

# 5. THE RELATIONSHIP OF TURNING POINTS AT WORK TO PERCEPTIONS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL GROWTH AND CHANGE

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Over the past decade, despite an expanding economy, American workers have had to adjust to increasing long-term job insecurity. Many must retrain to meet job expectations, or change careers over the course of their work lives. These changes in employment patterns and work demands have confronted adults with multiple transitions, choices, and decisions over the course of their work lives. These changes may also have led to shifts in the ways young and middle-aged workers typically view the role of work in their lives, their long-term commitment and loyalty to work organizations, and their definitions of career. The aim of this study is to explore perceptions of psychological growth and change during adulthood, in the context of work.

Social scientists have typically studied role transitions, socialization and psychological change that involve entering or leaving major life roles (Settersten, 1999). This study explores work transitions, socialization, and psychological growth and change using the concept of “turning point” (Clausen, 1995; Elder, 1998). Clausen (1995, 1998) utilized a self report design to study turning points, asking people to identify what they believed were the times when their lives “took a different direction from that in which one had been traveling” (Clausen, 1998, p. 202). Rather than reporting major events or role transitions that radically changed the course of life, many participants in

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Clausen's study reported "changing attitudes and feelings or personal development" (p. 205). Clausen labeled these latter reports "little" turning points, and suggested that they could be analyzed as indicators of perceived personal growth and change across the life span.

The study utilizes three studies of self-reported turning points at work. The measures used in these studies replicate Clausen's methods. The first study ( $N = 3,032$ ) is the MacArthur Foundation National Study of Midlife in the United States (MIDUS, Mroczek & Kolarz, 1998), a national random-digit dial telephone sample of the lower 48 states. The second ( $N = 724$ ) is the Psychological Turning Points Study (Wethington, 2000), a national telephone study follow-up to the MacArthur Foundation National Study of Midlife (MIDUS). The third ( $N = 632$ ) is the Cornell Couples and Career Study (CCCS; Moen, Harris-Abbott & Roehling, 1999), a sample of middle class employed couples in upstate New York, primarily professionals and managers. The national studies represent Americans from age 25–74, the full range of typical career experience. The New York study targets a population working in companies and other organizations that are rapidly adapting and reorganizing in response to a changing economy. Participants in all of these studies were asked if they had experienced a "turning point" in job or career over the past several years. Those who reported turning points were asked to describe what event or situation triggered the turning point, and what impact the experience had on their lives.

### *What Is a Turning Point?*

According to Clausen (1998), self-reported turning points reflect personal judgments and appraisals of the course and meaning of one's life, as well as adaptations to important role transitions with social meaning (college graduation, marriage, or the birth of a first child). Self-reported turning points include highly personalized periods of change or decision, such as changes in working conditions that tested the strength of commitment to a particular job or career. Self-reported turning points are thus quite distinct from reports of major life events and life transitions (Gotlib & Wheaton, 1997). Self-reported turning points are nevertheless useful to study because they offer a snapshot of how people at a particular point of time in history experience psychological growth and change across their course of life.

This paper approaches the analysis of turning points at work and adult socialization from two related theoretical perspectives, the *life event* and the *autobiographical memory* perspectives. The first perspective derives from research on stressful life events and chronic difficulties (e.g. Brown & Harris,

1978). The life event perspective assumes that turning points at work are consequences of significant changes in work, career trajectory, or work involvement. The impact on the person is determined, at least in part, by the objective characteristics of the situation itself.

The second perspective derives from research on autobiographical memory processes. The assumption of this approach is that the report of a work turning point is constructed by the process of assigning meaning to past events, in the context of the present (Ross & Newby-Clark, 1998). Clausen (1995, 1998) utilized the second approach extensively in his studies of turning points. Clausen observed that many people designated internal, psychological changes or reinterpretations of commitments to roles as where their lives went on a different trajectory. Such internal changes are by definition not visible to an outside observer. Although events and difficulties may provoke turning points, the post hoc appraisal of an event as a turning point is dependent on individual factors that may have little to do with the objective, observable features of the event (cf. Lazarus, 1999). Indeed, perceptions of a situation as constituting a turning point may change over a person's life, depending on intervening events. What may appear to be a critical life turning point in early adulthood (being laid off from an Internet start-up firm) may appear less significant as a result of subsequent events (going back to school and changing careers).

The autobiographical memory report has its difficulties, primarily methodological ones that result from its reliance on self-report rather than investigator observation. But it has considerable virtues for describing the processes of personal growth and change that contemporary Americans derive from work, particularly in tempestuous economic times. Work changes may be more likely to be perceived as "turning points" if conscious awareness of an important change has emerged in the context of subsequent events.

### *Theoretical Perspectives on the Emotional Meaning of Work*

What does work mean to contemporary Americans? Theorists have long observed that work gives people a setting for productive activity, identity development, and accomplishment, as well as financial sustenance (Rothman, 1998). The occupation or career is a major form of social integration into society. Occupations and careers constitute a means of socialization into adult roles and responsibilities, as they change across the life course and in the context of particular task demands.

Research on socialization through work is intimately connected to theories of positive psychological growth across the life span. Briefly stated, socialization to responsibility across adulthood is encouraged by confrontation and management

of increasingly complex demands at work and other social roles symbolic of peak adult functioning (Erikson, 1963). The assumption of the psychological approach is that social patterns of role responsibilities in modern societies developed to be consistent with the maturity and ego development of people of particular ages. Successful passage through transitions associated with maturity results in acceptance of social responsibility and emotional fulfillment from meeting those responsibilities (Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson & McKee, 1978).

Theorists have typically differed in how they define and envision the socialization processes of work, career, occupation, and by implication, adulthood. Socialization theories fall into two general categories, *social structural* and *dialectical* theories of growth and change.

More traditional sociological perspectives on socialization emphasize the social patterning of events and transitions across the life course, in typical roles (e.g. Havinghurst, 1972). Applied to career or occupation, work transition events such as entry, career consolidation, and retirement are keyed to age. According to this perspective transitions are confined to relatively narrow age groups, and the transitions are apt to be appropriate to the maturity, experience, and life situations of those passing through the transition. For example, "off-time" transitions are posited to pose challenges to successful adjustment. Those who enter career jobs very early in their lives might encounter difficulties because of coworkers' attitudes toward the new hire's alleged lack of maturity. Those who enter career jobs later in their lives could encounter difficulties because of social judgments that stigmatize late entrants as "laggards."

Psychological, developmental, and life course perspectives on socialization emphasize a dialectical process of development, shaped by the interaction between environmental demands and individual choice. Individual history, experience, and talents have an impact on the timing and content of transitions (e.g. Baltes, 1993; Brim, 1992; Clausen, 1993; Riegel, 1975; Vaillant, 1977). "Off-time" transitions are assumed to pose less challenge to those who are prepared for them because of their education, preparation, experience, personality, and talent. Dialectical theorists differ considerably in how much they emphasize the influence of social demands, patterning, and norms on adjustment to transitions during adulthood. However, all share the assumption that the individual is an active agent in the process of socialization, and that conflicts and decision periods are at the nexus of socialization and successful development. Growth occurs in periods of crisis, i.e. "effective adaptation to stress permits us to live" (Vaillant, 1977, p. 105).

Dialectical perspectives as well emphasize the role of demands, challenges, and stress in promoting psychological change (e.g. Thurnher, 1983). They have

also been applied to explain why stress exposure has positive, rather than negative consequences in some instances (Aldwin, Sutton & Lachman, 1996), including perceived personal growth (e.g. Park, Cohen & Murch, 1996; Wethington, *in press*).

In tandem with the rise of dialectical approaches to understanding adult socialization, the concept of “career” has been shaped by changes in the long-term economic commitment of organizations to their workers. Post-World War II research on “career” conceived of it as a trajectory patterned by job demands set by organizations (e.g. Super, 1957). Through the 1960s and 1970s, theorists began to see career as defined in a dynamic tension between the demands of organizations versus individual desires for self actualization, encouraged by other social institutions (e.g. Sarason, 1977). During the 1990s, in the midst of new threats to lifetime job security, the term “career” began to be applied to the person, rather than to the job embedded in the organization. Specifically, beliefs grew that it is the individual who must make the career, independent of organizational commitment or stability (e.g. Keegan, 1994). In the beginning of the 21st century, self-help books extol the virtues of the self-directed career, independent of traditional work organizations.

Although historical evidence is scant, what there is suggests that since the 1950s work may have become more important to the development of a sense of maturity among Americans, both men and women. Veroff, Douvan, and Kulka (1981), analyzing data on the sources of happiness and unhappiness in national samples of Americans, concluded that from 1957 through 1976 work became more salient to both men and women as a source of identity. In 1976, both men and women appeared to have higher expectations for acquiring gratification through their jobs, and these higher expectations had an impact on both increased conflict and greater satisfaction experienced through work. Empirical research on identity derived from jobs and career (e.g. Clausen, 1993) suggests that the movement of more women into lifetime career jobs increased the emotional salience of work for women throughout the latter half of the 20th century. Some recent theoretical work on adult development suggests that the salience of work to identity – and its consequent impact on continuing socialization across the life course – has continued to increase since 1976. Keegan (1994), near the turn of the 21st century, pointed out that demands for personal investment and responsibility at work were increasing and spilling over into other aspects of life. Specifically, to meet the contemporary expectations for “professionalism” Americans must develop the capacity to “invent our own work . . . to be self-initiating, self-correcting, self-evaluating . . . guided by own visions . . . to be accomplished masters of our particular work roles, jobs, or careers” (Keegan, 1994, pp. 152–153).

*Study Research Questions*

To summarize, this study examines self-reports of personal growth and change in relationship to work and career, reported by respondents as “turning points.” Research and theory in adult development and the life course suggest that work turning points will be associated with characteristics of work life that define success, such as promotions and other upward career moves (Keegan, 1994; Levinson et al., 1978). Reporting a work turning point may also be related to being a professional or a manager, occupations that pose demands for active career management as well as cognitive complexity (Keegan, 1994). Work turning points may be related to adaptation to stress, with turning points more likely among those exposed to work stressors (Wethington, in press). Dialectical perspectives on adult socialization also predict that reports of work turning points will be related to personality characteristics (Vaillant, 1987). It is likely that the relevant personality characteristics are those typically associated with reactions to life stressors and beliefs associated with appraisal of and coping with challenging events and situations (Thurnher, 1983; Vaillant, 1977). These characteristics and beliefs include level of insight into the self, the capacity to reflect on and to make sense of changes, learning from experience, self-directedness, and negative affect. In sum, demands produce adaptation and change (Vaillant, 1977).

**DATA**

This study utilizes a mixed quantitative-qualitative analysis approach. Three studies of work turning points are used; key characteristics of the datasets are summarized in Table 1. Quantitative approaches are used to explore the distribution of work turning points in the population and to predict who will report a work turning point. I address questions about the content of work turning points using a qualitative approach, by categorizing people’s descriptions of them.

The quantitative analyses are conducted on data about work turning points from participants in the MacArthur Foundation National Study of Midlife (MIDUS). This is a national sample generated by random digit dialing selection procedures. The exact response rate for MIDUS could not be computed because only about half of the people contacted were eligible for the interview, and only eligible participants are included in calculating the response rate. This estimated response rate was 70% for the telephone interview, 86.8% for the completion of the subsequent mail questionnaires among telephone respondents, yielding an overall response rate of 60.8% ( $0.70 \times 0.868$ ). For greater detail on

**Table 1.** Sample Characteristics of Three Studies of Work Turning Points.

|                        | National Study<br>Of Midlife<br>(MIDUS) | Psychological<br>Turning Points<br>Study (PTP) | Cornell Couples<br>and Careers Study<br>(CCCS) |
|------------------------|-----------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|
| Target Population      | U.S. population                         | Random follow-up<br>to MIDUS                   | Dual earner couples<br>in upstate New York     |
| Mode of Administration | Self-administered                       | Telephone                                      | Telephone                                      |
| Year Data Collected    | 1995                                    | 1998                                           | 1998                                           |
| Sample Size            | 3032 (weighted)                         | 724                                            | 632                                            |
| Mean Age               | 47.0                                    | 41.7                                           | 53.6                                           |
| Age Range              | 25–74                                   | 28–76                                          | 29–74                                          |

the MIDUS sample and response rate see Mroczek and Kolarz (1998). The interviews took place in 1995.

A series of weights was developed that adjusted for differences in: (1) the probability of selection, and (2) differential non-response by SES, race, age, gender, and other factors. Use of the weight adjusts for differences between the MIDUS sample and the adult U.S. population. All analyses that estimate population prevalence use weighted data. The weighted sample *N* is 3,032.

Two studies provide the opportunity for more in-depth analyses. These studies are the Psychological Experiences Study (PTP; Wethington, 2000) and the Cornell Couples and Careers Study (CCCS; Moen, Harris-Abbott & Roehling, 1999).

The Psychological Turning Points Study re-interviewed 724 MIDUS participants, randomly selected. The PTP data were collected from January through September 1998. The PTP survey was administered on the telephone. The study repeated the work turning point questions from MIDUS, with additional probes. Interviewers in PTP were trained to probe tactfully for concrete information, if the respondent was vague about details in response to the initial probes. This longitudinal design allows for a prospective prediction of who reports a work turning point in PTP.

The second source of detailed data is the Life Transitions Module of the Cornell Couples and Careers Study (CCCS, *N* = 632). CCCS was designed as a study of middle-class couples pursuing dual careers. The sources of the CCCS sample were companies and organizations in upstate New York, including manufacturers, health organizations, and universities. The interviews took place in 1998, approximately the same time as the PTP data collection. Because of the nature of the sample, the CCCS is not a representative sample of the working

population, although its participants are likely to resemble a regional or national sample of professionals and managers. These are people for whom the concept of career could have special emotional salience.

### *Measures of Turning Points at Work*

In MIDUS respondents were asked seven questions about the occurrence of turning points in the 12 months prior to the interview. One question was about work or career. The concept of turning point was defined in an introduction to the question sequence:

The following questions are about what we call psychological turning points. Psychological turning points are major changes in the ways that people feel or think about an important part of their lives, such as work, family, and beliefs about themselves and about the world. Turning points involve people changing their feelings about how important or meaningful some aspect of life is or how much commitment they give it.

The question about turning points involving changes at work or career was:

With this definition in mind, in the past 12 months, did you have a psychological turning point that involved your job or career? This could be an experience like increasing the amount of effort you put into your job or career, cutting back on your job to spend more time with your family, deciding to change careers, now or in the future, or leaving your job to do something different

If respondents checked yes to having a work turning point in MIDUS, they were asked to write about what happened and what impact it had on them. The MIDUS questions about turning points were developed in three small-scale pilot studies exploring different ways of describing this concept for participants (Wethington, Cooper & Holmes, 1997).

The telephone interview studies yielded more extensive data about turning points. In CCCS, respondents were asked whether they had had a work turning point in the three years preceding the interview, and in PTP, the five years preceding the interview. In both CCCS and PTP, respondents were asked what happened, and (in PTP) when it happened and what impact it had on them. The extra probes in PTP were: In what year did that happen? (In what month?) Briefly, what happened? What impact did this have on you?

Reported work turning points are common in all three samples. In the MIDUS study, 25.6% of participants reported a work turning point taking place in the 12 months preceding the interview. In PTP, 49.6% of respondents reported a work turning point in the past five years, 20.6% in the year preceding the interview. In CCCS, 57.6% reported turning points in the past three years (the percent in the 12 months preceding the interview cannot be determined).

### *Analysis Strategy*

The narratives for work turning points in PTP and CCCS were coded for their themes. An interactive process was used to develop the code, which emerged from classification of responses. All turning points were double-coded, and discrepancies resolved by a third coder. The major theme for coding was the cause to which people attributed their turning points. The attribution was then classified as a job or career change, and whether it was prompted by external events (e.g. company going out of business) or by personal choice (e.g. deciding to change to a more secure career).

## **RESULTS**

### *Distribution of Work Turning Points in MIDUS by Age, Gender, Education, and Occupational Status*

Table 2 presents data on the distribution of work turning points in the population. The largest of the representative datasets (MIDUS) is used for these analyses because MIDUS was weighted to represent the population. Turning points at work are the most frequently reported turning points in MIDUS and PTP (Wethington, Kessler & Pixley, in press), an indirect indicator of the salience of work to identity. Work turning points are similarly distributed by age, education, and occupational status in both PTP and CCCS. (In PTP and CCCS, however, overall reports of work turning points do not differ significantly by gender.)

Age, gender, educational attainment, and professional/managerial occupational status are all significantly related to reporting a turning point at work in MIDUS. Women report significantly more turning points at work than men. This is true across all age groups (Table 2, panel 1), educational attainments (panel 2), and occupational statuses (panel 3). Overall, younger people are more likely to report work turning points. People with at least some college education are also significantly more likely to report a work turning point. This finding might seem to contradict well-known observations in life events research that lower status people will be more exposed to stressors (Thoits, 1995). However, it may also indicate that designation of a situation as a turning point is likely to be affected by appraisal and autobiographical memory factors as well as by the event itself (Thurnher, 1983). And, turning points may also be caused by positive events, which could be more common among higher status workers. Consistent with the latter interpretation, respondents working in professional and managerial jobs are more likely to report turning points at work (Table 2).

**Table 2.** Reports of Work Turning Points by Gender, Age Group, Education, and Occupational Status (MIDUS).

|                         | Men ( <i>N</i> = 1317) (%) | Women ( <i>N</i> = 1715) (%) |
|-------------------------|----------------------------|------------------------------|
| Age 25–34               | 25.7                       | 34.5                         |
| Age 35–44               | 25.4                       | 29.9                         |
| Age 45–54               | 25.5                       | 29.6                         |
| Age 55–64               | 17.3                       | 22.1                         |
| Age 65–74               | 12.3                       | 12.8                         |
| <i>Chi</i> <sup>2</sup> | 16.81**                    | 39.37***                     |
| Less Than High School   | 11.4                       | 16.2                         |
| High School             | 19.9                       | 23.6                         |
| Some College            | 26.8                       | 36.4                         |
| Completed College       | 29.3                       | 36.4                         |
| <i>Chi</i> <sup>2</sup> | 25.70***                   | 40.49***                     |
| Professional or Manager | 29.8                       | 38.3                         |
| Others                  | 20.4                       | 24.9                         |
| <i>Chi</i> <sup>2</sup> | 13.25***                   | 25.07***                     |

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

### *Causes of Turning Points at Work*

Table 3 presents coded narrative data from CCCS and PTP on the causes to which people attribute work turning points. Not surprisingly, the predominant cause reported in both samples is a job or career change. In CCCS, 46% of men and 51% of women reported that a job or career change “caused” a turning point. The proportions attributing a turning point to a job or career change in PTP are higher, 68% of men and 69% of women. Job insecurity is mentioned by 25% of CCCS men and 13% of CCCS women. A smaller proportion of PTP participants (7%) attribute their work turning point to job insecurity, consistent with the somewhat less insecure job climate for professionals nationally in 1998, in comparison to upstate New York. However, the proportions of CCCS and PTP participants who attribute a work turning point to actual layoffs are roughly similar (7–8%).

It is notable that most participants do not attribute work turning points to family issues, however women do so more frequently than men. For example, 78% of CCCS women and 72% of PTP women do not spontaneously attribute work turning points to work-family conflict. This was somewhat surprising, given recent research that scaling back work commitments and hours is a popular

**Table 3.** Reported Causes of Turning Points at Work, by Gender, CCCS and PTP (Up to Three Mentions Coded Per Respondent).

|                                    | CCCS         |                | PTP          |                |
|------------------------------------|--------------|----------------|--------------|----------------|
|                                    | Men<br>N (%) | Women<br>N (%) | Men<br>N (%) | Women<br>N (%) |
| Job or Career Changes              | 78 (46)      | 89 (51)        | 123 (68)     | 121 (69)       |
| Layoffs                            | 12 (7)       | 9 (5)          | 12 (7)       | 10 (8)         |
| Job Insecurity                     | 44 (25)      | 24 (13)        | 14 (7)       | 12 (7)         |
| Other Negative Job                 | 19 (11)      | 19 (11)        | 11 (6)       | 15 (9)         |
| Promotions, Awards,<br>Recognition | 25 (14)      | 39 (22)        | 20 (12)      | 18 (10)        |
| Retirement                         | 5 (3)        | 4 (2)          | 31 (17)      | 22 (13)        |
| Work-Family Issues                 | 14 (8)       | 39 (22)        | 24 (13)      | 48 (28)        |
| Own Illness                        | 2 (1)        | 7 (4)          | 13 (7)       | 17 (10)        |
| Other                              | 11 (6)       | 10 (6)         | 18 (10)      | 19 (11)        |

CCCS percentages based on reports from 174 men and 180 women who reported turning points at work. PTP percentages are based on 180 men and 174 women. Column percentages add up to more than 100 because up to three mentions were coded per respondent.

strategy to balance career demands and family in dual-earner couples (Becker & Moen, 1999). On the other hand, the findings are consistent with an autobiographical memory perspective. Scaling back can be perceived as a temporary strategy rather than a permanent one that affects long-term work commitment (Wethington, Pixley, & Kavey, in press). The gender difference is consistent with previous observations that women are more responsive to family demands (e.g. Kessler & McLeod, 1984).

Table 3 also shows that positive as well as negative events and situations can trigger turning points. For example, retirements can be construed as positive events (the majority mentioned were planned). Many of the job and career changes reported were also positive, voluntary changes, which will be described in more detail below.

Another way of looking at the cause of a turning point is to consider whether it was attributed to an external event, or whether it was attributed to choice or self-direction. Five different types of reported choices and constraints emerged from the narrative descriptions of turning points. One was deciding to “cut back” on career involvement to accommodate family demands, personal ambitions, failing health, or aging. Its opposite was to decide to increase career involvement. A third category consisted of job changes caused by company reorganization and downsizing (involuntary job changes). Another category was choosing to change jobs in order to realize ambitions, improve career

**Table 4.** Self-Reported Choices for Job and Career Changes, CCCS and PTP, by Gender (Percents).

|                                | CCCS                   |       | PTP               |       |
|--------------------------------|------------------------|-------|-------------------|-------|
|                                | Men                    | Women | Men               | Women |
| Cut Back In Career Involvement | 13.3                   | 24.7  | 16.1              | 24.3  |
| Increase In Career Involvement | 10.2                   | 21.4  | 6.7               | 6.4   |
| Involuntary Job Change         | 43.0                   | 28.6  | 25.6              | 26.0  |
| Voluntary Job Change           | 26.6                   | 22.7  | 40.0              | 31.8  |
| Other Job Change               | 7.0                    | 2.6   | 11.7              | 11.6  |
| Gender Difference              |                        |       |                   |       |
| <i>Chi</i> <sup>2</sup>        | 17.63, <i>p</i> < 0.01 |       | 4.60, <i>n.s.</i> |       |

trajectory or salary, or to pre-empt a layoff (voluntary job changes). A fifth was a job change that was described as a combination of the preceding two.

The distribution of reports is summarized in Table 4. The major difference between the two samples is that more of the job changes in CCCS are specifically described as involuntary, while in PTP a larger proportion are described as voluntary. This is consistent with the job market in upstate New York, where major employers contracted in the 1990s while other parts of the U.S. boomed.

One might predict, given the emphasis on self-direction in professional and managerial occupations (e.g. Keegan, 1994), that people in those occupations would be more likely to report job changes that they pursued themselves. However, this is not the case. Other analyses (not presented) show that professionals and managers do not make more voluntary job changes than those in other occupations. The large proportion of forced job changes reported in the CCCS data, where the majority of participants work in professional and managerial occupations, suggests that location constrains the use of self-direction as an adaptive strategy.

#### *Turning Points at Work and Perceptions of Personal Growth*

Do those who report a turning point at work believe it resulted in personal growth and change? Table 5 examines whether those who reported a turning point spontaneously reported personal growth as an outcome of the experience. Data like these are available only from PTP because CCCS did not include questions about perceived impact.

The answer is a guarded "sometimes." Most men (61%) and women (62%) reported positive impacts, even though the majority of reported causes were spontaneously described as either stressful or challenging situations. Many of the positive impacts are related to successful mastery or resolution of the

**Table 5.** Summary of Self-Reported Impacts of Work Turning Points, by Gender (PTP): Selected Most Frequent Responses.

|                                | Men        | Women      |
|--------------------------------|------------|------------|
| <b>Positive Impacts</b>        | <b>61%</b> | <b>62%</b> |
| Shifted Focus to Personal Life | 11         | 11         |
| Greater Self-Confidence        | 4          | 7          |
| Enjoyed the Challenge          | 9          | 8          |
| Relief from Stress             | 7          | 8          |
| More Money                     | 7          | 2          |
| <b>Negative Impacts</b>        | <b>39%</b> | <b>38%</b> |
| Financial Loss                 | 6          | 7          |
| Life Disrupted                 | 3          | 4          |
| Increased Stress               | 5          | 4          |

situation that caused the turning point, such as a career change that turned out well, or an impending layoff that was resolved by starting a successful business of one's own. Intrinsic rewards (e.g. greater self confidence) predominate over extrinsic impacts (more money).

For example, 11% of participants reported that the major impact was a welcome shift of energy away from career to personal life. (This was the most frequently endorsed positive impact.) These are instances not only of "cutting back" to resolve work-family conflict, but also shifts to less demanding careers that allowed time to pursue volunteering or other, more rewarding interests. Others reported gaining more self-confidence, enjoying new challenges and achievements, and relief from stress. In contrast, frequently-mentioned negative impacts of work turning points reflect a lack of perceived mastery over work (more stress) and life in general (financial losses and life disruptions).

Negative events undoubtedly have negative impacts, but many respondents also report that they have positive impacts. Whether or not a turning point is perceived as having a positive or negative impact may be related to whether the job or career change was brought about by personal choice or external events, and also to the type of situation that brought about the turning point.

The relationship of the impact of work turning points to the type of provoking situation is presented in Table 6. The first panel displays the relationship of personal choice to self-reported impact. Involuntary job changes are the most likely to have a negative impact (64.7%). Voluntary job changes are the most likely to have positive impacts (81%) (closely trailed by the job changes that could not be classified). Consistent with the notion of "scaling back"

**Table 6.** Perceived Impact of Work Turning Points by Self-Reported Cause of Turning Point (PTP).

| <i>Self-Reported Choice for Job or Career Change</i>      |                     |                     |
|-----------------------------------------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
|                                                           | Positive Impact (%) | Negative Impact (%) |
| Cut Back In Career Involvement                            | 62.3                | 37.7                |
| Increase In Career Involvement                            | 70.0                | 30.0                |
| Involuntary Job Change                                    | 35.3                | 64.7                |
| Voluntary Job Change                                      | 81.0                | 19.0                |
| Other Job Change                                          | 78.9                | 21.1                |
| <i>Selected Specific Events Triggering Turning Points</i> |                     |                     |
|                                                           | Positive Impact (%) | Negative Impact (%) |
| Going Back to School                                      | 85.7                | 14.3                |
| Retirement                                                | 79.4                | 20.6                |
| Changing Career                                           | 78.9                | 21.1                |
| Becoming Self-Employed                                    | 76.5                | 23.5                |
| Promotion                                                 | 62.5                | 37.5                |
| Becoming a Parent                                         | 53.3                | 46.7                |
| Own Illness                                               | 44.8                | 55.2                |
| Laid Off                                                  | 33.3                | 66.7                |

(Becker & Moen, 1999), cut backs in career involvement are also predominantly perceived as positive (62.3%). However, it is evident that people can also perceive good things resulting from bad events, and vice versa, suggesting that the subsequent events after the change play an important role in its long-term psychological impact (e.g. Brown & Harris, 1978).

The second panel of Table 6 displays positive and negative impacts by types of specific events that were reported as triggering turning points. (Due to the many different types of triggers, a selection is discussed here.) On average, people tend to view retirement, an event involving choice, as having a positive impact (79.4%) and being laid off, usually an involuntary situation, as having a negative impact (66.7% negative). However parenthood, which is also often the result of choice, is less consistently perceived (46.7% negative, 53.3% positive), and more ambivalently perceived (in analyses not shown, half of new parents report *both* positive and negative impacts). This suggests that control over the outcome of a change may also be an important factor in determining appraisal of the impact. Similarly, having a career turning point caused by illness tends to be negatively perceived (55.2% negative), with negative impact more likely reported by those who contracted chronic and incurable illnesses rather than a temporary state of illness or disability.

### *What Predicts Reporting a Turning Points at Work?*

The presentation in the previous section about self-reported causes and impacts of work turning points suggests that difficulties at work and changing jobs will be associated with reporting a turning point. However, the data are inconclusive about cause because only those who reported a work turning point provided information. What remains unclear is whether some situations or events are more likely to result in the report of a work turning point, a prediction consistent with the life event perspective. It also leaves unclear whether certain types of people are more likely to experience a turning point than others. That is, can one predict prospectively who will report a work turning point?

The fact that the Psychological Turning Points Study was a follow-up to the MIDUS can be used to test a number of different propositions about how work situations and individual differences may be associated with reporting a turning point. In the PTP, respondents were asked to report about any work turning points occurring in the last five years. The MIDUS contained measures of job stress and job insecurity, collected three years before the PTP. MIDUS also measured aspects of personality and beliefs that might increase the propensity to report a turning point at work. The PTP included a series of questions that asked about job losses and promotions or getting a “better job” in the past five years. These sets of measures were included in a series of logistic regressions that examined the contribution of pre-existing chronic stress, personality factors, and life events to provoking the report of a work turning point.

Table 7 summarizes the analyses. Variables were entered in groups to assess the relative contribution of different sets of factors to reporting a turning point at work. For these analyses, only respondents who were employed at the time of the MIDUS data collection in 1995 were included.

Column 1 displays the relationship of some key demographic factors to reporting a work turning point, and is the “baseline” to which subsequent models are compared. Only the dummy variable coding for having some college education is a significant predictor. The model fits the data poorly.

Column 2 examines whether job conditions reported in 1995 are significantly related to reporting a work turning point in 1998. Chronic job stress (a composite of rating of interpersonal stressors and demands at work) is not related to reporting a work turning point, but feeling a lack of job security in 1995 is significantly related. The overall estimated fit of the model improves significantly. However, the percent of cases predicted correctly is only a little increased from baseline, indicating a relatively poor fit.

Column 3 controls for two types of job changes that the more qualitative analyses of turning points identified as important, job losses and promotions or

**Table 7.** Logistic Regression of Work Turning Points on Demographic Indicators, Chronic Stressors, Recent Work Events, and Personality, PTP ( $N = 479$ ).

|                       | <i>b</i> | <i>b</i> | <i>b</i> | <i>b</i> |
|-----------------------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| Age (Years)           | -0.01    | -0.01    | 0.00     | 0.00     |
| Professional/Manager  | -0.29    | -0.25    | -0.11    | -0.14    |
| Some College          | 0.95***  | 0.94***  | 0.66*    | 0.69*    |
| Female                | 0.28     | 0.27     | 0.22*    | 0.05     |
| Job Stress 1995       |          | 0.02     | -0.03    | -0.13    |
| Job Insecurity 1995   |          | 1.43*    | 1.21     | 1.29     |
| Promotion Since 1995  |          |          | 1.37***  | 1.37***  |
| Job Loss Since 1995   |          |          | 3.53***  | 3.69***  |
| Neuroticism 1995      |          |          |          | 0.05     |
| Insight 1995          |          |          |          | 0.20     |
| Reappraisal 1995      |          |          |          | 0.13     |
| Self Direction 1995   |          |          |          | -0.31    |
| Turning Points 1995   |          |          |          | 0.44***  |
| Constant              | 0.35     | 0.25     | -1.17*   | -1.37    |
| % Predicted Correctly | 63.1     | 64.1     | 70.6     | 74.8     |

The regressions are confined to respondents who were employed in 1995.

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

changes to “better” jobs. The dummy variables include only the job changes that took place since the MIDUS interview. Both types of job changes are significantly related to reporting a work turning point and their inclusion substantially improves the fit of the model, predicting more cases correctly. The coefficient associated with job loss is larger than that associated with promotions, even though job losses are reported much less often. The analysis suggests that if the PTP had included more detailed measures of life events involving work and other aspects of life affecting work, such as the onset or worsening of chronic health problems, I could have predicted more cases of work turning points.

Finally, column 4 examines whether personality and belief factors, measured in 1995, predict reporting a turning point at work. Four multi-item personality and belief measures are included: (1) trait Neuroticism, (2) how much the respondent analyzes past events to gain self-insight, (3) how much the respondent uses reappraisal to cope with stress, and (4) how much he or she relies on self-direction rather than direction from others (Wethington, in press). In addition, I included a count of the number of turning points reported by the participant in 1995 (ranging from 0 to 7). This count may reflect some combination of unmeasured personality factors, unmeasured stressor exposure,

or a response style that increases the probability of reporting a work turning point. Among this set of variables, only the number of turning points reported in 1995 is a significant predictor (and it improves the fit of the model). Controlling for these factors does not reduce the coefficients for job loss and promotions, suggesting that environmental change and self-directed action to improve one's career or job promote self-perceived psychological change to a greater degree than pre-existing differences in personality characteristics.

## DISCUSSION

This study examined self-reports of personal growth and change in relationship to work and career, reported by respondents as "turning points at work." Research and theory in adult development and the life course suggest that work turning points will be associated with characteristics of work life that define success, such as promotions. Work turning points may be related to adapting to negative work events, particularly situations that are resolved successfully. The study examined as well whether reports of work turning points are related to personality characteristics that are related to the successful management of demands and challenges.

The study found that challenge and stress produce adaptation and change (Vaillant, 1977). First, the study found that turning points at work are related to achieving success at work. Reporting a psychological turning point is significantly related to having received a recent promotion or having changed to a better job. Analyses of the intensive data suggest that promotions and getting better jobs are perceived as contributing to perceived positive growth and change for many who experience them. It is important that many of the improvements in career are described as self-directed. In fact, perceptions of experiencing growth and change are more frequently mentioned as impacts than increased extrinsic rewards from a better job, such as more pay.

The results tend to reject the idea that work turning points are more frequently reported by people who work in professional and managerial occupations. This is because the relationship of occupational status with work turning points is not significant when educational attainment is controlled. It is possible that higher education per se may provide a capacity or tendency to perceive personal growth and change, and that its effects transcend occupation.

Reports of turning points are strongly related to involuntary job loss (and other situations indicating job insecurity). However, it is notable that not all of the reported long-term impacts of work turning points involving job loss are negative. The qualitative data suggest that people believe they derive positive

feelings of growth and change from stressful situations that they were able to resolve well (cf. Pearlin & Schooler, 1978; Thoits, 1994).

The analyses examining the role of personality in experiencing work turning points are more complex to interpret. By themselves, personality factors measured in 1995 do not predict the propensity to report a work turning point in 1998. But it is clear from the qualitative data that people are active agents who make choices, such as career changes, that may later be appraised as turning points. Take as an example people who make pre-emptive job changes in order to avoid layoffs. They undoubtedly differ from people who are unable to anticipate layoffs, or who cannot organize themselves before the layoff to find another job. Perhaps they differ in characteristics such as foresight, boldness, and fear of failure, characteristics that MIDUS did not measure. But they may also differ in level of resources or live in regions of the country where opportunities to change jobs are more or less abundant.

#### *Alternative Interpretations*

A study based on self report data – in essence, *post hoc* appraisals of events that people now regard as significant and life-changing – cannot produce conclusive answers to questions about the impacts of recent economic changes and reorganization of firms on the emotional salience of work in adult development and change. The fact that about a quarter of women and about half that proportion of men report that work-family conflict “caused” a work turning point could mean that work has become more salient to identity over time, relative to family roles. However, it could also mean that people believed talking about family demands was an inappropriate response to the questions. The study of self-perceived turning points is relatively new, and historical comparisons are not readily made.

This study is also limited by not being able to track actual changes in perceived personal growth or role identification over time. Neither MIDUS nor PTP contained appropriate measures to conduct such analyses. There is also considerable reason to believe that appraisals of past events change over time, depending on distance from the event and intervening events that may change the “meaning” of them (e.g. Ross & Newby-Clark, 1998).

Recall of personally significant events is also afflicted with a number of recall biases that may affect interpretation. For example, a person who reports a job change that turns out well might be motivated to claim credit for initiating it. And a person reporting a job change that turned out badly may be motivated to blame someone else for the situation. Thus the qualitative analysis of reported attributions may reflect more about how “things turned out” than what actually

happened. It might also reflect the high moral value that Americans give to self-initiative as a form of adaptation.

### *Implications for Future Research*

Despite these limitations, this study has many useful implications. The study has made a contribution to understanding perceptions of personal growth and change – self-perceived “role socialization” – in response to challenging and stressful events. The qualitative results imply that stress exposure is not necessarily problematic. People make choices in their lives that expose them to more stress and challenge. Challenges that are within the capacity of people to resolve themselves through hard work and effort may contribute to perceiving positive growth and change (Park et al., 1996). Clearly, people must learn from experience how to choose the most manageable challenges (Brim, 1992), because prolonged chronic stress that cannot be resolved is physically and emotionally harmful (e.g. Brown & Harris, 1978). A major task of continuing successful adaptation to adult life is the testing of one’s capacities to cope with difficult situations and to master them. Adults are active agents in their own socialization to greater responsibilities in the domain of work and career.

The study also underscores that research on life history and significant personal events would gain from applying the findings of experimental research on autobiographical memory. Although the study was not able to identify personality factors that explained why some transitions were appraised as turning points, a companion study (Wethington et al., in press) suggested that appraisal of job changes may be affected by life stage and the level of family responsibilities (cf. Ross & Newby-Clark, 1998). Thus an important implication is that appraisals of stressful situations do not reduce to individual differences in traits (Updegraff & Taylor, 2000). Rather appraisal is formed dynamically in a transaction between people and their environments (Lazarus, 1999).

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