stake in one staying in the status quo.

### *Maturing and Aging*

Passion is not lost to those who did not discover it in their youth or early careers. It seems that midlife and some of the factors that show up during that time period can actually help to facilitate the reclaiming of passion. One factor is the up-or-out situation that many executives find themselves in midlife and mid-career. "Executives may feel that their work is no longer satisfying and that they want new challenges, for instance, or they may decide that it's time to branch out" (Strenger & Ruttenberg, 2008, p. 83). These situations may force an executive to take stock of what they have achieved in their lives and whether they are satisfied in their work. Strenger and Ruttenberg found "there is no period better suited to inner growth and development than midlife, when many people learn to listen to their inner selves—the necessary first step on the journey of self-realization" (p. 90).

Strenger and Ruttenberg (2008) further argued that midlife can be a time where people finally have the time and freedom to discover more of who they are without the constraints of trying to prove themselves or define their worth by someone else's standards. "They are also generally in less of a hurry and have the time to listen to themselves, map their possibilities in the world, and create their lives with care" (p. 85).

Midlife also can be an opportunity to apply a lifetime of accumulated skill, knowledge, and experience to a desired career. Strenger and Ruttenberg (2008) found that the changes in the market over the past few decades have resulted in increasing opportunities for mid-lifers to transfer their skills and market their knowledge in new ways. "For example, many professions and functions have emerged that didn't even exist 30 years ago. Moreover, large companies have tended to outsource more and more tasks and functions, creating opportunities for professionals from various fields to market their services" (p. 88). Therefore, it would be worthwhile for those mid-lifers to take the time to become more aware of the skills and knowledge they have obtained over the years so that they are able to take advantage of the opportunities that exist for them.

#### *Roadblocks to Reclaiming Your Passion*

Despite the many approaches that exist for discovering and reclaiming passion, the road to actually doing so can be difficult for several reasons. One of the first reasons originates from the person's own characteristics. For example, people might pursue their passion because they have reached a point of sufficient discouragement over their lack of career success or fulfillment. Wise and Milward (2005) found that negative work or domestic events such as

bullying, being unskilled, or getting divorced were often catalysts for career change. While these factors may motivate people to pursue their passion, it also can leave them with a sense of negativity, diminishment, depression, and low self-worth. When these negative feelings exist, it can be difficult to tap into the positive energy, memories, and visioning needed to realize and pursue one's dreams (Henderson, 2000).

People also might lack awareness about their deepest needs, wants, or desires. This can leave them unequipped "to provide any in-depth articulation concerning what they think and how they feel about their directions of interest. In other words, the rationale underlying a career alternative often remains unclear, vague, or even confused" (Chen, 2006, p. 133).

For these reasons and more, people generally cannot successfully recognize their passion based upon their current awareness and resources. This is the reason why career counselors, new experiences, and feedback and support from others are invaluable during this process and why self-help books often fall short (Dueease, 2004). Dueease asserted, "With the help of a person, who will care enough about you to provide you with an objective mirror, you discover the key truths about yourself in three to five months. Otherwise, it might take many more months and even years" (p. 15).

The need for additional support can pose substantial roadblocks for people who lack the time, resources, exposure, or willingness to rely on such help. For example, one grade school band director had a pervasive sense of dissatisfaction in his career. Despite working at different schools, the sense of unhappiness did not dissipate. In this case, it would have been beneficial to

dedicate time and energy to examining his true passions; however, he believed he lacked the money to purchase the books or secure the coaching and training support needed to do so. As a result, he chose to continue in his career despite his lack of fulfillment. This example further demonstrates that it might be one's perceived (rather than actual) limitations that pose the most substantial roadblocks to discovering one's passion.

Another key challenge in the process of discovering one's passion originates from the fact that the process simply is not easy. This might be best depicted in Robert Frost's poem "The Road Not Taken". DeLima (2005) observed, "His choice lay between an easier, successful, but less fulfilling road and a less traveled, more difficult road that would ultimately lead to greater satisfaction" (p. 35). DeLima continued that most people have faced this kind of crossroads. Choosing to take the path less traveled means experiencing excitement as well as enduring stress and challenge (Rouse, 1996). Strenger and Ruttenberg (2008) added,

The task at hand is not as easy as the "just do it" culture of self-help promises, however. True transformation at midlife does not reside in us, waiting to emerge like the butterfly from the cocoon. Self-actualization is a work of art. It must be achieved through effort and stamina and skill. (p. 90)

Several authors also emphasized that the process of pursuing one's passion can be quite time consuming and it might take many unexpected twists and turns (Rouse, 1996; Strenger & Ruttenberg, 2008). As a result, persistence, patience, listening to oneself, testing assumptions, and adaptation often is necessary. Strenger and Ruttenberg (2008) added that people "go through a lot

of fear, confusion, and trial and error on the road to transformation, and the serious coaches we have spoken with over the years confirm this" (p. 87).

It is particularly important to note the myth of radical, magic, and instantaneous transformation. While people might attend a motivating talk or retreat and return home with a renewed sense of self and purpose, ready to lead a dramatically changed life, this rarely happens (Strenger & Ruttenberg, 2008). One problem is that the very nature of the human brain is comprised of billions of neurons assembled in innumerable pathways designed to make perception, thought, and action efficient and effective. Transformation means interrupting those pathways and creating new ones that support the changed way of being. Creating these new pathways can take a considerable amount of time, intention, and effort. The demand can be even more substantial and time consuming, considering that making one's passion a reality may involve a career change, involving "fundamentally different skills, daily routines, and work environments from the present one" (Feldman, 2002, p. 66). This can result in significant fear, as it may mean abandoning one's finely tuned competitive advantage and having to compete with others who have had much more time to develop the new skills.

### *Implementing Passion into Work and Life*

A first step in implementing one's passion—once it is discovered—is to set a clear intention for it to be realized in one's life. This act of forming an intention builds a sense of personal agency whereby the person's conscious and subconscious thoughts and actions are harnessed toward making the intention a reality (Chen, 2006). Rouse (1996) added that the person should vividly envision the ways this passion might play out in one's life. He explained,

Envision the consequences of pursuing each of these alternatives. Using mental simulations, consider in detail what it would be like to pursue these possibilities. Don't focus on the rewards of having succeeded in these vocations. Instead, focus on what the day-to-day process of getting there would be like. (p. 37)

At the same time, it is important to be aware that this vision should be considered simply an inspiring possibility rather than an aspiration that *must* be realized (Wise & Milward, 2005). Additionally, each vision should be subjected to a process of reality checking, for example, by considering whether one's needs would be met if the vision was realized, if the process would be compatible with one's beliefs, and how one's existing mental models and capabilities would affect the achievement of the vision. This introduces a pragmatic assessment of one's existing opportunities and constraints, which is necessary to assure that fulfilling the passion is truly workable and realistic (Chen, 2006; Wise & Milward, 2005). Conducting informational interviews with people who do what one believes he or she may want to do is a great way to further illuminate and reality check one's options (DeLima, 2005).

Following this process of intention setting, visioning, and reality checking, creating an action plan for realizing one's vision is critical. The action plan could include a series of activities, such as making contacts, developing skills and knowledge, and gaining experiences. Chen (2006) and Rouse (1996) emphasized that an action plan is absolutely essential if the vision is to be delivered.

Boyatzis et al. (2002) added that the action plan might include a series of incremental changes that move one closer to realizing one's passion. They explained,

It's not always feasible to change your job or move somewhere new, even if your situation is undesirable. But it is often easier than you might think to make small adjustments so that your work more directly reflects your beliefs and values—as long as you know what you need and have the courage to take some risks. (p. 92)

### *Benefits of Passion*

When people discover their true nature, they are better able to fulfill their potential and, in turn, contribute in powerful and positive ways to the world (Campbell, 1988). This contribution is a gift to the world that also tends to be deeply meaningful and rewarding (Bolles, 2009).

The authors emphasized three benefits that can emerge when one pursues his or her passion. First, work is likely to far more enjoyable and the person's overall life tends to be happier—in part, due to the heightened rewards, meaning, challenge, and positive affect obtained through work (Burke & Fiksenbaum, 2008). Vallerand et al. (2010) explained, “passion can provide one with the energy to fully engage with one’s work and to derive satisfaction from it” (p. 290). Dueuease (2004) emphasized, “Most people spend approximately 25 percent to over 67 percent of their waking hours working. Eventually, most everyone will want to work in a career that they enjoy doing and are paid well enough to live a prosperous life” (p. 14). Finding the work that truly fulfills one's passion is likely to benefit not only the person himself or herself, but all those who come in contact with that person.

Second, people who work in the area of their passion tend to be more productive. Dueuease (2004) explained, “The most productive and enjoyable work positions are ones that come naturally and are easier to do because they fit your talent and skill levels” (pp. 14-15). Finally, people working in their passion tend to

do better work. This builds the person's sense of worth and also tends to attract more business, customers, and rewards.

### *Conclusion*

Passion can be understood as one's own unchanging, true nature (Campbell, 1988; Chen, 2006) or natural preferences (Jung, 1971; Myers, 1975). Exercising one's passion at work has been associated with important benefits such as high energy, emotional reward and enjoyment, intrinsic motivation, high productivity, and benefits to society (Campbell, 1988; Henderson, 2000).

Factors such as one's family context, social context (Blustein & Noumair, 1996; Grotevant & Cooper, 1985), and external environment (Rouse, 1996) strongly influence whether people will be able to identify and fulfill their passion. Further, intrapersonal drives, interpersonal influences, and environmental factors can lead people to suppress their natural passions (Eales-White, 2007; Strenger & Ruttenberg, 2008).

In contrast, increasing one's self-awareness (Blustein & Noumair, 1996; DeLima, 2005; Rouse, 1996), being still and listening (Campbell, 1988; Hansen & Amundson, 2009), discovering one's priorities and interests (Henderson, 2000), being active (Campbell, 1988; Chen, 2006; Hansen & Amundson, 2009; Strenger & Ruttenberg, 2008), being influenced by others (Rouse, 1996; Strenger & Ruttenberg, 2008), and maturing and aging (Strenger & Ruttenberg, 2008) have been found to help people in discovering their passions.

Research has further suggested that discovering and incorporating one's passion into one's life requires setting a clear intention, visualizing achieving it, pragmatically assessing whether the match between the vision and the person's

opportunities and constraints, and creating an action plan (Chen, 2006; Rouse, 1996).

Despite these proven methods, roadblocks to reclaiming passion exist, such as limited self-awareness (Chen, 2006), personal attitudes (Henderson, 2000; Wise & Milward, 2005), lack of support or willingness to obtain support (Dueease, 2004), the time and effort required to discover one's passion (DeLima, 2005; Rouse, 1996; Strenger & Ruttenberg, 2008), and belief in the myth of instant transformation (Strenger & Ruttenberg, 2008) can hamper or derail one's ability to identify passion.

Many of the findings shared in this chapter are from anecdotal accounts, trade journals, and Web sites. Limited peer-reviewed research was found on the topic of how people discover and implement their passion and what benefits they experience from doing so. This lack of literature highlights a need for additional research in this area. This study helped to fill this gap by conducting interviews with people who actually did discover and who currently do exercise their passion at work. The next chapter describes the methods used to gather and analyze data for this study.

## Chapter 3

### Methods

The purpose of this study was to identify the paths people have taken to discover their career passion. This chapter describes the methods used to collect and analyze the data. The following sections describe the research design, participants, interview procedures, and data analysis procedures.

#### *Research Design*

This study used a qualitative approach. Several characteristics distinguish qualitative designs from other forms. First, qualitative research tends to be exploratory, meaning that it develops understanding of a topic based on the participants' perspectives (Creswell, 2003). Due to the integral role of participants, qualitative studies are conducted in the participants' natural settings so that the researcher can "develop a level of detail about the individual or place and . . . be highly involved in actual experiences of the participant" (p. 181).

Second, qualitative research is emergent, meaning that "the research questions may change and be refined as the inquirer learns what to ask and to whom it should be asked" (Creswell, 2003, p. 181). Additionally, the data collection methods may even change along with the researcher's evolving understanding of the topic.

Third, the aim of qualitative research is to generate a holistic understanding of the topic. To help achieve this, researchers might utilize multiple strategies and methods (e.g., observations, interviews, documents) to gather data (Creswell, 2003). However, it is fully acceptable for beginning researchers to utilize only one method or strategy.

Fourth, data analysis in qualitative research requires a significant amount of interpretation, complex reasoning, and introspection (Creswell, 2003). Analysis often includes “developing a description of an individual or setting, analyzing data for themes or categories, and finally making an interpretation or drawing conclusions about its meaning personally and theoretically, stating the lessons learned, and offering further questions to be asked” (p. 182). An important part of qualitative research is acknowledging that the data are situated within a specific context (e.g., history, social setting) and that the researcher brings his or her own personal biases and perspectives to the research. As a result, it is important for the researcher to be sensitive to how these shape the study and influence the results.

Benefits of qualitative research include the rich and holistic understanding of the topic that can result (Miles & Huberman, 2004). Miles and Huberman added, “The possibility for understanding latent, underlying, or nonobvious issues is strong” (p. 10). A potential drawback of this type of research is that care must be taken to assure that the interpretations that result are as accurate as possible. Miles and Huberman explained,

What we consider as a descriptive, first-order fact rapidly ramifies out into the interpretations and explanations that the people being studied have, and into the researcher’s second-order conception of “what’s going on”—the interpretation of the interpretations. The influence of the researcher’s values is not minor. (p. 9)

Managing interpretation can be challenging, as much of the data collected focus on actions that have intentions and meanings. Qualitative research is not simply a process of noting behaviors.

Qualitative designs are appropriate for topics that have been the focus of minimal research, when the researcher cannot isolate the variables to measure, when applicable theories relevant to the sample are not available, and when the topic is complex and not easily measured or observed (Creswell, 2003; Morse & Field, 1995). Qualitative research is appropriate for this study because the goal is to understand how adults' process of identifying and fulfilling their career passion unfolded. This requires retrospective narrative, interpretation, and sharing of insights by the participants.

In particular, this study utilized a qualitative research interviewing design. This is an exploratory form of research that is a helpful for uncovering people's perceptions, meanings, definitions, and constructions of reality (Punch, 2005). Punch asserted, "It is also one of the most powerful ways we have of understanding others" (p. 168). To uncover these perceptions, it is important to ask participants open-ended questions to allow them to share their views in their own terms and words. Kvale (1996) emphasized that a critical objective of interviewing is to understand interviewees' meanings. As a result, interviews can be useful for gaining the background story of a participant's experiences (McNamara, 1999), especially given the flexibility and adaptability of interviewing as a method (Punch, 2005).

However, the benefits of interviewing also are its challenges. Denzin and Lincoln (1994) explained,

The interview is a conversation—the art of asking questions and listening. It is not a neutral tool, for the interviewer creates the reality of the interview situation. In this situation, answers are given. Thus, the interview produces situated understandings grounded in specific interactional episodes. This method is influenced by the

personal characteristics of the interviewer, including race, class, ethnicity and gender. (p. 353)

Therefore, it is essential for interviewers to be skilled in conducting interviews, including hearing and capturing the nuances and contextual details of participants' answers as well as acknowledging and controlling for their own biases.

Interviews were appropriate for this study because it was important for participants to be able to share their own unique story, including the deep meanings and nuances underlying their experiences. Discovering one's passion is a highly personal and complex matter; therefore, utilizing an open-ended approach like interviewing was necessary.

### *Participants*

Participant selection includes considerations of sample size, selection criteria, selection procedures, and confidentiality and consent procedures. These procedures are described below. An overview of the participant population also is provided below.

### *Sample Size*

The appropriate number of participants to include in the study depends on the study's purpose. Kvale (1996) elaborated that if too few participants are included, it will not be possible to draw credible conclusions and if too many participants are included, then it will not be possible "to make penetrating interpretations of the interviews" (p. 102). Morse and Field (1995) added that a good rule of thumb is to collect enough data so that the researcher can generate a "full and rich description of the phenomenon," (p. 80), which generally occurs

when the researcher no longer hears unique themes and ideas surfacing. At this point, data saturation is considered to have been reached. The minimum number of participants set for this study was 8 and the maximum was 15. These targets were selected because they were believed to allow for a suitable amount of data without reaching over-saturation. Ultimately, eight participants were involved in the study.

### *Selection Criteria*

Selection criteria are specified for a research study to assist the researcher in “purposefully selecting participants or sites that will best help the researcher understand the problem and the research question” (Creswell, 2003, p. 185). The primary selection criterion for this study was that the individual has discovered and is working within the area of his or her career passion. Definitions of career passion by Dueease (2004) and Csikszentmihalyi (1990) were used to screen participants. Dueease explained that when one is working in the area of one’s passion, one becomes “naturally excited even about the thought of doing it and more excited about doing it” (p. 14). Csikszentmihalyi added that people working in their passion become absorbed in the work, nothing else seems to matter, and the experience itself is so enjoyable that people do it even if it means sacrificing other things.

### *Selection Procedures*

Participants were identified for this study using convenience sampling, meaning that the researcher drew participants from her personal and professional networks (Miles & Huberman, 2004). This approach tends to be easy and expeditious; however, it can come at the cost of credibility of the data.

The specific steps to identify, recruit, and enroll participants in the study were as follows:

1. The researcher reflected on her personal and professional networks and created a list of people she believed satisfied the selection criterion for the study.

2. She sent a study invitation (see Appendix A) to each of these individuals. The invitation described the purpose of the study and the nature of participation. Recipients were asked to contact the researcher if they were interested in participating and to forward the email to anyone they believe might qualify for the study.

3. To further broaden participant selection, the researcher also sent the study invitation by email to her contacts who were not believed to satisfy the selection criterion. The researcher asked them to forward this invitation to anyone they believe might qualify for the study. Additionally, she posted the study invitation on her Facebook page to invite potential participants.

4. When a study candidate contacted her by telephone or email, she confirmed the candidate satisfied the study criterion by providing Dueaase's (2004) and Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) definitions of passion. The researcher asked the candidate, "Do these statements describe your feelings about your current work?" If the candidate did not respond affirmatively, the researcher thanked the candidate for his or her interest in the study and let the candidate know that he or she did not qualify. If the candidate answered affirmatively, the researcher emailed, mailed, or faxed the consent form to the candidate and scheduled an in-person interview (for local participants) or a telephone interview

(for non-local participants). The researcher advised the candidate that the interview would not proceed until she received the signed consent form.

### *Confidentiality and Consent Procedures*

The goal of confidentiality and consent procedures is to assure that all human subjects protections measures are taken and that participants do not face undue risk as a result of taking part in a study. These procedures are used to ensure that the participant is aware of the purpose of the study and the nature of his or her potential involvement. Additionally, these procedures assure that the participant is aware of any risks and benefits associated with participating and, in turn, can make a fully informed decision about whether to participate (Morse & Field, 1995). This study was conducted under the guidance of the Pepperdine University Institutional Review Board to assure that participants were duly protected.

Written consent to participate in the study was collected from each participant before he or she completed an interview. Consent was gained using the informed consent form in Appendix B. This form outlined the purpose of the study; the nature of participation; the risks and benefits associated with participation in the study; and contact information for the researcher, her advisor, and the head of the institutional review board.

Specific measures for assuring confidentiality included recording participant pseudonyms rather than actual names and assuring that any information that potentially could be used to identify participants was changed to protect their identities. Additionally, any hard copies of the consent forms were kept in a locked cabinet for the duration of the study and were destroyed after 3

years. Audio-recordings of the interviews, hard copies of interview transcripts, and hard copy interview notes were kept in a separate locked cabinet and were destroyed after 3 years. Interview transcripts were labeled using the participant pseudonym and did not contain any identifying information. Electronic copies of the raw data and the analyzed data were kept indefinitely for the purpose of any future research.

### *Participant Descriptions*

Eight participants (six women, two men) were interviewed as part of this study (see Table 1). Four participants were aged 25 to 34 years old, three participants were aged 35 to 44 years old, and one participant was aged 45 to 54 years old. Four participants were from small organizations, two were from medium-sized organizations, and two were from large organizations. Six were from the private sector, one was from the public sector, and one was in the nonprofit sector. Four were educators or executive coaches, two played a consultative role, one was a manager, and one was an individual contributor.

### *Interview Procedures*

After providing written consent, each participant completed a semi-structured interview about his or her experience discovering and pursuing career passion. In a semi-structured interview, the researcher uses an interview script that lists key questions or topics to pose to the participant. Using this script helps assure that the purposes of the interview are addressed and that a dynamic and flowing interview conversation is achieved.

To prepare for this kind of interview, the researcher performs background research to identify key questions that are relevant to the topic and that generate

Table 1

*Participant Demographics*

Pseudo	Age	Industry	Position	Organization Size	Passion
Danielle	35-44	Executive coaching and leadership development and cultural transformation	Thinking partner, principal	Small	Helping people uncover what really matters
Bonnie	25-34	Elementary education—public sector	1 <sup>st</sup> grade teacher	Medium	Learning and teaching
Carol	25-34	Nonprofit—Environmental education	Teach the teacher	Small	Teaching about the environment
Chuck	25-34	Industrial design	Junior designer	Medium	Design and creation
Hannah	45-55	Equestrian	Equine therapy facilitator and riding instructor	Small	Horses
Janine	35-44	High technology	Internal consultant	Large	Change
Lana	25-34	Entertainment	Manager of systems	Large	Analysis
Ron	35-44	Health and wellness	Transformational coach	Small	People

new insights. The researcher then designs the script with questions ordered in a logical manner (Morse & Field, 1995). In doing so, it is best to phrase questions in a short, simple, and open-ended manner to elicit rich discussion. Morse and Field urged researchers to “try to establish a conversational tone during the interview. Try to get the participant talking, telling stories that describe incidents, and ask for examples and stories” (p. 94).

## *Design*

The interview script (see Appendix C) for this study was organized into five sections:

1. Demographics. Participants first were asked for the pseudonym they would like to be called in the study. Additionally, participants were asked for their age bracket, industry, position, and organization size. These demographic details were important for contextualizing their story and more deeply understanding the path to discovering and fulfilling their career passion.

2. Definition of passion. Participants were asked three questions in this section. First, they were asked to provide their own definition of career passion. Next, they were asked to describe how career passion shows up in their life. Finally, the researcher confirmed exactly what the participant's career passion was. These details were important for understanding how the participant understood career passion and how it has unfolded in his or her life.

3. Emergence and evolution of career passion. The next section focused on encouraging participants to share their unique story of how they discovered and fulfilled their career passion. The discussion began by learning about the participant's earliest experiences with his or her passion. The researcher asked, "How old were you when you discovered this passion?" Several probing questions were then posed (e.g., "Tell me more") to learn as much as possible about the participant's experience of discovering his or her passion. Next, the researcher asked the participant to consider whether his or her early life (e.g., childhood or school years) held clues of the participant's adulthood career passion. This part of the conversation began with the question, "When you look

back on your life before that time, were there any clues that \_\_\_\_\_ might one day become your passion?" Probing questions (e.g., "Tell me more") were used as needed to gather sufficient data. Finally, the researcher asked the participant to reflect on his or her journey of discovering and fulfilling his or her career passion and consider whether the participant would change anything. The researcher launched this part of the discussion by asking, "Now reflecting on your entire path, from the first clues of your passion to the present day, is there anything you would go back and change if you had the chance?" Probing questions were used as needed to generate rich data.

4. Role of self-awareness. Several authors have suggested that self-awareness plays a key role in discovering one's career passion (Blustein & Noumair, 1996; Chen, 2006; DeLima, 2005; Eales-White, 2007; Rouse, 1996). Therefore, the fourth section of the interview asked participants to comment on whether self-awareness plays any role in discovering career passion. If needed, participants were prompted to comment on whether awareness of one's strengths, weaknesses, values, beliefs, or possibilities were helpful for discovering career passion. Probes (e.g., "Tell me more") also were used as needed to generate rich data.

5. Closure. The final section closed the interview. At this point, it was important to gather any additional insights the participant has about discovering and pursuing one's passion. Therefore, the researcher asked, "Is there anything you believe is important to your story that we haven't covered or that you would like to add?" The interview ended with the researcher thanking the participant for sharing his or her insights.

### *Administration*

During the interview, it was important for the researcher to listen carefully and to demonstrate a genuinely curious and interested attitude (Morse & Field, 1995). Additionally, it is helpful when the interviewer is calm, tolerant of silence, and patient to allow the participant's story to unfold. The researcher remained cognizant of and strove to demonstrate these best practices throughout the interviews.

The interviews were conducted in-person for Los Angeles-based participants and by telephone for participants located elsewhere. In-person interviews were conducted in a convenient, private location where the interview would not be overheard or interrupted. Specifically, the in-person interviews were conducted in a private library meeting room, the participant's home or office, or the researcher's home, depending upon the preferences of the participant. The researcher took handwritten notes for the purposes of collecting the data. Following completion of the interviews, the researcher recorded any additional notes needed to finalize the notes for each participant.

### *Data Analysis Procedures*

Following finalization of the interview notes, the researcher organized the interview data by question. Each response was labeled with the appropriate pseudonym to indicate which participant provided which response.

After the data were organized, content analysis was used to interpret the data. The researcher read and re-read the responses reported for each question one by one. Based on this review, a list of themes were identified for each

question. The researcher then reviewed each response again, coding it for the appropriate theme.

Following initial coding, the researcher organized the data by code and reviewed the analysis to determine whether any codes need to be combined or, conversely, further broken into two or more codes. This process of review continued until the codes best reflected the data.

A second rater reviewed the analysis to confirm its accuracy. The second rater was an experienced researcher who held a doctorate in psychology and who had personal experience discovering and exercising her career passion. When the second rater detected any errors in the analysis, she marked them and discussed these with the researcher. The researcher then decided how to adapt the analysis, if at all. There was approximately 90% agreement between the researcher's analysis and the second rater's analysis. In most cases, the researcher revised the analysis. Chapter 4 reflects the final results.

### *Summary*

This study utilized a qualitative interview research design to examine how adults discover and pursue their passion. Participants were identified using convenience sampling. Eight participants who have identified and are working in the area of their passion were selected for this study. Data were collected through in-person and telephone interviews. Data were analyzed using content analysis.

## Chapter 4

### Results

This chapter reports the results of the study. Definitions of passion are provided first, followed by the process participants followed to discover their passion, and the outcomes they experienced as a result of exercising their passion at work.

#### *Definitions of Passion*

Participants defined passion in three primary ways (see Table 2). All participants emphasized that passion meant enjoying and feeling energized about one's work. Danielle, whose passion is helping people uncover what really matters and who works in executive coaching, leadership development, and cultural transformation, explained, "It feels like something newer and endless enthusiasm for and the energy is coming from within and you have a strong belief in it." Chuck, a junior designer at a medium-sized industrial design firm, defined passion as:

Loving what you're doing, going to work everyday. And a love for what you're doing and being happy to be there. Getting excited to work on projects. And pushing yourself. Getting excited about going into work. I get excited when a new project comes in.

Table 2

#### *Components of Passion*

Definition	N	%
Enjoying and feeling energized about one's work	8	100%
It is still hard work, but passion drives you through	5	63%
Being in the flow, "in the zone"	3	38%

N = 8

Five (63%) of participants also pointed out that working in the area of one's passion does not mean that everything will be easy. Instead, they emphasized that the work is still hard, but the passion drives them through. Lana, manager of systems at a large entertainment firm, explained,

Even if I have passion for my job, there will always be parts that I don't enjoy, but at the end of the day I want to love my job more than I hate it and I think that I'm there right now.

Hannah, a riding instructor and equine therapy facilitator, shared her experience:

I jump out of bed every day, feed 20 horses . . . it's dirty work, but the horses need to be fed. . . . I hate paperwork and bookkeeping; but if you run a business, you have to do that and stay up with it. I think it's okay to not enjoy every aspect of your dream job—cleaning up manure isn't the best part of working with horses—but you still have to do it. If you have clients that are high maintenance, you have to keep them happy and do small things to keep them happy, knowing and anticipating their needs in your business.

The final definition of passion, offered by three (38%) of participants, was being in the flow or “the zone.” Ron, whose passion is people and who works as transformational coach, defined passion as being

. . . when a person is able to be involved in some type of field that elicits their creative juices, and they feel passion about what it is they are doing, losing track of time, and they are aligned with something in their karmic path their own existence and their calling.

Danielle described her experience of being in the flow while coaching:

. . . time just flies by and stands still. Maybe there is a link between passion and flow. It makes me think of coaching sessions with my clients. I get prepared for it and plan a few questions and I'm thinking about the session. Once I get on the call with them, I move the file away and I stand up, and I just walk and pace in my office and that is just when I'm in it and just drawn into listening to them and being their partner in what we are discussing. I'm not thinking, I'm just feeling it.

### *The Process of Discovering Passion*

The process of discovering passion was described by participants as a function of having certain initial conditions for passion, exhibiting early manifestations of passion and making early career choices, going through a process of identifying one's passion, and further developing one's passion.

#### *Initial Conditions for Passion*

Seven participants emphasized the importance of receiving support from others to discover passion (see Table 3). Carol, who delivers teacher education at a small environmental nonprofit, shared,

I was lucky because my company really supports people to figure out what they want to do professionally and they are willing to work with people to figure it out. I think that's what really helped me along the way. Although my family didn't push me in any one direction, I've always had incredibly supportive and encouraging family. If you don't have that, you will end up wandering in life and be lost.

Table 3

#### *Initial Conditions for Passion*

Condition	N	%
Receiving support from others to pursue passion	7	88%
Having one or more inspiring mentors	4	50%
Making a conscious choice	3	38%
Maturing	2	25%
Being influenced by parents or bosses	2	25%
Dedicating a significant amount of time	1	13%

N = 8

Hannah, a riding instructor and equine therapy facilitator, recalled, "We had the freedom to try a lot of things growing up. There was a sense that if you really wanted to do something, you could." Bonnie, a first grade teacher, shared,

My parents were my biggest fans from day one. My mom always hold teachers in a high regard, she would take me to the teacher

supply stores to get supplies. . . . She always encouraged me in anything I wanted to do. . . . It automatically put me in the right direction.

Half the participants mentioned having one or more inspiring mentors.

Bonnie shared that her mentor was

. . . my aunt on my mom's side. I never saw her teach, but I would always ask her questions about what she was doing. I had the same teacher in 1st and 2nd grade, Mrs. Nichols. When I got my credential, I emailed her and told her I got hired and told her she was an inspiration to me.

Lana, whose passion is analysis and who works as a manager of systems at a large entertainment company, described the mentoring she received from a professor:

One of my professors saw in me a great researcher. She took me under her wing helping her research and conduct experiments on students. [This was] a huge milestone because I realized I enjoyed analytics. I was really interested in going in to research in psych[ology]. I thought I might go on to get my Ph.D.

Three (38%) participants emphasized that discovering one's passion requires the conscious choice to do so. Danielle, an executive coach and consultant, explained,

This has been the first time I felt like a real, conscious shift. Before, I was just following the waters. I definitely paddled, but mostly I was just following along, learning along the way. There was a point along the way where the stream branched off and I realized, "This is not the arm to go down, you need to get out and make a shift."

Other initial conditions mentioned by participants included maturing (25%), being influenced by parents or bosses (25%), and dedicating a significant amount of time to the discovery process (13%).

### *Early Manifestations of Passion*

Several participants pointed out that their passions showed up in their life before they consciously realized it as their passion (see Table 4). Five participants (63%) stated they unconsciously carried out the passion. Carol, whose passion is teaching about the environment and who delivers teacher education, mused, "I wonder if I didn't realize that what I was doing was actual teaching. But I just never made that connection and I wonder if that's because I didn't have people around me that were in education." Ron, a transformational coach, recalled,

I always was sensitive to women when I was a teenager. I had the ability to listen to other people and their stuff. There was a girl Billy who was dating a friend of mine. My friend was having a lot of problems and she would always vent to me and I was there for her.

Table 4

#### *Early Manifestations and Early Career Choices*

Theme	N	%
Early Manifestations of Passion		
Unconsciously carried out the passion	5	63%
Passion was exhibited in childhood interests	4	50%
Early Career Choices		
Chance experience was the start of the journey*	7	88%
Chose education and training that aligned with passion	3	38%
Chose an initial direction that was not aligned with passion	3	38%

*N* = 8; \*For three participants, the chance experience occurred early in life and they made early career and education choices aligned with their passion. For the rest, the chance experience occurred later in life. Therefore, their early career and education choices were not aligned with their passion

Seven participants (88%) recalled that a chance experience was the start of their journey of discovery. For three participants, this chance experience occurred early in life, allowing them to make early education and career choices

that aligned with their passion. Hannah, a riding instructor and equine therapy facilitator, shared:

When I was 2 ½, my mom took me to Australia to visit relatives. I had a cousin who had a ranch and they put me in on a horse and I yelled and screamed until they would let me ride it by myself. What happened? I wanted a horse. I asked for it for Christmas and birthdays. I got horse brushes. I got a pony when I was 7. And I have had horses of my own since then. My grandparents lived an hour away. I was able to keep my horse at their house and I would keep my horses there. I would spend summers there and ride horses all day long. Now, as a sport, I do endurance riding, which started in my childhood.

Bonnie, who knew from childhood that she wanted to be a teacher, explained, “I always knew I wanted to be a teacher. I tried to take as many education classes in college. It never really changed.”

Three other participants shared that they did not realize their passion immediately. Consequently, they chose an initial educational and career direction that did not align with their passion. Janine, whose passion is organizational change and is an internal consultant at a large high technology company, shared, “Growing up, I decided I was going to be a lawyer. Chose a college for pre-law reasons and, looking back, I didn’t know where I was going.” Lana, whose passion is analysis and who is a manager of systems at a large entertainment firm, elaborated,

Big thing is that I’m a planner. In high school, I knew I was going to be a psychologist to listen and help people. Then it changed to being a teacher. But then in college, I realized I didn’t want to go back to school. I wanted to go have a career, which was really scary, because there had always been a plan when I was in school, but there wasn’t a plan beyond that. Junior year of college, I realized I didn’t know what I was going to do for the rest of my life, so my mom sat me down and we went down the newspaper classifieds and human resources was the only thing I was really interested in.

These individuals who initially chose a path that did not align with their passion eventually had a chance experience that started them on the journey to finding their passion. Janine, who initially pursued a career in law and later found her passion as an internal change consultant, described her chance experience:

Thinking I was going into pre-law, I sent out letters to alumni where I grew up and got hired in the human resources department for a summer internship. It was a good experience and I really enjoyed it. . . . [After several more internships and work experiences, I] really enjoyed human resources and decided to stay with that.

Danielle, who started out in human resources and eventually found her passion in executive coaching, leadership development, and cultural transformation, explained,

I wanted to try coaching with the senior team. I didn't know a whole lot about coaching at this time, but had heard good things. The senior team wanted me to try the coaching. I hired an executive coach for myself and work with him and it was such a gift to me. We worked together for quite some time and I remember he asked me a question. Twice a month, we had a call and I would bring challenges to the table and he would ask me a bunch of provocative questions. One day, I had my issue of the hour and the coach stops me in my path and asks me a question: "If you could do anything you wanted right now, what would that be?" I got a little frustrated. And I remember after getting over my frustration, the question hit me like a train.

### *Identification of Passion*

Following these early manifestations and career choices is the act of identifying one's passion (see Table 5). Based on the participants' stories, this consists of three potentially overlapping and iterative phases: reaching a crossroads, reflecting, and taking action. In terms of reaching a crossroads, two participants recalled that circumstances in their lives conspired to force re-

examination. Janine, who initially intended to become a lawyer and later discovered her passion to be organizational change, explained,

Even if you aren't naturally drawn to look inward, sometimes life becomes so miserable that you have to look at it. I've seen people in life whose lives self-destruct around them and I think to myself that's the universe telling them you have to look at how you are living your life: Are you out of alignment with who you are supposed to be? In some way, it will get your attention whether or not you want to look at it or not.

Table 5

*Identifying One's Passion*

Theme	N	%
Encountering a Crossroads		
Things sometimes conspire to force re-examination	2	25%
Turning point: is this what I really want to do?	2	25%
Reflecting		
Examining one's past to discover when and where one was passionate	4	50%
Questioning, evolving, and shifting	3	38%
Getting to know one's inner voice, needs, wants, values	3	38%
Constructing a coherent story of one's life	3	38%
Being still	2	25%
Recognizing the moment that reinforces that you are exactly where you are supposed to be	2	25%
Taking Action		
Gaining comfort with self: leveraging strengths and working around weaknesses	7	88%
Exploring	4	50%
Experimenting	4	50%

N = 8

Two participants also mentioned reaching a turning point where they asked themselves if their current profession was what they really wanted to do. Danielle, who had been working in human resources before discovering her passion for executive coaching, leadership development, and cultural transformation recalled her experience:

[My coach asked me,] “If you could do anything you wanted right now, what would that be?” And I remember after getting over my frustration, the question hit me like a train. At first I thought, “I have no idea.” But then there was a realization that I didn’t know how I got where I was. I was in this very nice office, where the windows don’t open, I spend 90% of my time on the phone with people I never see face-to-face. I just felt this incredible sense of “How did I get here?” Eventually, I said, “I need 6 months off. I don’t even know what I’m doing anymore. This isn’t what I signed up for. I don’t feel like I’m having an impact anymore.” And I had never allowed myself to think about that before. It was huge! Saying those words was scary. There was no going back. It was a secret that I had kept from myself and everyone else. Within a year from that conversation, I left the company.

The phase of reflecting consisted of six primary activities (see Table 5).

Half the participants described examining their past to discover when and where they were passionate. Chuck, a junior designer at an industrial design firm, explained,

Steve Jobs talks about how different things in life and all those experiences and connecting those dots and then applying them to get to where you want to be in life. Maybe that is what self-awareness is about—using those experiences to make yourself successful in life. When I heard this, I really resonated with what he said and I recognized that I had done that in my own life. Life is so much about experiences, taking and learning from your experiences, so I guess that is one of things that I really learned. You try something and it doesn’t work and you move on, but you have to take the experiences from one and use them as you move forward.

Three participants emphasized that the process of discovering their passion required them to question, evolve, and shift their core beliefs, values, and behaviors. Danielle, who eventually became an executive coach and consultant, shared her experience: “That was why that year was so hard—I had to re-program my thinking and what I thought success was, what I should be doing and what I should be valuing.” Janine, who switched from intentions to

become a lawyer to become an internal change consultant, observed, “You get infiltrated by value systems, but then you have to ask if that is what is true for me. A lot of the changes for me came from reevaluating my value system that I had never questioned before.” Other reflection activities included getting to know one’s inner voice, needs, wants, values (38%); constructing a coherent story of one’s life (38%); being still (25%); and recognizing the moment that reinforces that you are exactly where you are supposed to be (25%).

The final phase participants described in the process of identifying passion was taking action (see Table 5). Seven participants stressed the need to gain comfort with themselves, including learning how to leverage their strengths and work around their weaknesses. Ron, a transformational coach, shared his experience:

Math is a weakness, but it hasn’t affected me really. I joke about the fact that I probably could get good with it, but I don’t have any emotions around numbers or accounting. Or even stuff like how an engineer thinks. I might not understand computer jargon, which doesn’t affect me. I just hire people who do.

Janine, an internal change consultant, shared,

I don’t know if I really knew what I was good at until recently. Really truly owning my strengths—I feel like I’m still just coming into that. [Graduate school] really helped to put a mirror in front of me: Do you realize this is what you do really well, but also where you still get in your own way?

Half the participants described the need for exploring different careers and opportunities, which typically involved reading, attending retreats, taking classes, and even trying out different things only to discover that they did *not* want to do that. Half the participants also emphasized the need for experimenting. Danielle, who started out in human resources and eventually started a company dealing

with executive coaching, leadership development, and culture transformation, shared her story:

After I left [the company], I took a year off, which I didn't know I could do. I finished school, I sent two emails to Habitat for Humanity and I heard back from Paraguay within 48 hours. This is what I had decided I wanted to do. It was a last minute thing. I had 10 days to get down there. I was down there for 3½ weeks. Within 10 days, we had built two houses, when we were only supposed to build one. I had just come from a job where we built multi-million townhomes as people's second or third homes. How was that making the world a better place? I was working hard, but it wasn't where I wanted to put my energy anymore. Now I was at the opposite extreme, building houses for \$1,500. I came to the conclusion that I had to do something with more meaning and that I could connect to. Since then, 5 years ago, that is the path I have been on. I did a lot of things that I always wanted to do, I finally had some free time. I just had been so off before. I finally had the energy. Really fueling myself, I went down to Puerto Rico with a friend who connected me to a group with Deepak Chopra where people got together—social change agents to work together. Inspired the s--- out of us: Look what people are doing! . . . Then a 10-day meditation. Before this, I thought meditating was a total waste of time. There were all kinds of shifts happening for me: doing more by doing less and listening to what was really happening for me. I lived for a monk for 10 days. It felt like I was in an insane asylum. Allowing myself the space and time to explore, and by then it had been a year since I quit my job, and every 3 months, I would see if I was ready to go back to work. The strengths I'm discovering are the subtle things, like rules of life. Some you have heard before, but for me until I experience it and learn it hands on, I don't fully get it.

### *Development of the Passion*

Once participants identified their passion, they seemed to enter into a stage of further developing their passion. This included the phases of cultivating their passion, performing their passion, and maturing their passion (see Table 6).

Despite having found their passion, 75% of participants shared that they encountered obstacles trying to cultivate it. Carol, who delivers teacher education at a small environmental nonprofit, elaborated, "Some of it comes from you never

know how challenging a job is until you are actually doing it, which exists in any career path one chooses.” Chuck shared the challenges he experienced pursuing his education:

I had [attention deficit disorder]. It was really hard for me to balance school and everything else. But because there is a process in design, it's easy for me to follow. Some people get it and others don't. Being social in college deterred me from my focus in school. I really had to work at balancing school and social life. . . . It really forced me to take a life check. I went to live with my brother and he was a huge force for me. He got me working out and living a more healthy life and I started to help him with some of his architectural projects. It was a great summer. I went back to school and dropped a lot of my friends and just focused on school.

Table 6

*Developing One's Passion*

Theme	N	%
Cultivating the Passion		
Encountered obstacles	6	75%
Created opportunities to pursue my passion in my current work and life	4	50%
Performing one's Passion		
Eventually sought new position that capitalized on my passion	4	50%
Gained additional experience and training to support my passion	3	38%
Maturing in One's Passion		
Engaged in ongoing reflection	5	63%
Found or created community	3	38%
Sought balance so passion does not become all-consuming	1	13%

N = 8

Half the participants began cultivating their passion by creating opportunities to pursue their passion in their current work and life. Janine, who discovered she had a passion for organizational change, shared her experience:

I found a book *Bringers of the Light*. It talks about a guy who wants to be a healer. Leaves his job and starts a healing shop but no one comes and he has to shut it down and go back to his old job. He decides if he has to go back, maybe he can bring healing into his old job and he started telling co-workers and he started getting referrals. If you decide you want to be something, start it in the

space you are already in. This gave me permission to not have to restart with a whole new life, but to just get clearer on what I wanted. [After examining my past and identifying the times when I was passionate,] I recognized that, how do I bring more of those moments into my job? Got certified as a coach outside of work. Internal facilitator network through [my company]. That work was at the center of the theme of what I liked about my job. I got two weeks in training and facilitation, got certified to go to meetings. This is what I want more of my life and I just found ways to bring this into the job I was already doing, I just fine-tuned to what I enjoyed doing.

According to the participants, the next phase of developing one's passion is actually performing one's passion. Four participants eventually sought a new position that capitalized on their passion. Lana, who discovered she had a passion for analysis, shared her story:

The next a-ha moment came when I moved from an internship to coordinator position and I outgrew my job and I didn't know how to make the next leap. The moment was when my boss suggested that I apply for an analyst position. I applied and got the job. I was scared because I didn't think I could do the job; but 1 month later, I had an a-ha moment where I realized I could do the job. The third moment was this past January, when I was promoted up to manager.

Three participants described gaining additional experience and training to support their passion. For example, Bonnie, a first grade teacher, had to obtain credentials and continuing education to be able to perform her passion. She explained,

When you are a new teacher, the first 2 years you have to participate in Beginning Teacher Support and Assessment. You get a mentor to work with and there is a lot of crap work, lots of paperwork. It feels like you are back in school again. When that ended, it was a pretty big milestone, thank God. I can finally focus on teaching. I also went back to school, to get my Gifted and Talented Education certificate.

The final phase of developing one's passion is further maturing in one's passion. Five participants (63%) described engaging in ongoing reflection as a way to continually refine their passion and practice. Bonnie, a first grade teacher, shared that even in the summers, she is "already thinking about next year, shopping for new supplies. It's constantly in my mind." Carol, who delivers teacher education at an environmental nonprofit, shared that she often asks herself, "If I could start over, what would my career path be? The same? Would I choose this path?"

Three participants shared that they found or created community that also supported their passion. For example, Chuck shared, "The people you work with can help . . . give you the feeling that you made the right choices."

### *Outcomes*

Participants were asked to describe the outcomes they observed for themselves, their clients, their organizations, and their communities as a result of working in their passion (see Table 7). Four participants stated that they were able to achieve mutuality where both parties benefited greatly. Carol described her experience of delivering teacher education with two future teachers:

They were complete opposites, but watching them learn and transform their thinking and the passion that they gained from the experience was so personally rewarding. One, it was amazing to see that what we were doing actually worked. I thought if I could do this with more people in the future with more people, I would be so happy. It was very collaborative, lots of discussions and working together.

Four participants expressed that because they were working in the area of their passion, they strove to go the extra mile and wanted to make a difference.

Chuck shared his drive to work:

Developing concepts and coming up with new ideas. I'm always doing research on new designs that are out there and what is happening out there. Trying to get involved in other projects outside of work. I'm helping friends to start a company. I will pick things up and I want to take them apart and try to figure out how it works, keeping an eye out for innovation.

Table 7

*Outcomes Experienced from Working with Passion*

Outcome	N	%
Achieving mutuality (both parties benefiting greatly)	4	50%
Going the extra mile and wanting to make a difference	4	50%
Gaining a supportive community	4	50%
Having a thirst for continuous learning and improvement	3	38%
Satisfying one's needs and preferences	3	38%
Having the best of oneself come through	2	25%
Achieving maximum effectiveness and impact on client	1	13%

N = 8

Another four people shared that by working in their area of passion, they gained a supportive community. Chuck shared, "In my life, I surround myself with people who I can discuss [my area of passion] with." Hannah shared her experience with the "natural" community:

In endurance riding, we ride 50 miles a day, where you get to see things that you don't normally get to see: deer, horses, nature. When you bond with an animal, they become your friend and partner. You bond, they are your coworkers. The lessons I do with my horses, they are like my coworkers. They let me know how things are going, they are very communicative. They are intelligent and very intuitive.

Other outcomes mentioned by participants included having a thirst for continuous learning and improvement, satisfying one's needs and preferences, having the best of oneself come through, and achieving maximum effectiveness and impacts on the client.

### *Summary*

Eight participants were interviewed as part of this study. Their definitions of passion centered on enjoying and feeling energized about one's work, engaging in hard work inspired by the passion, and being in the flow or "in the zone."

The process of discovering passion was described by participants as a function of having certain initial conditions for passion (e.g., others' support and influence, conscious choice and effort, maturation); exhibiting early manifestations of passion and making early career choices; going through a process of identifying one's passion (including reaching a crossroads, reflecting, and taking action); and further developing one's passion by cultivating it, performing it, and maturing in it.

Outcomes from working in the area of one's passion appear to be mutual benefits for the person and his or her clients, desiring to go the extra mile, experiencing significant intrinsic rewards, and gaining a supportive community. The next chapter provides a discussion of these results.

## Chapter 5

### Discussion

The purpose of this study was to identify the paths people have taken to discover their career passion. Three research questions were explored for this study:

1. How do people understand and define passion?
2. What processes do people follow to discover their passion?
3. What are the outcomes of exercising one's passion at work?

This chapter provides a discussion of the results of this study, including a presentation of conclusions, recommendations, limitations, and directions for additional research.

### *Conclusions*

Conclusions are presented for each of the research questions. These are discussed in detail below.

### *Definitions of Passion*

Participants defined passion as enjoying and feeling energized about one's work, engaging in hard work inspired by the passion, and being in the flow or "in the zone." This is similar to definitions by Nichols (cited in Henderson, 2000), who stated that working in alignment with one's passion is deeply emotionally rewarding; Duee (2004), who stated that it brought excitement; and Csikszentmihalyi (1990), who called it *flow*. Additionally, Campbell (1988) and Chen (2006) related passion to each person's unique nature and Jung (1971) said that passion was related to people's natural preferences.

It is valuable to have confirmed the definitions of passion in the research to what people living their passion actually experience. This helps validate the existence of work passion and helps illuminate what aspects of the theoretical definitions show up in practice.

Based on these findings, it is not unreasonable for people to strive to discover and enact their passion at work. Further, it is reasonable for coaches to help their clients identify and fulfill their work passions. Establishing passion as a legitimate goal could have strong implications for career counseling for college students and individuals at any stage of their careers.

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that the sample was not representative of the United States population; therefore, these findings could have limited transferability to the general population. In particular, the sample featured a lack blue collar workers; few men; and limited socioeconomic, ethnic, and cultural diversity. It would be beneficial to expand this study to determine whether the definitions and understanding of passion vary by demographic or other distinctions.

### *Discovering One's Passion*

Participants described the process of discovering passion as consisting of multiple phases. It began with having certain initial conditions for passion, such as others' support and influence, conscious choice and effort, and maturation.

Participants described having shown early signs of their passion—such as in their childhood interests. They also spoke of having a chance experience that set them on the path to their passion. For some, this occurred early in life and they made educational and career choices that aligned with the purpose. For

others, the chance experience happened later in life and they took a different initial direction.

The next phase was actually identifying the passion, which included reaching a crossroads, reflecting, and taking action. For those who did not initially choose a passion-aligned career, they described reaching a moment of clarity or turning point when they realized they were on the wrong path.

Once discovered, developing one's passion appeared to unfold in three stages: cultivating the passion through creating initial opportunities but also encountering obstacles; performing one's passion, including gaining additional education and experiences and attaining a position to fully put the passion to work; and maturing in one's passion, consisting of finding or creating community and engaging in an ongoing reflective practice.

These findings show strong agreement with the literature, which suggested that increasing one's self-awareness (Blustein & Noumair, 1996; DeLima, 2005; Rouse, 1996), being still and listening (Campbell, 1988; Hansen & Amundson, 2009), discovering one's priorities and interests (Henderson, 2000), being active (Campbell, 1988; Chen, 2006; Hansen & Amundson, 2009; Strenger & Ruttenberg, 2008), being influenced by others (Rouse, 1996; Strenger & Ruttenberg, 2008), and maturing and aging (Strenger & Ruttenberg, 2008) were key activities required for discovering one's passions.

Based on these findings, people desiring to identify and enact their passions at work need to be prepared for a lengthy journey of discovery and be ready and willing to dedicate significant effort and energy to it. Both this study's findings and past literature emphasized that discovering one's passion is directly

linked to one's depth of self-awareness. Achieving this level of self-awareness can be time consuming and emotionally challenging and may require the individual to shift his or her existing beliefs, values, and behaviors. These activities, in turn, can affect one's existing relationships, commitments, and employment. It is likely that people discovering their passion may need additional resources and support to aid in the journey (e.g., additional education, therapy, moral support).

Due to the demands of self-discovery and uncovering one's passion, it is important to be aware that discovering passion may not be right for every person at every time. For example, one's personal and professional circumstances may be such that the individual must temporarily focus on making a living, attending to a loved one, or some other commitment. Additionally, some people may choose to pursue their passion avocationally rather than vocationally. The timing or nature of discovering one's passion should be tailored according to the individual's circumstances and goals. This is an important consideration for career counselors, coaches, and individuals themselves as they consider discovering their passion.

A helpful direction for additional researchers could be to examine the factors that make people ready to pursue passion at a given time and to more fully examine what resources need to be in place to support the journey.

#### *Outcomes of Working One's Area of Passion*

Outcomes from working in the area of one's passion were mutual benefits for the person and his or her clients, including achieving high performance,

having maximum impact, experiencing significant intrinsic and emotional rewards, and gaining a supportive community.

Existing literature on working with passion touted similar benefits, such as feeling a sense of enjoyment, happiness, self-worth (Dueease, 2004); meaning and purpose (Bolles, 2009; Henderson, 2000); and fulfilled potential (Campbell, 1988). Additionally, people who work in the area of their passion are believed to be more productive and higher performing, thus, attracting more business, customers, and rewards (Dueease, 2004). In short, they tend to contribute in powerful and positive ways to the world (Bolles, 2009; Campbell, 1988).

Based on the findings from this study and from past literature, it can be concluded that people who work within their passion tend to be more fulfilled and productive people. This has clear benefits for individuals, their organizations, and their clients. For example, if more people worked within their area of passion, it is likely that more productive organizations and healthier work environments and communities could follow. Given this, it is important to increase awareness among career counselors, coaches, organization leaders, and individuals of the possibilities of working with passion, the paths to get there, and the potential benefits of achieving this.

A key limitation affecting this conclusion is that the benefits of working with passion were obtained strictly from the perspective of those working with passion. Their work performance, productivity, and impacts on clients were not assessed except through self-report, and the data, therefore, is subject to the limitations of self-reporting. For example, participants might have inflated their impacts in a conscious or unconscious effort to appear successful or to tell the

researcher what they think she wanted to hear. Additional research may produce a more objective measure of passion's benefits by gathering data from the participants' performance evaluations, managers, coworkers, business partners, or clients. It also would be interesting to measure how far-reaching the impact may be when one works with passion. For example, are the participants' family members, friends, and communities affected as well?

### *Recommendations*

Study findings suggested that discovering one's passion can be a lengthy and demanding process. Therefore, it is important for people to make sure they are ready for this kind of journey and that they have the support in place to help them along this journey. If a coach or career counselor is working with an individual who wants to pursue his or her passion, it is important to initiate a discussion and evaluation to assess whether the individual has the needed support in place. Support includes such things as inspiring role models; encouraging friends, family members, or other important people; and financial resources to fund the various activities, experiences, or professional support that might be needed along with way. Due to the demanding and even costly nature of the process, it is possible that the individual might not be ready for the journey at a given time and the process could be toned down or delayed until the person has the needed time, energy, and resources for the process.

The findings from this study emphasized the important role that people play in others' journey of discovering their passion. Whether as a friend, coworker, manager, family member, or teacher, any individual at any time may be consciously or unconsciously encouraging (or discouraging) others from

pursuing their passion. This emphasizes the need for people to listen to, support, and encourage each other's dreams, and to strive to honor one's own passions. People in positions of authority (e.g., parents, teachers, managers) seem to have particular influence over whether their children, students, or subordinates will pursue their passion. Given the significant benefits that emerge from following one's passion, listening and encouraging others seems like time and energy well spent.

Organization development practitioners, consultants, and coaches also can have an important impact on whole organizations relative to passion. Given that people who are working within their passion are happier, more productive, and have more impact, it follows that a consultant who focuses on helping organizations create work communities of impassioned people would have a tremendous positive impact on the organization's employees, clients, and community. Such a focus could result in bottom-line impacts over the short and long term.

### *Limitations*

A leading limitation of this study was the small, rather homogeneous nature of the sample. Additionally, the sample was heavily weighted toward women and people in helping professions. These two factors might have skewed the findings. Further, these findings have limited or no transferability to the general United States population, although this study has identified variables that could be explored in a future study.

A second limitation is that the data were gathered exclusively through self-report and were, thus, limited to the biases affecting self-reported data. In

particular, it would be important to assess the benefits of working with passion, for example, by including examinations of the participants' performance and discussions with their stakeholders.

A final limitation is that the data were collected using handwritten notes rather than using audio-recordings and verbatim transcripts of the interviews. This opens the possibility of data loss, as it is difficult to capture all the data as one is speaking. Further, the majority of the interviews were conducted by telephone and important nonverbal cues may have been missed. These limitations could have been controlled for to some degree using member checking of the data analysis.

#### *Directions for Additional Research*

To determine how transferable this study's findings are to the larger United States population, it would be helpful to examine passion using a large, diverse sample. This could be accomplished by conducting a series of qualitative studies that draw 20 to 30 participants with specific characteristics or one large study that attempts to draw a more representative sample. Alternately, survey research could be conducted on a large sample.

A key finding from this study was that discovering one's passion requires a lengthy and demanding process and that people need to be ready to embark on such a journey. Therefore, a helpful direction for research may be to examine the factors that make people ready to pursue passion at a given time and to more fully examine what supports need to be in place to help them along the journey. Such a study could more deeply examine what challenges people face in the course of discovering their passion, what supports they rely on, and what

supports they need to successfully complete the journey. The findings from this kind of study would provide helpful insights to those desiring to find their passion and to those who help others find their passion.

A final suggestion for research is to produce a more objective measure of passion's benefits by gathering data from the participants' performance evaluations, managers, coworkers, business partners, clients, family members, and friends. While these individuals could not report on another person's inner experience of passion, they could share what they experienced in relation to the person's performance. Such a study would avoid the limitations of self-reporting bias that affected this study and would produce even more grounded conclusions about what one could expect from working in the area of their passion.

### *Summary*

This study sought to identify the paths people take to discover their career passion and specifically endeavored to understand how people understand and define passion, what process they follow to discover their passion, and what outcomes they experience as a result of exercising their passion in their work.

A qualitative interview research design was used to conduct this study. Eight participants were identified using convenience sampling. Data were collected through in-person and telephone interviews. The research questions were answered using content analysis.

Participants defined passion as enjoying and feeling energized about one's work, engaging in hard work inspired by the passion, and being in the flow or "in the zone." The process of discovering passion consisted of multiple phases including having certain initial conditions for passion, making a conscious choice

and dedicating effort, and maturing. Outcomes from working in the area of one's passion included mutual benefits for the person and his or her clients, such as maintaining high performance, achieving maximum impact, experiencing significant intrinsic and emotional rewards, and gaining a supportive community.

Limitations affecting this study included use of a small, rather homogeneous sample; gathering data exclusively through self-report; and recording data using handwritten notes.

Suggestions for additional research include conducting the study again using a large, diverse sample; examining the factors that make people ready to pursue passion at a given time and to more fully examine what supports need to be in place to help them along the journey; and to produce a more objective measure of passion's benefits.

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Appendix A  
Study Invitation

Dear <Name>,

I am conducting a research project to examine how adults discover and fulfill their career passion and I would appreciate your assistance.

I am conducting this project as part of my master's thesis research at Pepperdine University.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary and anonymous. Participation involves one telephone or in-person 60-minute interview where you will be asked about your experience discovering and pursuing your career passion. Summarized study findings will be incorporated into my doctoral dissertation and made available to you, if you wish.

Qualifications for participants are as follows:

1. You have identified work that you are genuinely excited about doing (your career passion).
2. You are currently working in the area of your career passion.

Please feel free to contact me by email or telephone at [omitted] to learn more about the project and discuss your participation in it.

Thank you for your help!

Shannon Philip  
Principal researcher, Masters candidate  
Pepperdine University

Appendix B  
Consent Form

## INFORMED CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH ACTIVITIES

Participant: \_\_\_\_\_

Principal Investigator: Shannon Philip \_\_\_\_\_

Title of Project: Identifying Adults' Paths to Discovering Career Passion

1. I \_\_\_\_\_, agree to participate in the research study being conducted by Shannon Philip, under the direction of Dr. Daphne DePorres

2. The overall purpose of this research is: The purpose of this study is to identify the paths people have taken to discover their career passion and strengths.

3. My participation will involve the following: One one-on-one telephone or in-person interview

4. My participation in the study will require up to 1 hour in duration. The study shall be conducted by telephone or in-person.

5. I understand that the possible benefits to myself or society from this research are: Greater understanding how people can identify their career passions and make those passions become reality.

6. I understand that there are certain risks and discomforts that might be associated with this research. These risks include: Emotional upset as I bring to mind any challenges I experienced while trying to discover my career passion.

7. I understand that I may choose not to participate in this research.

8. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may refuse to participate and/or withdraw my consent and discontinue participation in the project or activity at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled.

9. I understand that the investigator(s) will take all reasonable measures to protect the confidentiality of my records and my identity will not be revealed in any publication that may result from this project. The confidentiality of my records will be maintained in accordance with applicable state and federal laws. Under California law, there are exceptions to confidentiality, including suspicion that a child, elder, or dependent adult is being abused, or if an individual discloses an intent to harm him/herself or others.

10. I understand that the investigator is willing to answer any inquiries I may have concerning the research herein described. I understand that I may contact Dr. Daphne DePorres at [omitted] if I have other questions or concerns about this

research. If I have questions about my rights as a research participant, I understand that I can contact Dr. Doug Leigh, Chairperson of the Graduate and Professional Schools IRB, Pepperdine University, at [omitted].

11. I understand to my satisfaction the information regarding participation in the research project. All my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I have received a copy of this informed consent form which I have read and understand. I hereby consent to participate in the research described above.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Witness

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

I have explained and defined in detail the research procedure in which the subject has consented to participate. Having explained this and answered any questions, I am cosigning this form and accepting this person's consent.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Principal Investigator

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Appendix C  
Interview Script

### Demographics

1. Pseudonym:
2. Age bracket:
3. Industry:
4. Position:
5. Organization pseudonym:

### Definition of Passion

6. When we first spoke to schedule this interview, I gave you a definition of career passion. Now, I would like to find out how you define it.
7. How does this show up in your life?
8. And would you say your career passion is \_\_\_\_\_? [OR What is your career passion?]

### The Emergence and Evolution of Career Passion

I'd like to learn about how this passion emerged and evolved.

9. How old were you when you discovered this passion?
  - Tell me more about that.
  - What happened?
  - Who was involved?
  - What a-ha moments did you experience?
  - Were there any turning points or milestones?
  - What obstacles did you face?
10. When you look back on your life before that time, were there any clues that \_\_\_\_\_ might one day become your passion?
  - Tell me more about that.
  - What happened?
  - Who was involved?
  - What a-ha moments did you experience?
  - Were there any turning points or milestones?
  - What obstacles did you face?
11. Now reflecting on your entire path, from the first clues of your passion to the present day, is there anything you would go back and change if you had the chance?
 

Prompts:

  - Any changes in the support you received?
  - Timing?
  - Tools?
  - Choices you made?

### Role of Self-Awareness

12. Does self-awareness play any role in discovering your passion?
 

Prompts: Your awareness of your . . .

  - Strengths

- Weaknesses
- Values
- Beliefs
- Possibilities

Probes:

- Tell me more

### **Closure**

13. Is there anything you believe is important to your story that we haven't covered or that you would like to add?

Thank you so much for participating in the interview and sharing your insights!